

# New Nonfiction from Andrew Davis: Korta Za: Go Home

*Andrew Elliot Davis was born July 1, 1990 in Worcester, MA; his family moved to Milford, NH, where he graduated high school in 2008. Although Andrew had a lot of different interests as a young man, his dream was to be in the military, and he joined the Marines right out of high school—not knowing exactly what to expect but willing to take on whatever his country needed from him. Andrew faithfully served in the Marines as a Sergeant in the Infantry through three tours overseas, including a tour in Afghanistan. That is where he got his idea to write Korta Za.*

*After he was honorably discharged from the Marines, he went on to get his bachelor's degree in environmental economics from the University of New Hampshire. While attending UNH, he became an avid fan of their college football program, where Andrew was a season ticket holder. He would later donate a New Hampshire state flag that he had taken on his tours overseas to the UNH football program, and they still bring it out at every game to this day.*

*Like many other military members, Andrew had a hard time in life after his service, and throughout his successes he also suffered from PTSD. Unfortunately, Andrew passed away before he could publish his story. His family is very proud to share this story with others and our hope is that he would be proud as well. Andrew is buried at the Boscawen Veterans Cemetery in Boscawen, NH and is finally at peace, at last.*

## **Korta Za: Go Home**

When you experience something so life-changing, it is sometimes with you everywhere you go. Such is the case of my

experience. When I turn away, I see it; when I go to bed, I feel it. When I close my eyes, it haunts me like a horrible movie on rerun over and over in my head. I will drift to sleep in order to get some liberation, but the dreams always turn into nightmares. It's like a rat caught in a maze with no sensible exit in sight—just a loop of walls and empty corridors. This is my experience that changed me from who I once was to the man I am today. Whether I like to admit it or not, it affected me with such magnitude that I cannot possibly ever hope to comprehend it. The only thing I know for sure is the change will forever be with me.

This is about my time in Afghanistan, when 45 men from Third Platoon, Alpha Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Marines left the United States for seven months. We were going to a place we had never been but had read, talked, and heard so much about. For many of us, this was the first time out of the country, or even away from home for that matter. There is nothing in this world that could have totally prepared us for what we would go through in the next seven months. Not all the training, not all the class time, not a thing could. We left as boys. For those of us who did return, we were men, but not ordinary men. We were tired, broken, and defeated. This is my story.

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The hum of the rotors pierced my ears like the sound of a million wasps swarming around my head. The heat of the helicopter engulfed me as I struggled to breathe through the exhaust filling my lungs. This was a United States Marine Corps CH-53 helicopter, and it was my golden chariot to battle. Inside it were twenty tightly packed Marines, not knowing what awaited us. I sat with my heart pounding out of my chest, clutching my rifle for dear life as we were tossed and turned in our seats. Outside, I could hear the gunfire from below and I could feel the pilot swerving to avoid it. *So, this is it*, I thought to myself. *This is what I have been*

*waiting for my entire life.* Ever since I watched the World Trade Center Towers collapse on the screen over and over, I knew what I was destined for. Here I was, sitting in a metal coffin headed to the middle of nowhere in a country that might as well have been Mars.

We were given the signal for five minutes out and in one fluid motion I placed my rifle into condition one. This meant that I now had a bullet in the chamber and my rifle was ready to fire. We hit the ground, hard, and the ramp immediately dropped. Half dazed, we all threw ourselves up and ran out the back as we had practiced hundreds of times in the States. I struggled to see as the brown-out conditions of the sand overtook my eyes and throat. Still, I knew what I had to do and followed the outline of the Marine in front of me. Almost on cue, I threw myself to the ground in a defensive posture. I heard the helicopter take off behind me and then there was nothing but silence as I heard her rotors slowly fade into blackness. I pulled the butt of my rifle hard into my shoulder and immediately started scanning my surroundings, looking thoroughly for any possible sign of a threat. In the distance I could hear the sounds of war, but of them I could see nothing. The scene before me was like something out of a movie about other planets. All around me, we were surrounded by large mountains that would have looked more appropriate on Mars. They were nothing but rocks and dry dirt, not a tree on them. The ground itself was made up of hard-packed dusty sand that got into my eyes and throat with every breath. The sun beat down so hard it was like walking into an oven, the wind like holding a hairdryer on high to my face. We lay like this for what felt like an eternity, until the order came from around the group. *Pickup and move!* With my heart nearly pounding out of my chest and my body numb from adrenaline, I slowly rose to my feet and proceeded to fall into place with my comrades.

We set up our forward operating base in an abandoned police

compound on the outskirts of a town called Dehana. This area had many strategic advantages. It sat right on the Dehana Pass, which was situated between two mountains. It was a central chokepoint for any movement coming through the area, and it gave us enough high ground from which to keep observation posts on the valley below. This pass was famous for Alexander the Great's army moving through it during his invasion of Afghanistan. We felt as if we were following in his footsteps. At one time the town might have been flourishing, but all that I could see of it now were bullet-ridden walls and shops in appalling states. War had torn this town apart and its inhabitants were equally tattered. Our base consisted of one central building that had at one point held the town's police force, and then before us was owned by a drug lord. Now it was to be our home for seven months. There was no running water and the only electricity we had was from two generators we set up ourselves. The generators were used specifically for charging radios and running vital equipment. We slept on any ground that lay within the walls of the compound, but mostly sticking to our squads of thirteen Marines.

We took no time at all militarizing our new home. We placed barbed wire on entry and exit points and set up trip flares all throughout the perimeter. If anyone came near us in the night, they would be surprised with a large flash of light. We built posts and filled the sandbags. To us, we were just doing what we knew how to do, what we had always been trained for. To the people of the village, we were invaders from a far off land. Whatever we were, one thing was for certain: The Marines of third platoon had moved in, and we were here to stay.

On our forward operating base (F.O.B), life to us was good. We had bottles of water plentifully, and we ate prepackaged food called MRE's. But best of all, we had walls. Walls made out of mud so thick that the danger of what was right outside them seemed so far away. That for a moment we could feel safe was

all we needed sometimes. Knowing that just right outside our gates was an entire town that wanted us dead would become disconcerting, on occasion. If I said life on the F.O.B was amazing, I would be lying. But if I said I couldn't have asked for better, I would be telling the truth. We had water, food, and walls. I couldn't have imagined it could get any better. I was nineteen years old and there wasn't a telephone, toilet, or running water for that matter, in sight. We went to the bathroom in a bag and then burned it in a hole we dug out of the ground with our shovels. We would eat two meals a day consisting of food all out of a package, some twenty years old or more—but it was food. We would sleep maybe once every forty-eight hours or so—but it was sleep. I would huddle close to my brothers when the nights got freezing cold, and collapse into the shade of a wall when the temperature outside rose to 130 degrees during the day. On post, I would laugh with the children and throw them packages of freeze-dried muffins and anything else they would beg me for. This was my daily life within the base. Eat, stand post, eat again, laugh with friends, clean my gear, clean my rifle, and reload ammo. It was a good life, and it was a welcome opportunity from what lay just but a few hundred meters away.

Of all the men I was with, my best friend was Jake Fanno. He was from Oregon and had grown up similarly to me. He was in my squad, and we had gotten along from the beginning. We would always hang out and make jokes to each other to pass the time, and I always knew I could count on him for anything. I had no problem trusting him with my life. Of my best memories, I can recall this particular time when we found a bag of taco meat and then searched everywhere for packaged tortillas. Everything we found happened to be rotten and about thirty years old. We were so excited by the time we finally found tortillas that we forgot we had no way to cook the meat. So we just opened the bag and ate it cold. We were so happy we had found something good to eat that neither of us wanted to admit how horrible it really was.

"This is so good," Jake said.

"The best," I replied, "you could never get anything like this at home..."

"Dude, this is horrible."

We both laughed hysterically for about ten minutes and finally gave up on the entire situation. This was what made us happy—finding food that was thirty years old and pretending like it was edible. Just because of the idea that it might make us think of home. We could never get past how fake the food was, or how sick we always got from it.

When it was our squad's turn for patrol we would suit up and head out. Patrols were always conducted on foot and were the most dangerous parts of our days. We would wear our helmets, bullet proof flak vests, boots, camouflage utility uniforms, and of course our rifles, ammo, and whatever grenades or rockets we could carry. It was particularly dangerous because this was when we were most likely to be attacked. The enemy would watch and wait for us to get away from our base to open fire. Every step could have been our last. A favorite tactic of the enemy was to plant bombs in the ground, called IED's, that could blow up right under any of us if we didn't find them in time.

Walking through the village was always the most stressful time for me. The people did not like us at all and made us very aware of it. As we walked by them, they would clamp their mouths shut and berate us with their eyes. Any sign of weakness and they would be quick to take advantage. We were outnumbered by them, so it was important to always be on watch and not allow for any mistakes on our part. Whenever I was dealing with the villagers, I always had both hands on my rifle and kept such an aggressive posture that no one would dare to attempt to get the better of me. No matter what it took, I was coming home alive. I would let nothing get in my

way.

IED's were always my biggest fear while on patrol. Of all the times I was shot at it was easy to take cover and shoot back. IED's were another thing. While patrolling, my heart would fall into my stomach with every step. My mind was always so convinced that this would be my last step on earth. I had seen it happen to so many friends, to so many villagers that I was convinced that I was next. One second, everyone would be walking around like everything was fine. The next second, the ground was opening up, and hell for a split moment was swallowing the world as I watched my friends launched into the air with agony and horror in my heart. This was the fate that scared me the most. I was a grown man, and I went through horrible things on a daily basis. But of everything that happened to me this was the fate that was always so continuous in my mind.

One day while I was eating lunch, it began to thunder. I found this odd because never in all my time being in Afghanistan had I seen it rain. That was when I heard the familiar snap of rounds overhead. I instantly sprang to my feet and threw on my gear as fast as I could. My adrenaline was pumping so hard that I couldn't even remember placing a magazine of bullets into my rifle and making it condition one. It was just all a fluid motion, as if my rifle was an extension of my body. I flew to the gate where everyone was already waiting anxiously. They had never dared to attack us in our own backyard, and we were all nervous of what we would find right outside the door. Without hesitation I opened it and led the way out. They had come looking for a fight from us and they were going to get one. Had my body been listening to my mind before I opened the door and went outside, then maybe I would have acted more slowly or rationally. My mentality of "act immediately without hesitation" is exactly what had kept me alive up till that moment, but I feared this mentality would now get me killed. Instantly, upon stepping out of the gate I heard and felt the

symphony of death play its encore all around me. The dust at my feet and the air around my body was being sprayed with what felt and sounded like millions of little firecrackers. I pushed on and flung myself behind a grave and began to return fire. Rockets exploded right in front of me, but my body was so full of adrenaline that I ignored them. As my mind screamed for it all to stop, as my gut gave out, as I instantly wanted to vomit, my legs carried me, and my hands reacted. It was as if I was acting on autopilot and was up above watching the entire situation. When I made my way up to the wall, I knew that my fire team was behind me. I knew that if I pushed on, they would be there. They always were. I had two choices, go left or go right. If I chose right and everyone followed me, we could all be killed. If I chose left and everyone followed me, we could also be killed. It was the most important decision of my life, and I knew exactly what to do. I followed wherever my legs would take me. These are the moments that defined my time there, the times that I can gaze back on and know that I am lucky to be alive.

So many years later I can look back on my experience and I can talk about it. There are many things I did not mention in this story. Some things are so horrible that they need never to be talked about to a single soul, things that nobody could possibly comprehend. Those horrible things were part of my everyday experience. But it has shaped who I am today. Not a day or a minute goes by that I do not think of these things. That how at nineteen years old I was a grown man, knowing that each day, each moment, each step could have been my last. I have many friends that do not have the opportunities that I have today: to go to school, to enjoy a football game, to kiss a girl. They are no longer here, and they are some of the best men I have ever had the honor of knowing.

In Pashto "Korta Za" is a phrase that means "*go home*". The locals would always tell us that, meaning that this was their home and we needed to leave. To me, it always had more



meaning. To me, it meant that we would be going home. But not going home as who we once were; we would be going home as shells of those young men. Forever changed by our experiences, our innocence forever left on a mountain top in the Dehana Pass of Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

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## **Fiction by David Abrams: “Thank You”**



Thank you Thank you for your service Thank you for going Thank you for coming back Thank you for not dying Thank you for taking the bullet, the mortar round, the shrapnel that is making its way to your heart by micromillimeters every year Thank you for eating that god-awful food gritted with sand so we don't have to Thank you for eating Thanksgiving dinner on a paper plate Thank you for living in a metal shipping container for the first three months until they got their shit together and built proper housing for you and your men Thank you for driving a Humvee without armor while ambassadors and visiting senators and country music stars were going around in bulletproof SUVs Thank you for carrying a gun for slinging it across your body for wearing it like a heavy necklace that, after the first week, you hardly noticed was there Thank you for the magazine of bullets you polished every night Thank you for dripping with sweat Thank you for leaving your wife for eighteen months Thank you for telling your children you'd be back before they knew it Thank you for punching the walls of your shipping container Thank you for your bruised knuckles Thank you for screaming Thank you for crying quietly in the porta-potty when you thought no one was listening Thank you for enduring the stink and heat and filth of that entire year-and-a-half Thank you for writing back to that fifth-grade class when all you really wanted to do was sleep after a hard day of walking Thank you for looking through the tear-blurred sights of your rifle Thank you for crying over the dead Thank you for the sucking chest wound Thank you for the partial loss of your leg Thank you for your blood caught in a sterile metal tray shaped like a curled cheese puff Thank you for hating and killing Muslims Thank you for the hard clench of your jaw Thank you for thinking of us back here in the United States of Amnesia going about our war-free lives Thank you for our amber waves of grain purple mountains majesty bombs bursting in mid-air Thank you for Fox News and the pretty girl who reads the headlines Thank you for the freedom to fill my lungs so I can howl across the bandwidth of Twitter Thank you for this Big Mac and this Whopper and this Domino's pizza Thank you for

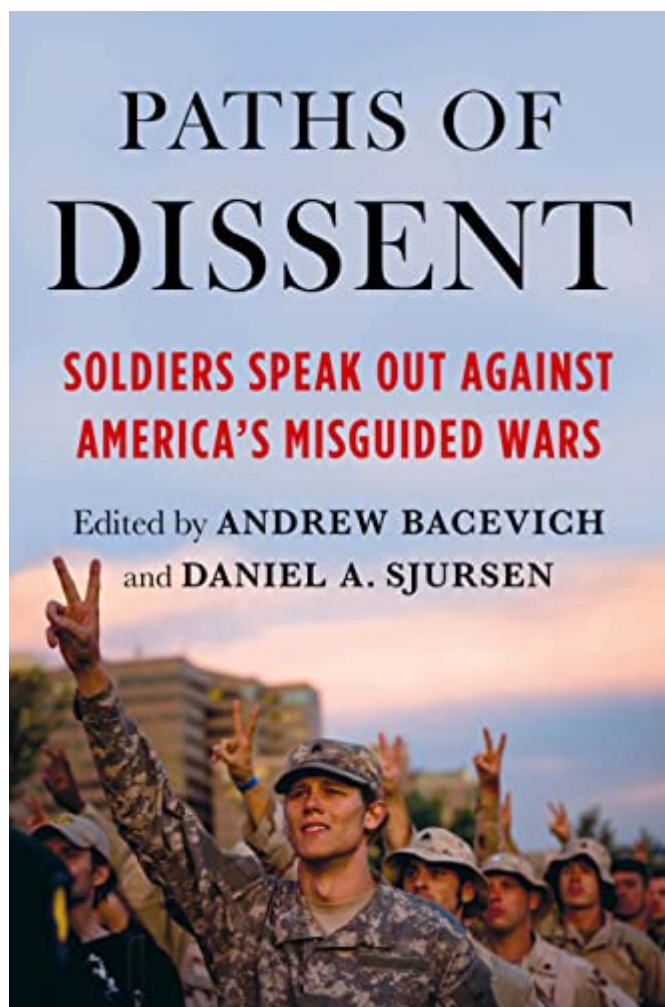
almost dying in order that I might live to gain another twenty pounds and then Keto myself back to normalcy two years later Thank you for the chance to marry Kevin S., to fuck him, to bear his two children, and to file for divorce when I was through with all of that Thank you for giving me the freedom to move from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon Thank you for my Golden Retriever Thank you for my God-given right to enjoy the rain Thank you for my new breasts and the blue pill which cures my erectile dysfunction Thank you for infomercials and the operators who are standing by Thank you for this cigarette and this beer and this fried pork rind Thank you for the chance to uncork this '41 Cabernet and eat this Bernaise-smothered filet Thank you for the three Starbucks in my neighborhood Thank you for *American Idol* Thank you for my amazing Amazon Kindle Thank you for the Mall of America Victoria's Secret Dippin Dots The Gap Best Buy and the weight of shopping bags that turn my fingers white Thank you for my Prius and the \$3.34 per gallon which fills it Thank you for giving your blood for my oil Thank you for leaving and returning Thank you for limping through the airport on your half leg Thank you for that little American flag sticking from a side pocket of your rucksack (long may she wave) Thank you for your smile on a stiff upper lip and the way you tried to conceal your limp by swinging both legs in equal cadence like you were in a Sousa march Thank you for catching my eye Thank you for allowing me to stop you on the concourse Thank you for taking this stranger's hand Thank you for saying You're welcome No problem Glad to do it.

*The original version of "Thank You" was published in F(r)iction Magazine in 2015.*

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# Peter Molin's Strike Through the Mask!: A Review of Andrew Bacevich's "Paths of Dissent"



What did you do if you were deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and believed the wars you volunteered to fight were unethical or badly managed? Keep quiet and perform your duties as best you could? Take your concerns to the chain-of-command? Express your reservations privately to friends and family? Protest publicly by writing a congressman or news outlet? Or, wait until you were out of service to tell the world about your misgivings?

In *Paths of Dissent: Soldiers Speak Out Against America's Misguided Wars* (2022), editors Andrew Bacevich and Daniel A.

Sjursen invite fourteen veterans of the Global War on Terror to describe acts of public protest they made while still serving or in the years afterward. The contributors describe the events that led them to protest and explore the consequences of their actions. They also reflect on the shape dissent has taken in the post-9/11 contemporary political and cultural climate.

Contributors include field-grade officers, junior officers, and enlisted service members; former non-commissioned officers are notably absent. Army and Marine voices dominate, with only Jonathan Hutto representing the Navy and no former Air Force or Coast Guard personnel featured. Hutto is the lone African-American voice, and Joy Damiani's the sole woman, while Buddhika Jayamaha's contribution illustrates the multicultural make-up of America's post-9/11 military. Arguably the most-well known contributors are National Football League star and Army Ranger Pat Tillman's brother Kevin and Army veteran-author Roy Scranton. In many cases, the contributors' acts-of-protest were letters written to influential decision-makers in Washington or opinion-pieces published in the *New York Times* or other high-brow journalistic outlets. Others were published in military venues such as the *Armed Forces Journal*, or in book form. Contributors often describe brief moments of mainstream news notoriety, but curiously, the Internet as an outlet for protest or as a possible galvanizer of public outrage is rarely mentioned. Only a few authors report actively participating in public protests or anti-war organizations.

The lack of a vibrant antiwar movement is foregrounded in Andrew Bacevich's introduction, as Bacevich, a retired colonel, came-of-age in the Vietnam era. That war's glaring sins and mistakes, as well as the ensuing public demonstrations, are on his mind: "In fact, from its very earliest stages until its mortifying conclusion, America's war in Vietnam was a crime." The implication, then, is that Iraq

and Afghanistan were also crimes, with the additional message being that we have ignorantly repeated Vietnam's mistakes. "...of this we can be certain," Bacevich writes, "rarely has such an excruciating experience yielded such a paltry harvest of learning."

The dismal historical record drives Bacevich to ask contemporary contributors to examine the disconnect between their isolated protests and popular tolerance of the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, marked as they were by torture, wanton killing, disrespect for our allies, helplessness in the face of Improvised Explosive Devices, unresolved debates about policy and strategy, and, most of all, lack of success. The personal narratives that follow Bacevich's introduction are varied and compelling.

For the field grade officers represented, such as Jason Dempsey, Paul Yingling, and Gian Gentile, speaking out against failed policies and tactics came not in the guise of impassioned outcries, but as reasoned analyses in books and thought-pieces aimed at military decision-makers. To a man, they report their ideas and objections fell on deaf ears. Gentile, an Army colonel who served in Baghdad at the height of the surge and subsequently took issue with COIN strategy and its primary proponent General David Petraeus, states it most bluntly: "From what I can tell, [my] seven years of professional military dissent had no impact on the actual US strategy and the conduct of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan." Instead, the failure to conform to repeat the party line brought upon their authors ostracization leading to early-retirement. No one's going to feel too sorry for colonels forced to live on a colonel's retirement pay-and-benefits, but taken together, the essays by this group of authors are savvy about military institutional politics and culture, particularly within the officer corps and especially in regard to its capacity for intellectual honesty and rigor.

The essays by junior officers typically begin by describing the youthful idealism that led the authors to the military, followed by accounts of how their idealism was crushed first in training (or in their educations at West Point or Annapolis), and culminating in scornful howls fomented by battlefield events in Iraq and Afghanistan. Army infantry officer Dan Bershinski describes how losing his legs to a mine in Afghanistan made him a pariah within the infantry corps. Rather than treated as a hero who might speak the truth of combat to officers in training, he was isolated from the junior officers whom he wanted to help become better leaders for fear his words and injuries might bum them out. For Marine Gil Barndollar, two desultory tours in Afghanistan drove home the point that the war was unwinnable, in equal parts due to failed American overarching strategy, the incompetence of the Afghan military, and his own units' risk-averse and uninspired tactics. For Marine Matthew P. Hoh, experiences in Iraq similar to Barndollar's in Afghanistan soured him. For these former officers, the gaping chasm between stated goals and ideals and actual experience of the war was intolerable. The sentiment expressed by Hoh that after leaving the military he vowed "to live a life according to how my mind, soul, and spirit dictate—to be intellectually and morally honest for the remainder of my days"—unites their accounts.

The contributions by junior enlisted service members are the most varied and in many ways the most interesting reflections in *Paths of Dissent*. Often, they recount dutiful performance of duty while in uniform, even by left-leaning and artistically-minded soldiers such as Joy Damiani and Roy Scranton. Airborne paratrooper Buddika Jayamaha reports with almost chagrin and regret an act-of-protest—an article he and squad members composed for the *New York Times*—he undertook while serving in the ranks while in Iraq. Frankly, the sense that the military was a reasonably tolerable institution for young men and women just starting out in life seems to predominate. Only Jonathan W. Hutto's essay describes a



sustained and contentious wrangle with his chain-of-command and the big Navy while in uniform born of miserable terms-of-service. For most of the enlisted authors in *Paths of Dissent*, the real drama takes place after leaving the military. Several accounts report flirtation with anti-war movements. A more common experience is a period of drift and dysfunction as they sorted out their past lives as soldiers with efforts to build meaningful lives afterward. Jayamaha writes, "I had too many choices, and every choice seemed hollow. I had survived the war relatively unscathed, thankful to my colleagues, leaders, and God for saving my dumb ass... But what would be the most meaningful way to spend the rest of my life? How could I be of service again?" Similarly, Roy Scranton writes that "...dissent may need to take form not in words but in deeds: not as yet another public performance of critique but as the solid accomplishment of repair."

The principled literary objections to small-unit practices or big-military policies recorded in *Paths of Dissent* differ from more overt forms of protest, such as refusal to obey orders or demonstration outside the halls of power. There are, however, other ways veterans manifested dissent than by writing letters, disobeying orders, and marching in the streets, which Bacevich and Sjursen seem not inclined to foreground. We might think of the low-boil burn virtually every deployed soldier felt about the wars. It was evident to almost everyone that that victory was far-off as the wars were being imagined and fought. As someone who has read dozens of Global War on Terror soldier memoirs and fictional portrayals, I'm surprised that the truculent dissatisfaction of lower-enlisted soldiers and junior officers surfaces in only a few *Paths of Dissent* accounts. Damiani's essay points to it, as does former-Marine's Vincent Emanuel's; general readers might know this spirit of unruly disobedience best from the sarcastic Terminal Lance cartoon strip.

We might also consider how the national conversations around

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and veteran suicides represented if not direct dissent, then touchstones by which the ill-begotten wars were often measured. In other words, the cries for help broadcast by troubled veterans might be understood as a dissent that had not found the right words for what those cries signified. Only Jonathan W. Hutto's contribution directly references racism as a rationale for dissent; Hutto's unfortunate experience illustrates how large could be the gap between the military's stated ideals and the reality of life in the ranks for people-of-color. Even in Joy Damiani's essay, which wonderfully documents what might be described as an early case of "quiet quitting" to silently register protest, gender inequity and sexual assault and abuse are not explored for the rottenness they all too often exposed at the core of military culture and the war effort. Finally, the idea that alienation generated by disgust with military hypocrisy and incompetence might lead to anti-establishment fervor for President Trump and radical conservative outrage is not considered in *Paths of Dissent*. What might Ashli Babbitt, the Air Force veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan who died storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021 have to say on the matter? Or active-duty Marine Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller, Jr., whose tirade against President Biden for his perceived mishandling of the evacuation of American allies at Hamid Karzai International Airport in August 2021 effectively ended his military career?

So, *Paths of Dissent* leans heavily toward mannered outcries-from-the-left against the American war machine, inspired by conscience, principle, and duty. I like that fine, but the mannered approach also hints at reasons why protest never caught hold with the populace as it did in the Vietnam era. Bacevich and many contributors view the tepid indifference of the American public as structurally facilitated by the all-volunteer military that allowed the populace to safely avoid thinking about the war. Considered from the populace's perspective, the Global War on Terrorism did not exact much of

a cost, and was hazily connected with the fact that there were no more major terrorist attacks on American soil. "Thank You for Your Service" and "Support the Troops" rhetoric was enough to demonstrate care and assuage guilty consciences about not personally doing more to fight "terrorism." Left mostly unspoken was a less-flattering corollary in regard to veteran protest: "Well, what did you expect? You volunteered for it." Even more: "You volunteered for it and were well-compensated for your service." Vets themselves were subject to the force of these sentiments. It's also hard not to think that a significant portion of the American public rationalized that there were plenty of Al Qaeda in Iraq and Taliban in Afghanistan who hated America and wanted to kill American soldiers. To continue to fight them—to not admit defeat—registered as legitimate, whatever the problems that accrued in the process.

Thus civilians, deferring to the military itself to shape and win the wars, did not demand accountability from political leaders, who in turn did not demand accountability from senior military leaders. In the absence of oversight, the military in the field floundered. Units did what they could, which often wasn't much. Soldiers, murky about the big picture, understood missions in terms of tactical proficiency, loyalty to their squads, and body counts of dead Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Without clear orders and a winning strategy, soldiers made up their own minds and often took matters into their own hands. Some fought more brutally than policy and circumstance called for, while others turned in lackadaisical efforts that focused on staying safe and doing as little as possible.

While demanding that civilians and civilian leaders listen more carefully to the voices of soldiers, *Paths of Dissent* zeroes in on the military's own culpability for creating the specific conditions that caused soldiers to dissent, as well as its inability to correct those conditions. An overarching message repeated often is that the military was and is

incapable of critiquing or reforming itself. The accounts by field grade officers illustrate that perpetuating the status quo is the imperative that most governs military culture, not winning wars or taking care of soldiers. Even relatively sustained efforts at internal change, such as the pivot to a counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, or application of manpower “surges” in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been poorly conceptualized and wracked by group-think and “flavor-of-the-day” thought-processes. A political sphere and populace that either refused to exercise oversight or just didn’t care made the situation even worse. That the whole war enterprise might have been a disgraceful crime, as Bacevich suggests, tugged at the mind of all participants, thus adding layers of denial and self-deception. Given such inadequacy, is it any wonder that junior officers and junior enlisted felt unsupported and unheard?

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*Paths of Dissent* is dedicated to Ian Fishback, the Army special forces officer who took his grievances about the lack of guidance regarding the use of torture while interrogating prisoners in Iraq to the Washington political establishment and media mainstream in 2005. Bacevich reports that he asked Fishback to contribute, but Fishback was too overtaken by the madness that consumed him at the end of his life to author a publishable essay. Bacevich himself is no stranger to dissent; a retired Army colonel himself, he has written books whose titles illustrate his own objections to America’s modern wars: *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (2005), *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* (2010), and *The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory* (2020). Co-editor Daniel A. Sjursen is not as well-known, but he’s a retired Army officer who served

in Iraq and Afghanistan and is now associated with the website Antiwar.com.

*Paths of Dissent: Soldiers Speak Out Against America's Misguided Wars.* Edited by Andrew Bacevich and Daniel A. Sjursen. Metropolitan-Holt, New York. 2022.

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## **Fiction from Sara Nović: After the Attack**

Well, nothing at first, not right after. In those initial moments panic is still optional.

At the grocery store, the one across from your building on Frederick Douglass, or farther up on Ft. Washington near your boyfriend's place, depending—a shrill, unfamiliar tone piercing the Muzak. It startles awake a sudden bond between you and other shoppers, people with whom you'd so far avoided eye contact, mumbling a continuous apology for bumping into one another. Now there is camaraderie in the unison groping of pockets, the rifling for phones among purses and reusable totes.

Across the river on Atlantic Avenue, in the urgent care waiting room, you and the receptionist both jump. The emergency alert system, this is not only a test.

Or on your couch at home, your phone dead from the night before, you receive no alert. You won't see the special report ticker tape because you are watching Netflix. At the moment, it doesn't much matter. At first, there are only unconfirmed reports.

It can, as it has before, happen at any time, and therein is the bulk of its power. But city mornings offer certain opportunities—more people on the street, on subways, concentrated in office buildings. People running late, or still bleary-eyed, unseeing, unsaying. See 9/11, 8:46 AM; see Oklahoma City, 9:02 AM.

The West Fourth Street station is bombed in the morning. In your Columbus Circle office tower, a splay of technological gadgets laid out before you on the conference table sound unanimous alarms. The first alert does not contain the word “attack”; it only says “explosion.” So you and your colleagues ignore it. Because the meeting is about to start.



Because New York is a big city, and old, and badly-kempt. Because, though you have watched your share of terror unfold live and on screens, it is still possible that this is not that. Possible is all you need, and in New York possibilities are myriad—gas line break, signal malfunction, flood, or trash

fire. You've read the posters; the MTA boasts hundreds every year.

Nothing more will happen for a while. You get in line to pay for your groceries.

The receptionist will turn on the television just as you are ushered to the exam room, and you'll scroll through Twitter in your paper gown, seeking a hashtag.

Or you'll lie on your couch with your feet atop the armrest and let your eyes glaze hard against the electro-glow, allowing one episode to flow into the next. It is, after all, your day off.

When, that morning, about halfway through the meeting you remember it is a Tuesday, you pull your phone beneath the table and text your wife. She would've passed through West Fourth on her way to class. *U ok? Saw the alert*, you write, then put the phone back on the table, designating half an eye to the task of monitoring the indicator light that might signal her response. A moment later you see the graphic designer making a similar move. The meeting facilitator, who flew in from LA, does not notice.

The second alert changes things. It goes off mid-walk-up, echoing through the stairwell, and you abandon your grocery bags on the kitchen floor and turn on the television. There has been another explosion; cops are in pursuit of a suspect; there is speculation about his race and religion.

You shiver in your paper gown while your doctor, a Pakistani man from Jackson Heights, wishes for the attacker's whiteness, laments the hate crimes his neighborhood will be in for otherwise. Why, when there is an attack, must they always suffer twice? As he talks you reach for your phone to text your roommate.

Or you fall asleep there on the couch before the computer,

waking only when Netflix stops its auto-play, seeking validation that you are, in fact, still here.

After the second alert, you step out of the meeting to call her. She doesn't answer. It doesn't even ring. Maybe, you think, she has made it to class and is mid-lecture. Maybe she is stuck underground, train traffic bottled up beneath you. Maybe, you think, New York should get its shit together and get some goddamn phone service in the subway like every other city in the goddamn world. Some Russian oligarch is probably dragging his feet, trying to figure out how to wring more money from it first. Fuckers, you think, aware that in your glass skyscraper on the Circle, many have thought the same of you. You call her again—no dice. You see Adrian—your partner on the project—in the hallway. He is on the phone, and you nod at each other as you pass.

An inactive group text once made to plan a reunion dinner (failed due to irreconcilable schedules), is reanimated as friends check-in. Quickly, most everyone says they are fine—stay safe—and you wait for the stragglers to respond.

You ball up the paper gown and jab at your phone with one hand, pull your clothes on in brusque, awkward bursts with the other. You hop on one leg as you yank at the backs of your shoes. You hear from your roommate, or you still haven't heard from your roommate.

You finally plug in your phone and the missed calls from your mother, seven in total, are how you find out something is wrong. You try to piece together the story from her news jumble. No, you rarely go to the place where it happened, but this is cold comfort, and you do not attempt to detail the reality of city living for her. You wake up your computer while you listen to her relief set in. Of course you take the subway, everyone does, but you're home now. You remember a guy you'd had a crush on at your last job and wonder if he is okay, then if it is creepy to seek him out online and ask. You



refresh Facebook to see if he surfaces.

The attacker's manifesto has surfaced, though what it says doesn't matter much. Whatever the angle it serves as fuel for someone else's vitriol. Already the feeds have been coopted by trolls of diverse hatreds, practically gleeful in how the dead people are indisputable proof of their political stances, casualty numbers collected and laid out as evidence like a good hand of poker. As if in defiance, the body count fluctuates all afternoon. NBC volleys between 30 and 33 while CNN holds steady at "dozens." A reporter reads snippets from the document, lines they have also turned into an infographic, to be shared and repeated in and out of context in the weeks to come.

Around the table, you and your colleagues are each engaged in your own ceaseless scroll, searching for a live newsfeed online. But the streams are jammed, or they are an erratic, pixelated froth—frozen in one moment, blurred and jerky the next, altogether unwatchable. Adrian drags a TV cart into the conference room, the kind the gym teacher used to pull out of the closet when it was time for the Sex Ed videos. Aptly, someone has drawn a penis in the dust on the screen. Once the TV is on you can no longer see it, but while the news flashes grainy Chopper 7 footage of fire belching up the subway stairwell, you still wish someone had wiped it off. You send another text as you watch the FDNY charge the flames. The hose water does not look like water; it looks solid, a length of rope lowered into the chasm, its impact on the flames inconsequential.

You want to go home, but with the subway down and traffic gridlocked, you are told to remain in a safe place as the police sweep the city for IEDs. Despite being forced to stay in the office, you are wholly unproductive. The guy from LA, trying to be kind, passes in and out of the room intermittently. At a borrowed desk he calls his home office, where the day is still new and unmarred.

The feeling when her message comes through: relief pushing up your chest with such force it is almost nauseating. Like eating something so sweet it burns your tongue, makes your stomach jump.

*I'm good. stuck on train for a while. class canceled so headed home. love u.*

You yelp when you read it, a weird, strangled sound, and you aren't even embarrassed. "She's okay," you announce. And they are happy for you.

Politicians from all over the country call in to news shows to offer thoughts&prayers, having less to do with either endeavor than with being on record as having said the phrase.

You are out of the way and grateful to be so, way uptown in a place no one has yet thought to blow up.

You leave the doctor's office and try to decipher the map of bus routes that might get you back to your place.

Or, when you hang up with your mother, you remember you were supposed to meet a date tonight. You text him to ask whether you are still on.

You cut out at 4:30, a rarity for you, but you weren't getting anything done anyway, and you want to see your wife. You try to call, but it goes to voicemail. You're grateful you had some contact, you feel lucky. On your way, you notice the receptionist has been crying, but you don't stop to ask. Outside it is Sesame Street weather, such sharp contrast to the smoke screened footage of downtown, it feels as if it had all happened much farther away. Your phone rings but you don't recognize the number, so you ignore it and contemplate the nerve of telemarketers these days. You walk home, thirty blocks, and think it really is a nice commute on foot, that you should do it more often.

The doorman greets you, searches your face and, finding no distress, looks reassured.

"Good to see you, sir."

"You, too. All okay in your family?"

"Yes sir. And the missus?"

"She's fine. She's upstairs, actually."

He gives you a look that suggests he is trying figure out what he might say next. You register the question in your arched eyebrows.

"It's just—I've been here all day, sir. The other doorman couldn't make it in, because of the trains."

And you remember him bidding you goodbye early that morning. You excuse yourself and get in the lift and rush to your door, though you know before you open it—she isn't there. You call and call on the landline but it goes straight to voicemail like the battery is dead. A while passes before you remember the unknown caller.

You never hear the whole message. You hang up as soon as you realize it is the police, call the number back. They are uncharacteristically polite as they cast you around the circuit board.

Finally, an officer says your name, your wife's. Apologizes. Asks if you could come down to make an ID.

"There must be a mistake," you say. "I heard from her after the attack. She said she was okay."

"You spoke with her?"

"She texted."

"Sir, we'd still appreciate if you came down." He gives you

directions to Washington Square Park as if you are an alien, and in that moment you feel like one.

You call your boyfriend and tell him to come over for dinner, you have been grocery shopping today and can make a nice stir fry; you can catch up on that show you've DVR'd.

You get a phone call from your roommate sounding groggy, saying yes, he is fine, but they're taking him to the hospital—somewhere nearby, maybe Brooklyn Heights. Or you hear nothing and lament your morning quarrel over toast crumbs, or hear nothing and invent grand schematics for his escape from peril—perhaps he is still deep underground, inching along the wall of the tunnel, making his way home.

Or you flat iron your hair and put on extra mascara and things go back to normal. You feel guilty about it or you don't. You take a cab in a wide arc around the affected blocks and look away when you see caution tape. You arrive at the restaurant right on time.

You take a cab, get out after ten minutes, feeling sick, remind yourself that nothing is for certain. You run twenty blocks buoyed by that hope, hail another cab. At the scene it is not yet night, the NYPD's neatly ordered mobile generator streetlamps muted by a fuchsia sunset so striking it makes you want to punch something. The police have cordoned off the park, one corner swathed with tarps where the EMTs swarm. You know this is where you are supposed to go before anyone tells you; the policeman at the gate who checks your ID confirms.

In the makeshift tent: ferric scent of blood and antiseptic-as-cologne. A policewoman leads you down the row to a stretcher tagged with your last name. On the ground beneath it is your wife's purse.

"I don't understand. She messaged," you say when the cop pulls back the sheet.

"It's possible the message was sent with a delay, after extraction," she says. "As they're brought above ground and reconnect to the grid—the phones—it's been causing some confusion."

You stare at the cop as if she is speaking another language. She expresses her condolences, tells you to take your time and then return to the front table for the paperwork.

Beneath the sheet you take her hand, except she doesn't feel like your wife anymore—fingers cool and taut—so you settle for stroking her hair, soot and shrapnel flecked through like glitter. You cry until you think your ribs might crack; you sign your forms and push your way out of the tent into the twilight. You stand there on the grass, holding your wife's purse and wondering what the point of that goddamn arch is anyway, wondering what the hell you are supposed to do next. Once, when you were fourteen, you and your best friend skipped school and got high in this park, but you have never been as dazed as you are now, generator stars boring through your eyes and into your skull, no hope of an exit wound.

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