

## PREFACE

On that Wednesday night in June, Russell Madden's mother, Peggy Madden Davitt, heard the knock at the door she had dreaded for months. She opened the door and saw a man in full military dress uniform. For a nanosecond Peggy thought there might be good news about her son, who was fighting in Afghanistan. Realizing why the officer was there, she started saying, then crying, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no . . ." Peggy told the man, a U.S. Army chaplain, that he had the wrong house and slammed the door shut.

He knocked again.

"No, you have the wrong house!" Peggy screamed.

The chaplain knocked again. When Peggy finally opened the door, the chaplain quickly slid his foot between the door and its frame and forced his way inside.

Private First Class Russell Madden was just twenty-nine years old. According to the Army, on June 23, 2010, Russell was killed in Afghanistan when a rocket-propelled grenade, or RPG, tore through his vehicle's armored hull.

Russell grew up in Bellevue, Kentucky, a town of fewer than six thousand, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. He ran track, played

baseball, and was a high school football star who played six positions for a team that lost one game his senior year. After graduation Russell coached peewee football and was a mentor to his players on and off the field. He volunteered to help elderly neighbors with odd jobs. Russell married his girlfriend, Michelle Lee Reynolds, and in 2006 she gave birth to their child, Parker Lee.

Parker was born with cystic fibrosis, the incurable disease requiring lifetime medical treatment. According to Peggy, Russell struggled to find steady work after high school. Mostly he did some roofing and electrical work, and he didn't have health insurance to cover the treatment. "Where he had been working, he had no benefits or anything like that," his sister, Lindsey, said.<sup>1</sup> Family and friends raised money to send Parker to the world-famous Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. When Russell, Michelle, and Parker arrived, the clinic asked about Parker's insurance. Peggy said the clinic quickly turned them away.

"No one will ever send my son away again," Peggy remembers Russell saying. After returning home, Russell enlisted in the Army. "He joined because he knew that Parker would be taken care of" by the military "no matter what," Russell's sister said.

Russell went to boot camp. The Army sent Russell to advanced training and then to its elite 173rd Airborne Brigade, stationed at military bases in Germany and Italy. Russell deployed to Afghanistan in 2009. Eight months later, Russell's family received his body in a casket at the local airport.

So many people wanted to attend the viewing of Russell's casket that the city moved the viewing to a local ten thousand-seat arena. It lasted for more than five hours. The line to greet the family stretched the entire length of the arena and out the doors. The day of the funeral, a hearse drove Russell's casket to the football stadium at Russell's high school. His former teammates were waiting for him at the fifty-yard line, standing in two lines in football jerseys and suits. A horse-drawn carriage carried Russell's casket through Bellevue, where people lined the streets holding Stars and Stripes flags and signs saying good-bye. A bishop and six priests presided over the funeral. The next day, Russell was on the local newspaper's front page. More than eight hundred people joined a Facebook group created in his honor. The Kentucky state legislature named a highway after Russell.<sup>2</sup>

Before Peggy and I met in 2014, she sent me a photo of Russell in uniform, holding Parker in his arms before he deployed to Afghanistan. Russell was just as Peggy had described: almost six feet tall and two hundred pounds, he could look intimidating with his completely shaved head, but he had a boyish smile and soft, gentle eyes. “That smile,” his mother said longingly over the phone. “I miss that smile.”

According to the Army, Russell died of severe injuries after the RPG blast fractured his skull in multiple places and caused bruising and bleeding inside and around his brain. The explosion hit Russell’s face and fractured his jaw and nasal bones in multiple places. The impact fractured Russell’s left clavicle, broke both forearm bones on his right arm, and caused bruising and bleeding around both lungs. Scrapes, cuts, and bruises covered much of his body.<sup>3</sup>

Russell Madden is one of more than 2.7 million people that the U.S. government has sent to fight wars that have raged continuously since the U.S. military invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Within days of the militant group al-Qaeda’s September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush declared a “global war on terrorism.” Within months U.S. forces were occupying Afghanistan and fighting other militants, with differing connections to al-Qaeda, in the Philippines, Somalia,



*Figure 1.* Body bag containing the remains of one of an estimated four million or more dead combatants and civilians, from all nations, in the post-2001 U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Yemen. Tens or, likely, hundreds of thousands more have died in seventeen additional countries where U.S. military forces have fought since 2001.

and Yemen. On March 20, 2003, the U.S. military invaded Iraq. Its leader, Saddam Hussein; its government; and its people had no connection to the September 11 attacks or al-Qaeda. U.S. troops deposed Hussein and occupied the country. President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and members of their administration justified the invasion by claiming an imminent threat from Iraqi chemical, biological, and possibly nuclear weapons; U.S. troops found that no such weapons existed. As in Afghanistan, U.S. forces soon faced an increasingly fierce armed resistance that became a brutal civil war.

In the nearly two decades since U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. military has fought in at least twenty-two countries.<sup>4</sup> The actual number is probably higher because of the secretive nature of post-2001 military operations. The words of U.S. leaders suggest that this period of unceasing war will continue for decades. Gen. David Petraeus, who commanded U.S. forces across the Middle East, called the wars “the kind of fight we’re in for the rest of our lives, and probably our kids’ lives.” Other military and civilian officials call the current conflicts the “long war” or the “forever war.”<sup>5</sup>

“Do you think it’s a forever war?” an NBC News reporter asked one four-star general.

“I don’t know if it’s—if it’s,” hesitated Gen. Joseph Votel, “you know, forever war. Define *forever*.”<sup>6</sup>

Some tend to think that this period of forever war is exceptional. Some assume, as I did, that it’s unusual that most new U.S. military recruits and most new U.S. college students have no memory of a time when their country wasn’t at war. To the contrary, this state of war is the norm in U.S. history. According to the government’s own Congressional Research Service and other sources, the U.S. military has waged war, engaged in combat, or otherwise employed its forces aggressively in foreign lands in all but eleven years of its existence.<sup>7</sup> Depending on one’s definitions, the years at peace may be even fewer. “The people of the United States have arguably never been at peace,” says scholar Nikhil Pal Singh.<sup>8</sup>

U.S. forces initiated most of these wars and invasions. Most were aggressive, offensive wars of choice. The Japanese attack on the United States—specifically, on what were then five Pacific Ocean colonies: Hawai‘i, the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, and Alaska—was an exception in U.S. history. The total list of U.S. wars and other combat actions

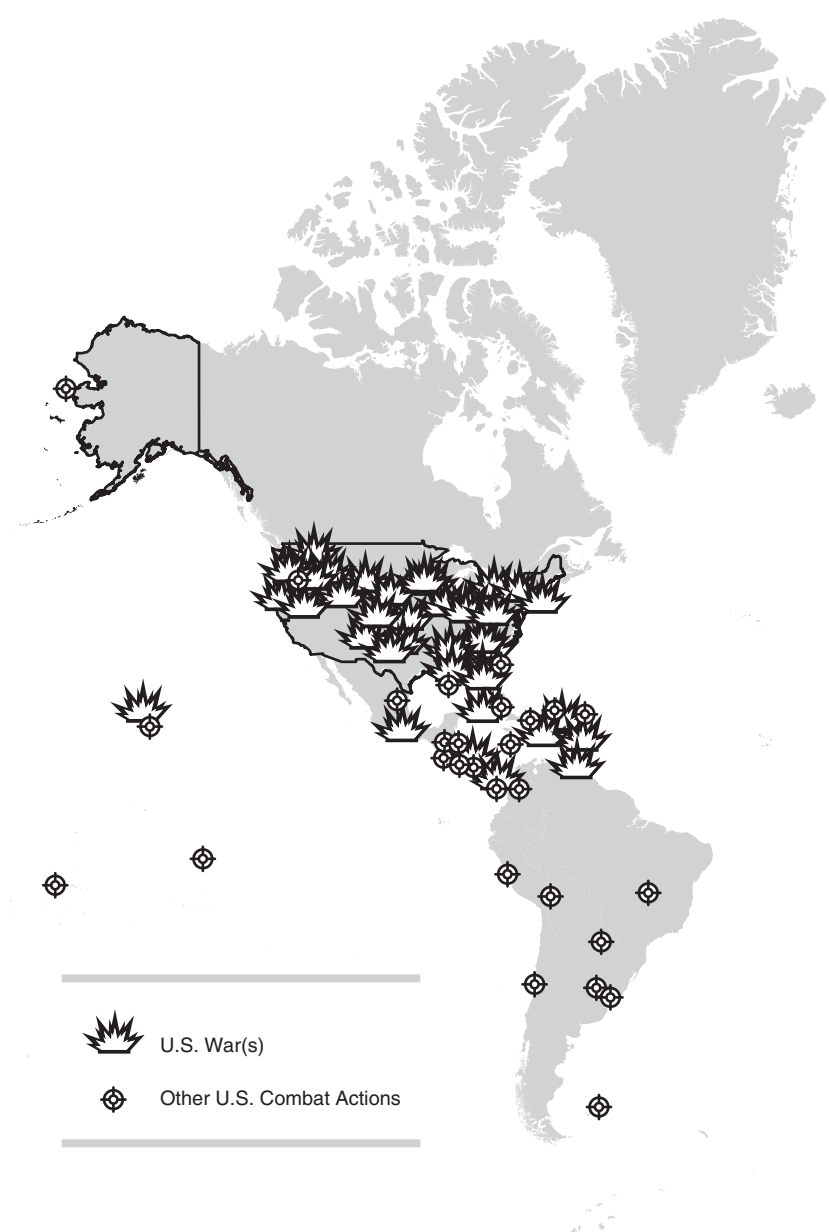


extends into the hundreds. A small fraction appears in most U.S. history textbooks: the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, the Korean War, Vietnam, the 1991 and 2003–11 wars in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, and the wars against the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. If histories mention the wars between European settlers and indigenous North American peoples, those wars are generally lumped together as the “Indian Wars.” Between U.S. independence and the end of the nineteenth century, Euro-American settlers waged essentially unceasing warfare against the Miami, Shawnee, Delaware, Muskogee (Creek), Seminole, Cherokee, Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne, Modoc, Apache, Sioux, Bannock, Piute, and Ute, among many others.\*

Even before the conclusion of the Revolutionary War with Britain, soldiers of the soon-to-be independent nation launched another war, to destroy Iroquois Confederacy resistance to settlers and troops in western New York and today’s Ohio. The brutal scorched-earth war opened new territories to westward colonization. It also opened the way for more wars. After independence U.S. forces were soon fighting a naval war with France. The U.S. government launched another war against Britain and invaded Canada at least eleven times (the military maintained plans to invade Canada into the 1930s).<sup>9</sup> In the first decades after U.S. independence, the military deployed to fight in places as far flung as Algiers, the Marquesas Islands, Peru, Samoa, Turkey, Angola, China, Haiti, Siberia, Laos, and Somalia.

Across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth and twenty-first, the invasions and wars of aggression generally grew lengthier, deadlier, and larger in scope. Although relatively few today think of California, the Southwest, and parts of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming as occupied territory, they’re controlled by the United States because the U.S. government instigated a war with Mexico in 1846, invading and taking almost half its land. The military invaded and occupied hemispheric neighbors, including Cuba (six times), Honduras (eight times), and Panama (twenty-four times). More fighting followed in China, Cambodia, Laos, Serbia, and Sudan, among others. Elsewhere the U.S. government has waged

\* When discussing American Indian/Native American/indigenous nations and peoples, I try to use the name(s) and spelling(s) most commonly used by the group itself, historically and today.



U.S. War(s)



Other U.S. Combat Actions



*Map 1. U.S. Wars and Combat, 1776–2020.*

Because of space limitations, this map does not reflect all conflicts between U.S. forces and Native American peoples. See the appendix for a full list. Oceans not to scale. Key sources: Torreon and Plagakis, *Instances of Use*; Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2014); John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

proxy wars and backed coups in places such as Guatemala, Iran, Indonesia, Chile, and Afghanistan.

The number of dead from these wars is hard to comprehend. Imagine how many Russell Maddens there have been. In the Revolutionary War, there were between 25,000 and 70,000 U.S. deaths, alone. More than 400,000 died in the U.S. Civil War. There were more than 1.6 million U.S. deaths combined between World Wars I and II; 36,500 U.S. dead in Korea; and more than 58,000 U.S. deaths in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>10</sup>

In Afghanistan, Russell Madden is one of around 6,100 U.S. military personnel and contractors who have died since the October 2001 invasion. Adding personnel and contractors who died in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, and other countries where the U.S. military has been waging war for almost two decades, the total rises to around 15,000.<sup>11</sup> Hundreds of thousands have returned from these wars with amputations, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries, and other physical and mental damage; as of 2018, 1.7 million veterans had reported a disability connected to wartime deployments.<sup>12</sup>

When one counts the dead on all sides in the history of U.S. wars, combatants and civilians alike, the total runs into the tens of millions. They include what were likely millions of Native Americans killed by battle, disease, and starvation; 200,000 to 1 million Filipinos dead in a fifteen-year U.S. war to assert colonial control beginning in 1898; between 3 and 4 million killed in Korea; and an estimated 3.8 million deaths in the wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>13</sup>

To call attention to all the dead in these and the many other U.S. wars is not to suggest that the U.S. government or the U.S. military—let alone every U.S. citizen—is responsible for all the death and damage caused by these wars. It is, however, to insist that any examination of U.S. wars needs to foreground the damage these wars have inflicted on human beings, regardless of their place of birth or nationality. This is especially important given the tendency of many U.S. news accounts and histories to ignore the suffering of non-U.S. citizens or to whitewash the deadly reality of war altogether.

As terrible as the impact of the post-2001 wars has been in the United States, death, injury, and trauma in the countries where the U.S. military has fought is orders of magnitude worse. An estimated 755,000 to 786,000 civilians and combatants, on all sides, have died in just Afghanistan, Iraq,

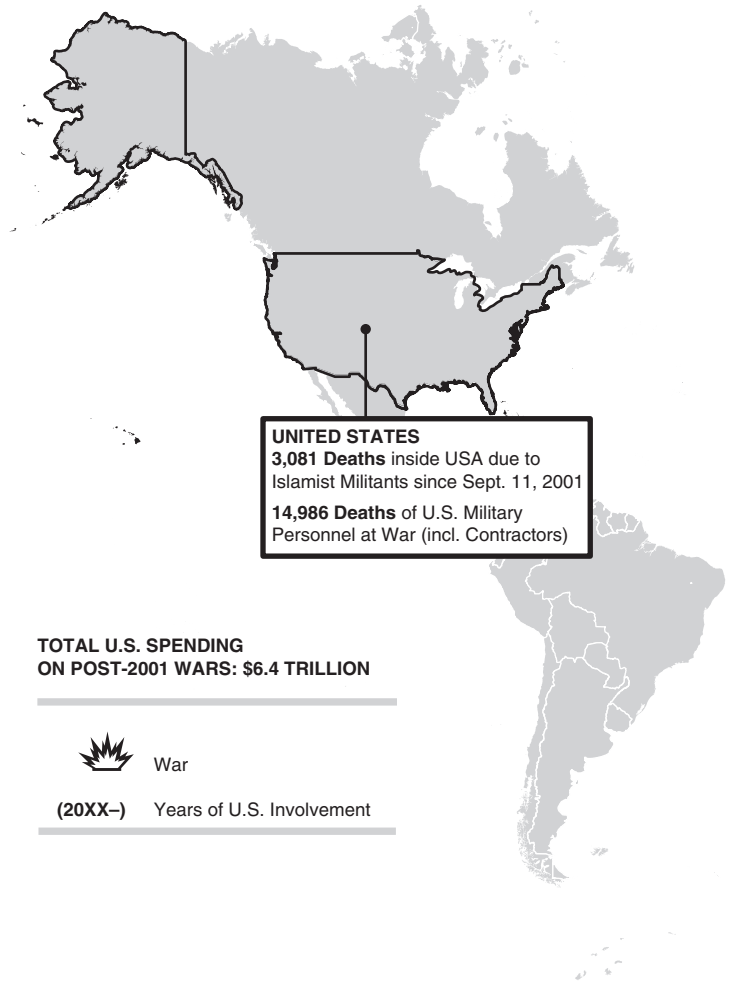
Syria, Pakistan, and Yemen since U.S. forces began fighting in those countries. That figure is around fifty times larger than the number of U.S. dead.<sup>14</sup>

But that's only the number of combatants and civilians who have died in combat. Many more have died as a result of disease, hunger, and malnutrition caused by the wars and the destruction of health care systems, employment, sanitation, and other local infrastructures. While these deaths are still being calculated and debated by researchers, the total could reach a minimum of 3 million—around two hundred times the number of U.S. dead. An estimate of 4 million deaths may be a more accurate, although still conservative, figure.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, entire neighborhoods, cities, and societies have been shattered by the U.S.-led wars. The total number of injured and traumatized extends into the tens of millions. In Afghanistan, surveys have indicated that two-thirds of the population may have mental health problems, with half suffering from anxiety and one in five from PTSD. By 2007 in Iraq, 28 percent of young people were malnourished, half living in Baghdad had witnessed a major traumatic event, and nearly one-third had PTSD diagnoses. As of 2019, more than 10 million have likely been displaced from their homes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya alone, becoming refugees abroad or internally displaced people within their countries.<sup>16</sup>

Alongside the human damage, the financial costs of the post-2001 U.S.-led wars are so large, they're nearly incomprehensible. As of late 2020 U.S. taxpayers already have spent or should expect to eventually spend a minimum of \$6.4 trillion on the post-2001 wars, including future veterans' benefits and interest payments on the money borrowed to pay for the wars. The actual costs are likely to run hundreds of billions or trillions more, depending on when these seemingly endless wars actually end.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the challenge of trying to fathom one trillion anything, let alone \$6.4 trillion, it's important to try to grasp what these sums mean (especially for those of us who are paying for the fighting with our taxes). What, for example, could such sums have done to rebuild public schools and public health infrastructure or to provide health care to those, like Russell and Parker, lacking insurance? The roughly \$5 trillion that U.S. taxpayers have already spent on the wars could have paid, for example, for eighteen years of health care for the thirteen million U.S. children now living below the poverty line, while simultaneously paying for two years of Head Start for all



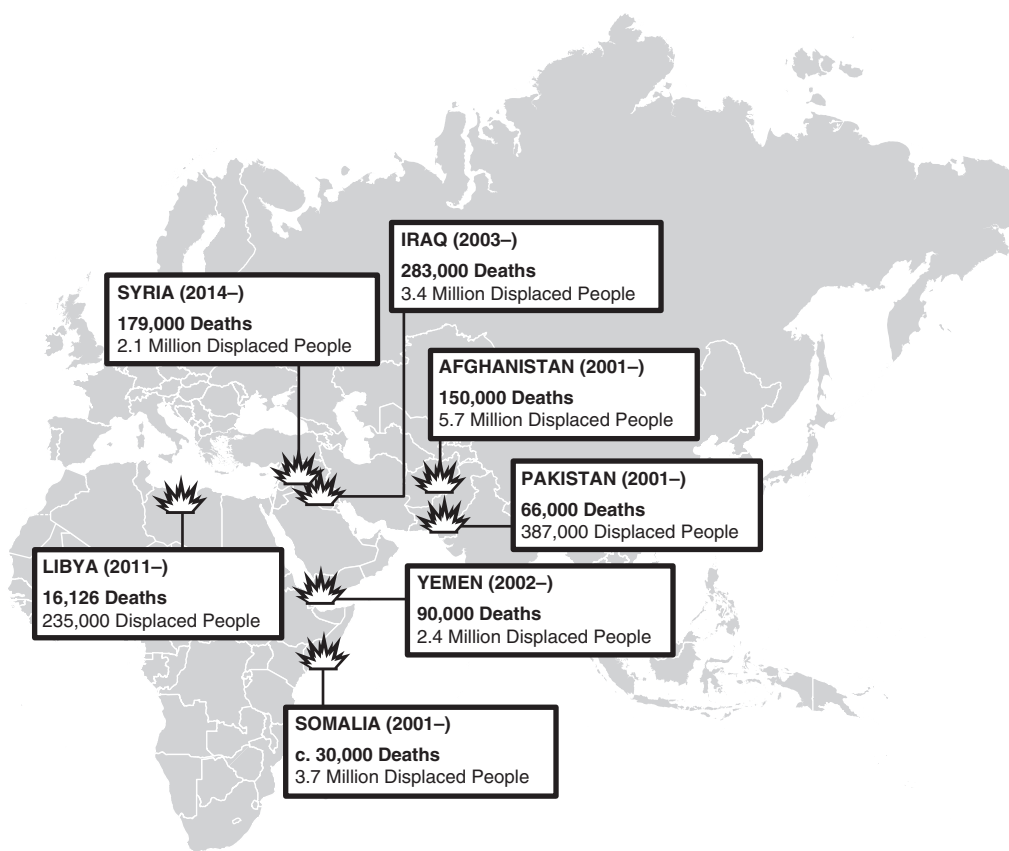
**TOTAL U.S. SPENDING  
ON POST-2001 WARS: \$6.4 TRILLION**



War

(20XX–)

Years of U.S. Involvement



*Map 2. The Human and Financial Costs of the Post-2001 Wars.*

*Deaths* include only direct combat fatalities among combatants and civilians of all nationalities. Total war deaths could be three-to-four, or more, times higher, including "indirect deaths" caused by the destruction of health and other infrastructure.

*Displaced people* include refugees and internally displaced peoples, although the causes of displacement are complex and extend beyond war alone (especially in Somalia and Pakistan). Financial costs reflect taxpayer funds spent or obligated, including estimated future veterans' benefits and interest payments. Data is as of 2019–2020. Oceans not to scale. Key sources: see page 349, notes 15 and 16.

those children, while simultaneously funding four-year public college scholarships for twenty-eight million students, while also providing twenty years of health care for one million military veterans, while still having enough to pay the salaries of four million people working clean energy jobs for ten years.<sup>18</sup>

The total effects of the post-2001 wars have been so disastrous that words can't capture the calamity. Numbers certainly can tell us only so much. Quickly they become numbing. Ultimately, there's no adequate way to measure the immensity of the damage these wars have inflicted on all the people in all the countries affected. Imagine how many Yemeni Russell Maddens there are. Imagine how many mothers who've lost sons, like Peggy Madden Davitt, there are in Iraq; how many sons without fathers, like Parker Lee, there are in Somalia; how many widows, like Michelle, there are in Afghanistan.

Facing the longer history of U.S. wars and their terrible effects, from the eighteenth century to today, the inescapable question is *why*? Whatever the motivations behind any individual war, what explains this record of near-constant warfare? What explains this record of war for a country long portrayed as a beacon of peace and democracy? And does it have to be this way?

#### POSTSCRIPT, MAY 6, 2020

I made the last substantial edits to this book early this year, before the first reports of deaths in the United States from the 2019 coronavirus disease pandemic. How many have died or suffered unnecessarily because the U.S. government didn't invest in adequate pandemic preparedness? The cost of assembling an adequate supply of masks and other personal protective equipment, an adequate ventilator stockpile, robust testing and vaccine-production capacity, among other public health tools, would have been a tiny fraction of the \$6.4 trillion spent or obligated on the post-September 11, 2001, wars. Responsibility for the COVID-19 disaster doesn't just lie in one or two or three of the last presidential administrations. Responsibility lies in large measure in the long history of U.S. wars and what's become a system of endless war. COVID has further demonstrated the urgency of changing that system.