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Wars at Home: A Meditation on Circumstance and Luck

A friend of mine sent me a couple of *New York Times* articles this week – you can “gift” articles to people like me who don’t have a subscription, so these stories were “presents” regarding events that I would otherwise be ignoring; the end of the semester is stressful enough without keeping up with the news.

The first article was a profile¹ of Anton Filatov, a conscripted soldier in the Ukrainian army. The former film critic was an unlikely soldier – he is a pacifist, his vision is impaired – and his career as an intellectual didn’t necessarily prepare him for live combat. Nevertheless, Filatov, like many other Ukrainians, has stepped into the fray courageously. His Facebook blog posts, where he writes in three languages and takes moving photos of the books he’s reading amid ephemera of war, “opens his gifts even more²” per Alexandr Gusav, a fellow Ukrainian film critic quoted in the *Times*.

Filatov, whose story is ultimately framed by the sharp headline “Words were once his harshest weapons. Now he carries an AK-47,” still practices his art. The *Times* piece quotes from one of his more reflective pieces on his constant proximity to death:

"One morning I went to the post office to receive a shipment from my family of warm clothes. They came in a big plastic bag. Then I was busy all day and took this plastic bag everywhere I went. In the evening, unexpectedly, I was asked to help our medics load a plastic bag with a casualty from our battalion. This coincidence just struck me emotionally.

A plastic bag gives you life in the morning and in the evening a very similar plastic bag takes life away. Here at war everything is guided by coincidence or accident. No one knows how the missile will fly, how the shrapnel will go or where the bullet will land.

Are you going to carry the bag? Or are you going to be in the bag³?"

Filatov’s assertion – “here at war everything is guided by coincidence or accident” – points to the grim reality of war that many combat veterans have spoken of throughout the centuries of humankind at war: war is hell. War is sloppy, even when strategy has been carefully laid out, and instances of “collateral damage” to innocent lives are nearly as frequent to acts of

¹ Gettleman, J. & Mykolyshyn, O. (2022) “Words were once his harshest weapons. Now he carries an AK-47.” *New York Times*. 18 Nov 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/18/world/europe/ukraine-film-critic-soldier.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

astounding heroism. The everyday mundanities of war-time life (carrying a big plastic bag) are the times spent waiting for the sudden flashes of terror and action: the times when the bullets land and the missiles fly. The way you, as a human, ultimately use the big plastic bag depends on, usually, simple dumb luck.

Dumb luck is often characterized by being at the right place at the right time; something good happens to the undeserving and unexpected. But, by and large, the rest of the world is rooting for Ukraine. Articles like this, which highlight the indomitable spirit of the Ukrainian soldiers, underscore how deserving they are of good fortune. They are fighting an invading aggressor (Russia) in the bitter cold with little help from the rest of the world (the \$18.2 billion⁴ in “security assistance” from the United States, or the €19.7 million⁵ “support package” pledged by Europe, only underscores the hypothesis that much of the world is on the side of Ukraine). Most of the world wants Ukraine to be lucky at war; their fortitude fighting a war in and over their own country’s sovereignty deserves reward.

The United States, conversely, has been lagging in fortitude in their own war, on their own soil, by terrorists in splinter cells made up from every corner of the country. The second *New York Times* article my friend sent me concerned the United States of America’s 34th mass shooting of 2022 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. I’ve been to Colorado Springs; there’s lots of nature, the people are friendly, and it is notably home to the US Air Force Academy. But this piece was about the heroes of the shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, mainly Richard M. Fierro, a retired US Army major who spent time in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of his 15 years of service.

Grimly titled “Army Veteran Went Into ‘Combat Mode’ to Disarm the Club Q Gunman,” the story details Fierro’s actions. The gunman at Club Q killed five people and injured at least 18, and could’ve gone on to cause more damage had Fierro not stepped in, armed only with his Army training and experience on the battlefield. Fierro, who’s personal battle with what appears to be PTSD (medication, psychological treatment, his unease with crowds or in enclosed spaces) is detailed as part of the news story, recalls his moment of action as simply going into “combat mode⁶”:

The long-suppressed instincts of a platoon leader shot back to life. He raced across the room, grabbed the gunman by a handle on the back of his body armor, pulled him to the floor and jumped on top of him.

“Was he shooting at the time? Was he about to shoot? I don’t know,” Mr. Fierro said. “I just knew I had to take him down.

⁴ “\$725 million in additional security assistance for Ukraine.” *US Department of Defense*. 14 October 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3189571/725-million-in-additional-security-assistance-for-ukraine/>.

⁵ “Commission proposed stable and predictable support package for Ukraine for 2023 of up to €18 billion.” *European Commission*. 9 November 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6699.

⁶ Phillips, Dave. (2022). “Army veteran went into ‘combat mode’ to disarm the Club Q gunman.” 21 November 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/21/us/colorado-springs-shooting-club-q-hero.html>.

The two crashed to the floor. The gunman's military-style rifle clattered just out of reach. Mr. Fierro started to go for it, but then saw that the gunman come up with a pistol in his other hand.

"I grabbed the gun out of his hand and just started hitting him in the head, over and over," Mr. Fierro said⁷.

Effectively, Fierro pistol-whipped the hell out of the assailant, encouraging a passing "drag dancer to stomp on [the assailant's] head with her high heels⁸." In the article, Colorado Springs Mayor John Suthers commends Fierro and other patron's actions, acknowledging that without their quick thinking, more casualties would have occurred. The article's Pulitzer-winning author, Dave Phillips, wonders what "allowed [Fierro] to put aside fear and act⁹," though in the sentence prior, he details Fierro's behavior until the assailant was subdued: "The whole time, Mr. Fierro said, he kept pummeling the shooter with the pistol while screaming obscenities¹⁰." Phillips need only look at his prior sentence to understand the reason Fierro put aside his fear – he was actually afraid. And angry. He happened to, as dumb luck might have it, also have the right tools and background to carry out the heroic act.

In a bizarre twist, we see two narratives of war in these two articles. Filatov, who entered the Ukrainian military with zero combat skills, perseveres on an international battleground. Fierro, who returned to a civilian world where he no longer needed to be in "combat mode," perseveres through a "mad minute [of combat]¹¹" on an unlikely battlefield. Or is it really that unusual now, in the United States, to see the whole country as a potential battleground? Fierro appears to think so. The article concludes with his ominous reflection in the aftermath of the shooting: "[To get through loss in war zones] you just get out on the next patrol [...] Eventually you get home safe. But here [in the US] I worry there is no next patrol. [The trauma] is harder to cure. You are already home." What then, of America's war at home? When did terrorist combat become a normal incident in American schools, nightclubs, churches and synagogues? When did the United States accept this as fact, making claims of "hero" on a war veteran who'd already served his country, but had to do it again, unfairly and by surprise, due to the United States' impotence in doing any real work toward gun violence reform? Can we not admit that we are at war?

On the surface, I read two articles this week about men who were fighting a war in their country. But in one instance (Filatov), the war looks like wars normally do, where there is a clear enemy using familiar villainous methods of land-grabbing to gain power and control. In the other instance (Fierro), the enemy is unclear and the methods are guerilla acts of domestic terrorism. While the profile of the American mass-shooter as enemy has become pretty

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

standard – male, white, and armed with military-grade weapons he had no business owning, never mind using – but there are no efforts made to stop him or others in his ilk. There are concrete, concerted efforts, even *by* the United States, to quell the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When the battlefield is “home” and the enemy, while identified, goes free, there is no more dumb luck at play. The war going on in the US, unlike the Ukraine, is simply dumb inaction.