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Lives and Numbers Count as Trump Tweets

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

October 20, 2017

Watching General John Kelly, President Trump's Chief of Staff, reveal the details of how the bodies of America's fallen military are cared for was a sobering reminder for all of us of the dedication and commitment of that one-percent who comprise our voluntary military. The context for the comments was the loss of four young lives in Niger in early October (Staff Sgt. Bryan Black, Sgt. La David Johnson, Staff Sgt. Dustin Wright and Staff Sgt. Jeremiah Johnson). Kelly's words were a reminder that beyond the politics - way beyond the politics - are the real lives of real Americans at risk. When any of those lives are lost, loved ones live on, suffering the loss. Yet, thanks to Kelly's words, we too feel the loss. Lives count.

Four lives mean something. They mean so in Niger. They meant something in Benghazi in 2012 when four perished (Ambassador Chris Stevens, Information Officer Sean Smith, and two CIA operatives, Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods, both former Navy SEALs). Though Benghazi became a political football, we all still grieved for the four Americans who were lost. General Kelly's recent remarks bring that sense of loss to the forefront again. Lives Count.

These two losses of four lives were keenly felt. But, remember the absolute shock that changed our nation when 2,996 people were killed during the September 11, 2001 attacks (the immediate deaths included 265 on the four planes [including the terrorists], 2,606 in the World Trade Center and in the surrounding area, and 125 at the Pentagon). The loss of that many lives in such a short period of time shook the soul of America. Lives count. But so do numbers.

During the Vietnam War there were 58,220 American military fatalities over 20 years, from 1955 to 1975. The trauma we all felt over those lost lives was caught up in a great policy and political struggle. The whole period changed America deeply. But it was not a one-day thing. It has taken decades for millions of us to reconcile that complex period and the loss of life in that period, brought home just now thanks to Ken Burns' Vietnam documentary series. We are reminded in a big way that lives matter. And so do numbers.

Four in Niger. Four in Benghazi. 2996 on 9/11. 58,220 in Vietnam. Lives count. Numbers count, too.

Here are some more numbers: following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, within the first four months 90,000–146,000 people had been killed in Hiroshima and 39,000–80,000 in Nagasaki with roughly half of the deaths occurring on the first day. Twelve of those were American POWs. But, American or not, all those lives counted. And the numbers are beyond comprehension.

We can somehow get our minds around 4 deaths or 2996 deaths. We have a harder time comprehending 58,220 deaths. But the 129,000 – 226,000 in August through November 1945? Incomprehensible.

Lives do count. And numbers do count. So, here are some current numbers. There are nearly 35,000 military personnel in South Korea, nearly 40,000 in Japan. There are thousands more family members in the area. There are nearly 25 million people in Seoul, South Korea, just 35 miles from the demilitarized zone that separates the Koreas. There are 15,000 North Korean conventional cannons and rocket launchers north of the zone pointed right at Seoul. The US cannot quickly or easily destroy the North Korean guns. These conventional weapons threaten tens of thousands of American lives and hundreds of thousands of Korean lives. Use of nuclear weapons - theirs and ours - would not just change the Korean peninsula, it would change the world forever. The number of lives lost would be immeasurable.

Given those potential impacts, are you worried when the President Trump threatens “fire and fury?” When he tweets “totally destroy,” “stop wasting time negotiating, we’ll do what has to be done,” and “only one thing will work?” Just last year Trump said more countries should have nuclear weapons and three times asked if we had nuclear weapons, “why can’t we use them?”

Lives count. Numbers count. If the four deaths in Niger reached your soul, what does the Trumpian future portend for the world?

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, recently retired after 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and record commentaries, and occasionally teach Montana history and contribute to community and economic development projects.

(700 words in the body)