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During his Tuesday night address to the U.S. Congress, President Trump paid tribute to Ryan Owens, the Navy SEAL killed in the January commando raid in Yemen that Trump ordered. As he did so, television cameras focused for almost four full minutes on Owens's grieving wife, Carryn, as she wept and applauded while sitting next to and periodically being touched by Trump's glamorous daughter Ivanka. The entire chamber stood together in sustained applause, with Trump interjecting scripted, lyrical expressions of support and gratitude for her husband's sacrifice.

It was, as intended, an obviously powerful TV moment. Independent of the political intent behind it, any well-functioning human being would feel great empathy watching a grieving spouse mourning and struggling to cope emotionally with the recent, sudden death of her partner. The majestic setting of the U.S. Congress, solemnly presided over by the U.S. president, vested the moment with political gravity.

Media commentators [predictably gushed](#) that [this was the moment](#) Trump became "presidential." Meanwhile, the U.S. media's most reliable partisan warriors, horrified that the moment might benefit Trump, [instantly accused](#) him of [exploiting these emotions](#), and exploiting [Carryn Owens herself](#), for his own political benefit.

While there is certainly truth in the claim that Trump's use of the suffering of soldiers and their families is politically opportunistic, even exploitative, this tactic is hardly one Trump pioneered. In fact, it is completely standard for U.S. presidents. Though Trump's attackers did not mention it, Obama often included tales of the sacrifice, death, and suffering of soldiers in his political speeches — including when he devoted four highly emotional minutes in his 2014 State of the Union address to narrating the story of, and paying emotional tribute to, Sgt. Cory Remsburg,

who was severely wounded by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan:

George W. Bush also hauled soldiers wounded in his wars before cameras during his speeches, such as his 2007 State of the Union address, where [he paid tribute](#) to Sgt. Tommy Rieman, wounded in Iraq.

There are reasons presidents routinely use the suffering and deaths of U.S. soldiers and their families as political props. The way in which these emotions are exploited powerfully highlights important aspects of war propaganda generally, and specifically how the endless, 15-year-old war on terror is sustained.

The raid in Yemen that cost Owens his life also killed 30 other people, [including](#) “many civilians,” at [ast nine of whom were children](#) [le](#). None of them were mentioned by Trump in last night's speech, let alone honored with applause and the presence of grieving relatives. That's because they were Yemenis, not Americans; therefore, their deaths, and lives, must be ignored (the only exception was some fleeting media mention of the 8-year-old daughter of Anwar al-Awlaki, but only because she was a U.S. citizen and because of the irony that [Obama killed her 16-year-old American brother](#) with a drone strike).

This is standard fare in U.S. war propaganda: We fixate on the Americans killed, learning their names and life stories and the plight of their spouses and parents, but steadfastly ignore the innocent people the U.S. government kills, whose numbers are always far greater. There is thus a sprawling, moving monument in the center of Washington, D.C., commemorating the 58,000 U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam, but not the ([at least](#)) [2 million Vietnamese civilians killed](#) by that war.

Politicians and commentators condemning the Iraq War always mention the 4,000 U.S. soldiers who died but rarely mention the hundreds of thousands (at least) innocent Iraqis killed: They don't exist, are unmentionable. After a terror attack aimed at Americans, we are deluged with [media profiles and photographs of the victims](#), learning their life aspirations and wallowing in the grief of their families, but we almost *never* hear anything about any of the innocent victims killed by the United States.

Senior Chief Ryan Owens is a household name, and his wife, Carryn, is the subject of national admiration and sympathy. But the overwhelming majority of Americans do not know, and will never learn, the name of even a single foreign victim out of the many hundreds of thousands that their country has killed over the last 15 years. This imbalance plays a massive role in how Americans understand themselves, the countries their government invades and bombs, and the Endless War that is being waged.

None of this is to say that the tribute to Owens and the sympathy for his wife are undeserved. Quite the contrary: When a country, decade after decade, keeps sending a small, largely disadvantaged portion of its citizenry to bear all the costs and risks of the wars it starts — while the nation's elite and their families are largely immune — the least the immunized elites can do is pay symbolic tribute when they are killed.

Nor is it to say that this obsessive, exclusive focus on our own side's victims while ignoring the victims we create is unique to the U.S. Again, the contrary is true. This dynamic is endemic to nationalism, which in turn is grounded in tribalistic human instincts: paying more attention to the deaths of those in our tribe than those we cause other tribes to suffer.

As I've [described before](#), I was in Canada the week that it was targeted with two attacks — including one on the Parliament in Ottawa — and the Canadian media was suffused for the entire week with images and stories about the two dead Canadian soldiers and their families. Then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper [spoke at the funeral](#) of Cpl. Nathan Cirillo, who became a household name for dying in the Parliament attack, even though most Canadians don't know the names of and can't tell a single story about even one of the numerous innocent victims [killed by their own government](#) over the last 15 years. This is by no means a uniquely American phenomenon.

But unique or not, this is an incredibly consequential tool of war propaganda. By dramatizing the deaths of Americans while disappearing the country's victims, this technique ensures that Americans perpetually regard themselves as victims of horrific, savage, tragic violence but never the perpetrators of it. That, in turn, is what keeps Americans supporting endless war: *The se savages keep killing us, so we have no choice but to fight them.*

More importantly, this process completely dehumanizes the people the U.S. government bombs, attacks, and kills. Because they're never heard from, because we never learn their names, because we never experience their family's suffering, all of their human attributes are stripped from them and their deaths are thus meaningless because they're barely human.

This dehumanization — the suppression of any humanity on the part of the U.S.' foreign war victims — is the absolute key to sustaining popular support for war. Nobody knew that better than Gen. William Westmoreland, the U.S. Commander of the Vietnam War, which is why he insisted that "Orientals" do not experience death and suffering the way that Westerners do

A population will only tolerate the ongoing, continual killing of large numbers of civilians if they believe that the innocent victims do not experience human suffering or, more importantly, if that suffering is hidden from them.

Just imagine how different Americans' views of the war on terror might be if they were subjected to heavy grieving rituals from the family members of innocent victims of U.S. bombing similar to the one they witnessed last night from Carryn Owens. There's a reason the [iconic photo of a South Vietnamese police official](#) summarily executing a Vietcong suspect during the 1968 Tet Offensive resonated: Violence and suffering are much more easily tolerated when their visceral reality need not be confronted.

The ritualistic tribute to dead or wounded U.S. soldiers has other purposes as well: It attempts — not using rational formulas but rather emotional impulses — to transfer the nobility of the slain soldier onto the war itself; after all, how unjust could a war be when such brave and admirable American soldiers are fighting in it?

And it is also intended that the soldier's nobility will be transferred to his commander in chief who is so solemnly honoring him. As demonstrated by the skyrocketing post-9/11 approval ratings for George Bush and the endless political usage Obama obtained for killing Osama bin Laden, nothing makes us rally around a president like uplifting war sentiment.

Van Jones [received intense criticism from Democrats](#) for how positively he reacted on CNN to Trump's tribute to Ryan and Carryn Owens, but Jones was just speaking honestly and with his emotions, as he often does: War makes people instinctively venerate the authority and

leadership of the president who is presiding over it. That's why — as John Jay [warned in Federalist 4](#) — presidents like wars due to all the personal benefits they generate.

The reaction to last night's Owens moment was fascinating because the widespread media contempt for Trump clashed with the instinctive veneration of all matters relating to U.S. war; in most cases, the latter triumphed. But more interesting than that is what this ritual reveals about how Americans are taught to think about war and the reasons it is so easy for the political class — no matter the outcome of elections or what polling data tells us or how many people senselessly die — to continue and escalate endless wars. These propaganda rituals are well-tested and very potent.