

# The Last Word: Thinking About the “Cost of War”

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On October 6, 2021, the Texas Christian University community gathered together to mark the tenth anniversary of the death of former student and Marine Lance Corporal Benjamin Whetstone Schmidt. The event had been planned for months, intended to provide the campus with an opportunity to pause and reflect on the life of a student who left an indelible legacy in the TCU History Department. That legacy is incredibly complex, born of both tragedy and privilege, testament to the unyielding costs of war and the enduring attempt to learn from it.

Benjamin’s story is but one of many, many thousands. In the wake of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of August and the subsequent desperate attempts of many Afghans to escape the country, it often felt selfish to focus only on his story, as if we were prioritizing him at the expense of others whose stories need to be told. Benjamin’s story is only his own. It, alone, cannot capture the larger meanings of centuries of war, or even of the nuances of the most recent U.S. endeavors. Certainly, it can tell us very little, if anything at all, about the ways that Afghans suffered the costs of the very war that Benjamin fought. Nor can his story speak for others who wore the same uniform.

Still, on the anniversary of his death, we tried to tell his story in a way that, we hoped, honored without romanticizing it. We will always tell Benjamin’s story, and not just because his life mattered. We tell his story in part because it is so very difficult to do so, because it raises hard questions about the nature and legacies of American war-making and militarism. Those questions need asking, even if we do not have the answers. And, fundamentally, we ask these questions because his legacy not only demands it but also provides us the means to do so.

Benjamin Schmidt came to TCU in the fall of 2006. A San Antonio native, he had played high school football and loved to hunt and fish in the nearby Hill County. By all accounts, he had a very good time at TCU. He declared a major in History, made many good friends, loved going to football games, and joined a fraternity. Yet, as his father later remarked, Benjamin probably loved college “too much.” After three semesters, he was failing out, having earned a GPA that was so low, his mother later joked, that she didn’t believe it was possible.

Reluctantly, Benjamin returned home to San Antonio with plans to get himself back on track before retuning to TCU. But, in the spring of 2008, he surprised his family by announcing that he had joined the Marine Corps. He left for basic training in San Diego on Mother’s Day.

Benjamin relished being a Marine. He excelled, beginning in boot camp where he graduated as the platoon Honor graduate. He then attended infantry training and was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment at Camp Pendleton. One day, he saw an advertisement for sniper school and—always on the lookout for a new challenge—decided to apply. He thought of the snipers as the cream of the crop, the best of the best, and he stood out among them. After completing sniper school, he went on to graduate from four additional, advanced sniper training

courses, along the way demonstrating a talent for teaching and training other snipers like himself.

In 2009, Benjamin deployed on the *USS Bonhomme Richard* to Yemen and other locations in South Asia, but he described the time as little more than five months of boredom. He very much wanted to feel that he was doing something useful and told his superiors that he wanted to go to Afghanistan. Only a month after returning home from sea, he got his wish.

It would be an understatement to say that Benjamin was not a standout student in his time at TCU, but he had a deep love for military history, and he took a book with him on his deployment. While stationed in Afghanistan, Benjamin read *The Anglo-Afghan Wars, 1839-1919*, by Gregory Fremont-Barnes, which examines three successive British wars in the country, none of which ended in what the Britons considered victory. That history informed Benjamin’s growing frustrations with the U.S. war nearly a century later.

After he returned from his tour in Afghanistan, he began to make plans for life after the Marine Corps. He had fallen in love, and he wanted to return to TCU to finish his degree in History before pursuing graduate work to become a professor of military history. Before he could do so, however, Benjamin learned that his battalion was being ordered to Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the U.S. assassination of Osama bin Ladin and with public approval of the war plummeting, many expected that the American engagement would end, or at least drawdown considerably. Indeed, President Obama had followed through on his promise to begin withdrawing many of the forces he had ordered to the country in his 2009 “surge,” but even as many troops returned home, others continued to deploy.

With Benjamin’s enlistment set to end during the scheduled deployment, he did not have to go. But he knew that none of the snipers in the platoon had been in combat before, and he thought they needed someone with experience to go with them. Despite his misgivings about the war and his desire to move on with his life, Benjamin extended his enlistment and volunteered to go. He left in August 2011.

On October 6, the eve of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the U.S. war, Benjamin was on patrol near the village of Lwar Julji in Helmand Province, where he was killed in a friendly fire accident. He is one of an undisclosed number of American and allied forces to have died by fratricide in our nation’s most recent war, victim of a deadly combination of precise technology, human fallibility, and the fog of war. He was laid to rest at the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in his hometown of San Antonio.

Benjamin was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with Valor Device, the Combat Action Ribbon, the National Defense Service Medal, the Afghanistan Campaign Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, the Sea Service Deployment Ribbon with two Bronze Stars, and the Purple Heart. All of these ribbons and medals hang on the wall in the TCU History Department to remind us daily of both the selflessness of

a 24-year old young man, and the profound costs of war.

In his now classic work *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s*, Michael S. Sherry traces the entangling webs of militarization that defined American politics, culture, and society for much of the twentieth century. Wars, he argues, cast long shadows. Benjamin's family and friends live in that shadow every day, as do the thousands of other families and friends who lives have been disrupted and torn apart by war. Those shadows have long covered the lands and people of Afghanistan, where wars waged by outside nations and internal groups have consumed the lives of Afghans for centuries.

On October 6, only weeks after all American forces withdrew from Afghanistan, Afghans were just beginning to see how the shadows of war might or might not change as one war ended and a new period of uncertainty began. In Fort Worth, Texas, far from the immediate physical dangers that continued to plague Afghanistan, the sun shone down on a group of family and friends who had gathered to remember Benjamin, bringing light to a somber memorial.

The remembrance service took place at TCU's Veterans Plaza, a space where, for nearly one hundred years, the campus community has come to remember those students who have served and died in our nation's wars. The idea for this space began with a student veteran, Edwin Elliott, who had served in World War I before attending TCU and becoming president of the class of 1923. He and his classmates raised the funds for a memorial arch, the pillars of which remain today as the entrance to the plaza. In June 1923 they dedicated the arch in memory of their three classmates who had died in the war.

Since its dedication, the memorial arch has been changed and adapted many times, testament to the continuing shadows of war on one university campus. Students learned soon enough that the "war to end all wars" had done no such thing, and they added a memorial plaque with the names of sixty-four students who had died in another world war. They later added another memorial plaque with the names of seventeen students who had died in the Vietnam War, followed by five who have died in the wars since. The last name added to this memorial is Benjamin Schmidt.

Today, those memorial plaques stand just behind the original pillars, surrounded by a grove of small trees. The architect who redesigned the plaza in 2005 explained that he intended these trees to represent a supportive community encircling the void of trees where the plaques stand. That void of trees mirrors the absence of the eighty-nine students whose names are inscribed on the memorial plaques, but it also allows space for the sun to shine down on their names.

At the most recent of memorial ceremonies to have taken place in that space, a crowd of people gathered to remember Benjamin. A TCU alumnus shared his memories of Benjamin from their time together in the Marine Corps, described how Benjamin had trained him to be a scout sniper, recounted how he had decided to enroll at TCU after learning about Benjamin's connection to the school, and lamented that he would be the last Horned Frog student to have known Benjamin. A retired sergeant major traveled halfway across the country because he had made a promise ten years earlier that he would always remember Benjamin. That Marine had been in Afghanistan with Benjamin when he died, and he came to do one more, final roll call for Lance Corporal Benjamin Whetstone Schmidt.

Even the brightest sun can never entirely outshine the shadow of war, but at TCU, Benjamin ensured that there will always be light. Before he deployed to Afghanistan in 2011, he told his family that if he did not come home, he wanted to bequeath half of his life insurance to the History Department to create a scholarship for a graduate student. Not any student, mind you, but a graduate student, because he said he did not want to support an unfocused undergraduate like himself. Every year since 2012, the department has awarded the LCpl. Benjamin W. Schmidt Dissertation Fellowship to a PhD candidate finishing her or his dissertation. It is the highest award the department bestows on a student.

Inspired by his son's generosity, Benjamin's father launched an endowment campaign to honor his son's plans to become a professor of military history. (In 2015, I was honored to become the first LCpl. Benjamin W. Schmidt Professorship of War, Conflict, and Society in Twentieth-Century America.) This position ensures that TCU students will always have the opportunity to study how wars and the military shape their society. Graduate students in history take their courses in a seminar room dedicated in Benjamin's memory. And, they attend an annual symposium named in his honor. Generously funded by Benjamin's father, the symposia bring noted scholars to our campus to examine the relationships among wars, conflict, and societies. In March 2022, we will gather to consider the histories and consequences of the many wars in Afghanistan.

Several years ago, at that symposium, Benjamin's father addressed the audience. "I know the cost of war," he stated simply, "and I want others to think about that cost as well." At TCU, we are fortunate and humbled to have these opportunities to consider the costs of war. We do so with and for our students, most of whom have lived their entire lives in war's shadow, some of whom know its cost intimately. Grateful to those whose lives remain darkened by it, we hope that our efforts will shine a light on the costs of war, while honoring the legacy of one who knew it well.