

The police murder of Iraq War veteran Brian Easley

Eric London
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On the morning of July 7, 33-year-old Iraq War veteran Brian Easley walked into a Wells Fargo bank in Cobb County, Georgia, an Atlanta suburb, and told the only two people there—both bank employees—that he had explosives in his backpack and was holding them hostage.

He called a local television station and, in a calm voice, explained that he was not robbing the bank. He said he had one demand: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had unjustly eliminated \$892 in monthly payments for an injury he sustained in Iraq, and he wanted the funds reinstated.

He pleaded, “They took my disability check and I have nothing and I’ll be out on the street and I won’t have any money for food or anything, and I’m going to starve.” He was particularly worried about the fate of his eight-year-old daughter.

Meanwhile, police in assault gear massed outside. The area was placed on lockdown and armored military vehicles were brought in to encircle the bank. An FBI negotiator called the bank and Easley repeated his demand: \$892.

It was clear to all involved, including the hostages themselves, that Easley posed no threat to anybody. In the phone call with WSB-TV, Easley said he was not going to hurt either of the employees. “These ladies are very nice and they have been very helpful and supportive,” he said.

The hostages told the press that Easley was “kind” and “respectful.” According to a local newspaper, a police spokesman let slip that “no one inside or outside the bank was ever at risk of being harmed.”

That did not prevent a SWAT team from using an armored vehicle to burst through the bank’s wall and riddle the young man’s body with bullets. Police later confirmed what was already clear from the phone

conversation: Easley had no bomb, either in his backpack or his hotel room.

No matter. Easley’s death was the police’s preferred outcome. This was a calculated act of state murder aimed at conveying a message to the general public.

The recorded conversation between Easley and WSB-TV assignment desk editor Stephanie Steiger is a desperate man’s cry for help. “I got the feeling he just wanted somebody to talk to,” Steiger said.

Easley, a lance corporal, fought in Iraq between 2003 and 2005—the period of the invasion and its immediate aftermath, when the fighting was at its worst and the civilian death toll at its highest. The invasion and occupation destroyed Iraqi society and led to the deaths of up to a million Iraqis, as well as some 2,000 US soldiers. The lexicon of the invasion emerged while Easley was deployed: Shock and Awe, Fallujah, Abu Ghraib, Blackwater, Mission Accomplished, black site, Haditha.

Like most veterans, Easley found it difficult to acclimate to civilian life. He took a low-wage job at a warehouse in Georgia and moved in with his parents. He tried to go back to school to pursue an interest in film studies, but he couldn’t seem to get on his feet. He and his wife divorced and he struggled to make ends meet.

Easley said that after the VA cut off his disability payments he began to run out of money. He was living in a nearby motel but could afford only one more night. On Saturday, he would be homeless.

He loved his daughter and worried about having no way to care for her. Several days earlier he had visited a VA hospital to seek help, but instead of offering him mental health support, the VA called the police and had him dragged away.

Easley’s relatives were horrified to learn of his death.

“This is not the Brian I know,” Jazzima Damons said. “He would not hurt nobody, nobody.”

Sierra Damons said, “Our family is just in shock right now because the Brian they are saying that he went up in this bank, that is not him, he is a very loving person.”

The exact circumstances of Easley’s death remain unclear. One account has Easley releasing the two hostages before being murdered by police. According to another version, police burst in and fired at Easley in an unnecessary and reckless attempt to free the bank employees.

News of Easley’s death has set off a wave of anger on social media, with residents of the Atlanta suburb denouncing the government for abandoning Easley after sending him to fight in a war for the rich: “Brainwash them, send them off to war to steal, kill and destroy, and when their false agenda is accomplished, you’re sent home and fed to the wolves. So sad,” wrote one commenter on Facebook.

Another commenter noted, “Even the war in Iraq was based on lies. Never any WMDs. Lies and more lies. Look at the stockpile of banned weapons the US government has.”

A third comment reads, “This is sad and needs to be fixed. ‘Support our troops’ is only a friendly phrase politicians use to secure votes and get funding for military equipment contractors. They care nothing about the well-being of the mental and physical state of our veterans when they return from duty.”

Easley’s death has touched a nerve because it exposes the devastating social impact of the permanent state of war, the militarization of the police and society as a whole, and the growth of poverty and social inequality. War crimes abroad are accompanied by social crimes against the working class at home.

This brutal and arbitrary state killing exposes the political establishment’s ritual worship of veterans as nothing more than empty propaganda aimed at building support for wars fought by the poor to enrich the wealthy.

Since the launching of the “war on terror” in 2001, the phrase “God bless our troops” has become a national liturgy, repeated ad nauseam by politicians of both parties and innumerable talking heads on television. The military pays sports teams millions of dollars to unfurl giant flags, feature patriotic songs and

“honor our veterans” by flying bombers and fighter jets over stadiums. Multiple federal holidays are dedicated to the glorification of the military and the “men and women who risk their lives to protect the nation.”

Official paeans to veterans drip with hypocrisy and cynicism. Easley’s death shows how the ruling class really views the poor and working-class youth it sends to war. They are corporate cannon fodder. When their fighting is done, their bodies and minds having been ravaged in the process, the government tosses them aside like so much trash. To the state and the oligarchs it serves, their lives are worth less than the \$892 Easley asked for.

Each night, 50,000 war veterans are homeless in the United States. One third of disabled veterans between the ages of 35 and 54 live in poverty. Twenty veterans kill themselves each day. Since 2001 alone, over 128,000 veterans have committed suicide—more than the population of Topeka, Kansas; Lansing, Michigan; or Santa Clara, California.

The ruling class’s view of veterans struggling with the consequences of war was expressed by US Army Maj. General Dana Pittard, who said in 2012, “Suicide is an absolutely selfish act... I am personally fed up with soldiers who are choosing to take their own lives so that others can clean up their mess. Be an adult, act like an adult, and deal with your real-life problems like the rest of us!”

At the root of the crisis facing veterans is the capitalist system, under which imperialist war is inevitable. The US government has spent roughly \$5 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, and over half of the government’s budget goes to the military for the purpose of protecting the global interests of US banks and corporations. The vast resources squandered by the US government on death and destruction must be redirected to meeting the urgent social need for health care, housing, transportation, jobs, and mental health services for all.



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