

# Donald Trump has proven that he does not know what any potential Commander-in-Chief should: that military families also serve.

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*Until now Donald Trump's presidential bid has remained relatively immune to the backlash which has followed by his offensive comments and rhetoric. That may be about to change after the GOP's nominee criticized the family of Humayun Khan, an Army captain killed in Iraq in 2004, who had attacked Trump over his immigration policies. [Nancy Sherman](#) writes that what has been missed in the commentary on this week's events is that military families also serve, by going to war vicariously with their family member, and often suffer from complicated grief syndromes and PTSD. Any Commander-in-Chief should be aware of this; Trump does not seem to be.*



Donald Trump has built his candidacy on bullying, mockery, and revenge. But he crossed a red line this week in his attacks on Khizr and Ghazala Khan, the grieving parents of a fallen American Muslim soldier, Humayun Khan, an Army captain, killed in Iraq in 2004 by a suicide bomb. Khan did what good commanding officers do: He ordered his troops to stand back and hit the ground, as he took ten steps forward to inspect a suspicious vehicle that wouldn't stop at a military gate. As he approached, the oncoming car exploded and he was killed in the blast, but saved the lives of those he supervised and many Americans and Iraqis in the nearby military compound.

On Thursday night at the Democratic National Convention, Humayun's father, Khizr Khan, with his wife standing by his side, electrified an audience with his [critique](#) of Trump's immigration policy and its implications for his son's service and sacrifice: "If it was up to Donald Trump, he never would have been in America." "Trump wants to build walls and ban us from this country." The real jolt came when he addressed Trump directly: "Let me ask you: Have you ever read the United States Constitution? I will gladly lend you my copy," he offered, pulling out of his coat pocket a miniature version. "You have sacrificed nothing and no one."

Trump lashed back in [interviews](#), stating, "I've made a lot of sacrifices. I work very very hard" and on Twitter:

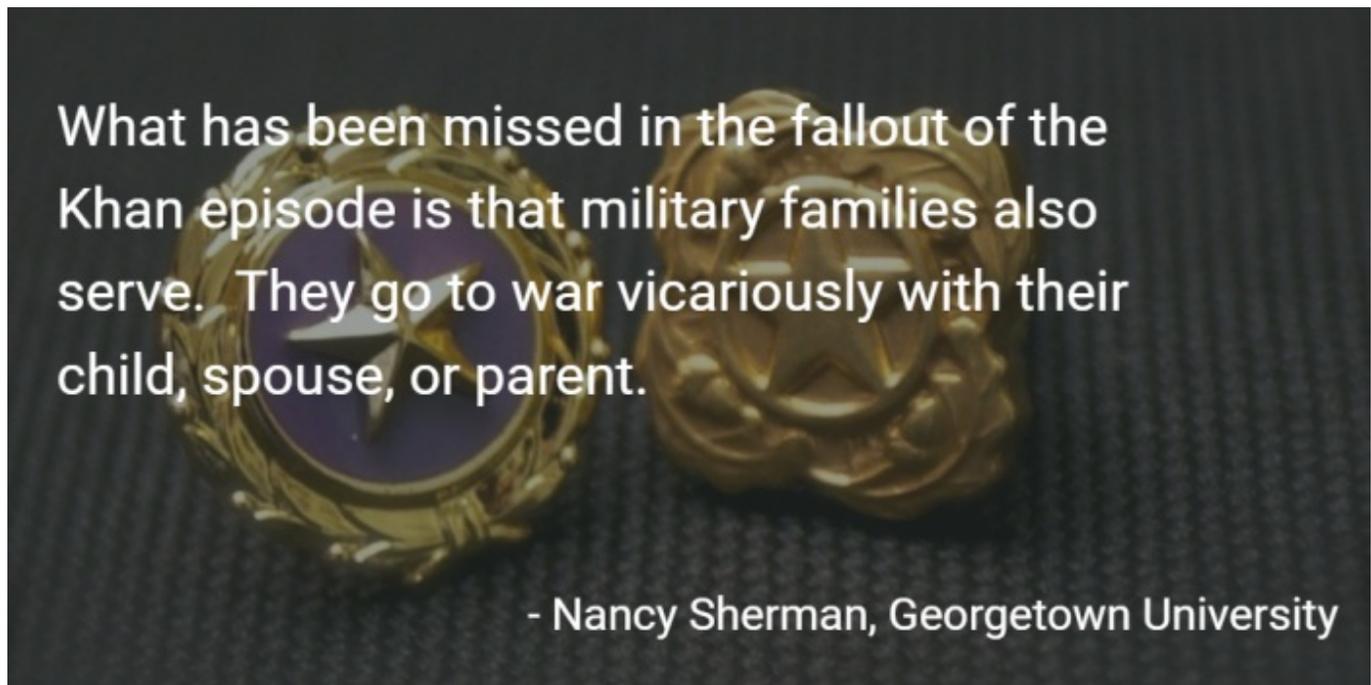
And then he took off his gloves, and [hit](#) the lowest blow to a bereaved mother: "If you look at his wife, she was standing there. She had nothing to say." "She probably, maybe wasn't allowed to have anything to say." (Read between the lines: She's Muslim and subordinated).

Ghazala Khan spoke for herself shortly after in a [Washington Post op ed](#). She is still too overwhelmed by grief to comfortably address a public audience, she said.

All this has been in the news. Trump's vindictiveness and total inability to control his rage is the very stuff Seneca long ago warned about in his famous [Essay, On Anger](#), with Nero clearly in mind. Of leaders' impulsive rage, he writes, "No plague has cost the human race more."

But what has been missed in the fallout of the Khan episode is that military families also serve. They go to war vicariously with their child, spouse, or parent. They follow every movement of their unit. They scour the web for unit locations when there is official silence. They form squads of their own stateside— support systems, extended families, first responders who are ready and willing to help if the dreaded knock on the door comes, or a medevac takes a service member to a military hospital and a family now needs help juggling the daunting responsibilities of work, raising a family at home, and keeping vigil at a hospital. And they suffer from complicated grief syndromes and PTSD not unlike those of service members. There are also four million military connected children in the United States—kids of service members who don't wear uniforms and so can't be easily identified at school as military kids but who may suffer the secondary effects of combat-related trauma.

Any Commander-in-Chief knows this. He knows the burden military families carry. The presidential visits to military hospitals, to Walter Reed, the military flagship hospital in my neighborhood in D.C., aren't just courtesy calls. They are moments for deep empathy and connection to service families who worry what the future may be like for themselves and their 20-something son or daughter whose life is changed overnight because of traumatic brain injuries or limb loss or facial disfigurement.



The families of the fallen and injured all grieve in their own way, sometimes for a year, sometimes for 12, and sometimes for a lifetime. Sometimes in eloquent words and flourishes of founding father documents. Sometimes in quietude and silence, with tears held in check. Those who are injured also grieve for those who fell while covering their backs. Their grief can spiral into harrowing self-blame, into “could haves” and “should haves,” nagging moral injuries that give testament to the heightened sense of personal and moral responsibility many in the military carry. I suspect that some of those unit members who survived the blast that took Khan’s life feel that sense of overbearing liability and survivor’s guilt.

All this a Commander-in-Chief knows. Battlebuddies take care of each other in the way that parents take care of children. “I take care of my babybirds,” one of my Marine interviewees once told me. And the care and attachment bonds in both cases make for deep vulnerabilities to loss.

The Khan family has kept building their military family, and interestingly, around the Constitution. Their son was a graduate of University of Virginia’s Reserved Officer Training Corps. After their son’s death, the Khans began inviting the U.VA. cadets to dinner annually, to introduce them to an American Muslim family and to give each a pocket sized Constitution.

It’s an apt ritual. As officers, their ultimate duty is, after all, to support and defend the Constitution, even at the cost of disobeying unlawful orders of commanders, including that of the Commander-in-Chief. This raises a different specter of Trump as a Commander-in-Chief. He’s [told us](#) he would do “worse” than torture and wants soldiers to kill terrorists’ families. “They won’t refuse. They’re not gonna refuse me. Believe me.”

They will refuse, at least the military professionals I know and whom I teach will. Many have already resisted orders to aid and abet torture. The harder deliberative questions for most of them have to do *not* with blatantly unjust conduct but with unjust cause. Are the causes of war they are fighting or fought unjust? Manifestly unjust? Or only dubiously just? And at what time and when and by whom are those assessments of just cause made in wars that are

ongoing and whose missions change? What would count as epistemic due diligence for a soldier to know when not to fight? Even if one can justify the sacrifice of one's own life in a given war, is the taking of others' lives justified?

When Humayun Khan was ordered to Iraq, his father recalled asking him, "How do you feel about the whole Iraq deal?" He answered as many soldiers do: "That's not my concern and that's not my pay grade." "My responsibility is to make sure my unit is safe." For service members, comrades rise to the level of cause, not because of blind devotion to authority, but because military professionalism and discipline is at its core about cadre building and down-sized egos. Now that is a lesson for Trump.

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## About the author

**Nancy Sherman** – *Georgetown University*

Nancy Sherman is University Professor and Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University. She is a former Guggenheim Fellow and served as the inaugural holder of the Distinguished Chair in Ethics at the US Naval Academy. Her most recent books include *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of our Soldiers* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *The Untold War* (W. W. Norton, 2010).



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