

A question few seem to consider when the US wages war afar

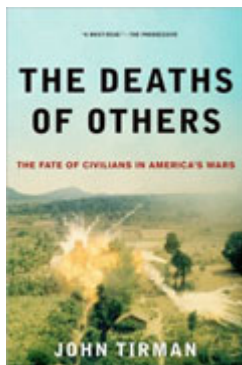
Chris Herlinger | May. 15, 2013

Why is it that Americans tend to be so indifferent to the deaths of those in whose lands the United States wages war? That is a question rarely expressed, but still troubling.

It has long intrigued me partly because of personal experience. I have a cousin who served periodic tours with U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and my heart and prayers went out to him. But my travels there through the years on humanitarian assignments mean my heart has also gone out to civilians in Afghanistan, and in neighboring Pakistan.

I visited both countries before the events of 9/11 (and have returned since). Because of those pre-war experiences -- where I saw realities of both countries without the lens of a U.S.-led war -- I have never been able to shake concern over the fate of ordinary Afghans and Pakistanis who are just trying to live their lives.

Perhaps that is not the norm. The apparent lack of concern about "the victims who are not Americans" underlies John Tirman's *The Deaths of Others*, recently released in a new paperback edition following its 2011 hardback release. Tirman, executive director of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for International Studies, writes: "The costs of war to the populations and common soldiers of the "enemy" are rarely found in the narratives and dissections of conflict, and this habit is a durable feature of how we remember war." (I know there is at least one notable exception to this rule: a wonderful 1998 collection of poetry of the Vietnam War, *From Both Sides Now*, that features verse from both American and Vietnamese poets.)



THE DEATHS OF OTHERS: THE FATE OF CIVILIANS IN AMERICA'S WARS

By John Tirman

Published by Oxford University Press, \$21.95

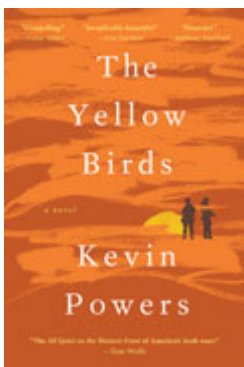
Tirman adds: "As a nation that has long thought of itself as built on Christian ethics, even as an exceptionally compassionate people, this coldness is a puzzle. It is in fact more than a puzzle, for ignorance or indifference has consequences for the victims of American wars and for America itself." In his search for answers, Tirman acknowledges that the "squeamishness Americans feel about addressing the very raw questions" is normal. He notes neither the onetime great colonizers, France and Great Britain, nor the former Soviet Union for that matter, "have been more forthright" than the United States about their wartime behavior.

Yet as someone addressing the question through the lens of American experience, Tirman finds at least some of the answers (not surprisingly) in the notion of American exceptionalism and the "frontier myth." Those notions, Tirman argues, are a constant in U.S. history, from the early wars of continental conquest down to Iraq and Afghanistan today. "Americans essentialize those we invade as savages in a wilderness to be tamed, and the taming itself is rewarded with a material bounty," the author argues.

That may sound raw. But the history Tirman lays out is not pretty. In a memorable chapter on the Korean War titled "The Hegemony of Forgetting," Tirman takes particular pains to point out that when it came to civilian deaths, the Korean conflict was a notably bloody and shameful affair.

"Naming the enemy as subhuman, as a mortal and insidious threat, as a denier of American destiny," he argues, "resulted in a slaughter of the innocents in numbers -- hundreds of thousands -- which even then was too easy to ignore and thereby forget."

Tirman's is a tough read -- essential in many ways, though also daunting and demanding. And as a piece of nonfiction, it probably cannot jar a reader's sensibilities in the same way as a war novel like Kevin Powers' widely acclaimed *The Yellow Birds*. However, Tirman's work can inform a reading of Powers' powerful book -- a beautifully written (though occasionally overstylized) debut novel about one young American soldier's sobering experiences in Iraq.



THE YELLOW BIRDS

By Kevin Powers

Published by Little Brown and Company, \$14.99

Early on in the novel, Malik, an Iraqi translator for a young soldier, Private Bartle, is killed; Malik is one of the few Iraqi characters -- maybe the only one -- named in the novel. Otherwise, the Iraqis remain either nameless figures of looming threat or limp corpses on the street. The narrator says: "I didn't think about Malik much after that. He was an incidental figure who only seemed to exist in his relation to my continuing life. I couldn't have articulated it then, but I'd been trained to think war was the greater unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth."

Not true, Private Bartle concludes. "War is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today? Dying would be one way. If you die, it becomes more likely that I will not. You're nothing, that's the secret: a uniform in a sea of numbers, a number in a sea of dust."

While the passage seems to support Tirman's thesis -- the Iraqi becomes almost an afterthought in the American's mind, with Iraq itself background to an American's psyche -- it also says something true and essential about how the sheer wickedness of war is actually experienced.

Later in the book, a beaten-down Bartle, back in the United States, reflects on the war's searing costs -- one of them being guilt and shame at what he and others had done to those in the country they inhabited: "There isn't

any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed ? it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone and knowing from being taught your whole life that there is no making up for what you are doing.?

Here Powers the novelist finds common ground with Tirman the social scientist. To quote Tirman again:
?Indifference has consequences for the victims of American wars and for America itself.?

Which book to recommend? As I get older, I find myself drawn more toward literature than the social sciences -- there are simply more resonances and echoes in fiction and in poetry than there are in, say, political science. And Powers' fine novel already deserves a place alongside such classics of American war literature as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

Still, those with the fortitude and patience to tackle *The Deaths of Others* will be rewarded with a study that can both frame a good piece of fiction like Powers' and also ask a needlessly overlooked question that few Americans seem to have considered.

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist and a frequent contributor to *NCR*.]

Source URL (retrieved on 05/26/2017 - 19:29): <https://www.ncronline.org/books/2013/05/question-few-seem-consider-when-us-wages-war-afar>