

Santa Wars: Do We Really Need to Militarize Santa?

Written by Colin Flint

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/01/10/santa-wars-do-we-really-need-to-militarize-santa/>

COLIN FLINT, JAN 10 2013

Each year on Christmas Eve NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) runs a website with the premise of using US military surveillance technology to monitor the progress of Santa Claus across the globe, from time-zone to time-zone culminating in Hawaii. The url for the 2012 tour is www.noradsanta.org, interestingly not a .gov or .mil address. Is this just harmless fun or a reflection of the pervasiveness of the military in all aspects of American, or even global, society? At the risk of being accused of acting as Scrooge (my sons are asking “Why Dad, why?” as I talk at home about this essay), the banality of NORAD’s website stirs a frustration and anger in me regarding the way that US military strength and its global presence has become a taken-for-granted fact: a benevolent force that keeps Santa secure.

The tracking Santa site is just one of many means by which idea of the US military as a necessary global force and harbinger of good is reinforced in US society. The NORAD site is interesting because it uses the universalism of Santa as a means of creating images of US military benevolence and unconstrained global reach; it also gets ‘em when they’re young. The banner at the top of the NORAD website this year showed a quaint Christmas scene: a blanket of snow and an inviting cottage, and, of course, a military-industrial structure; radar apparatus, naturally enough, blended unobtrusively into the background. The subliminal message being that US military surveillance is always there but nothing to notice or think about. And in the sky, not Santa’s sleigh but a silhouetted jet fighter. No military plane spotter’s badge is needed to identify the jet as a US war machine. The inference is clear, only the US military has the ability to project itself across the globe. There is also another assumption that is subtly reinforced by the NORAD website, the purpose of this global military force is for the benefit of all. Though providing security for Santa rests upon a particular national military, the USA, the public being served is global – to allow for.

The business end of the website has a running count of how many gifts Santa has delivered; the final 2012 total was 7,060,919,100. There is also a map of the globe that is systematically filled with quintessentially wrapped Christmas gifts: Quintessential in US Christian culture but represented as globally desired and practiced. A number of locations across the globe are designated privileged sites for NORAD Santa Cams, 33 in total – the final one being in Hawaii. Each video is almost completely devoid of overt military images or machinery. In fact, they provide virtual images of notable architectural features across the world: the Great Wall of China, the “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium, a mosque in Pakistan, the Kremlin, etc. I said almost devoid of military features, but not quite. Each video has a unique soundtrack of jaunty music, played by US military bands. There is also an opening video that reveals how Santa’s journey will be captured – cameras placed in these locations that are seemingly remote controlled (from NORAD HQ, presumably). But these are not shown as threatening pieces of military hardware, but are softened by a label declaring them to be a “Santa Cam”.

It is also ironic that these locations are depoliticized. How the US would love to travel so easily across all of Pakistan. What about policy concerns over China’s access-denial policy? Have no fear as “we” are there looking down on the sites of Beijing. Isn’t Putin a geopolitical thorn-in-the-side? Not really, we even have synchronized searchlights that illuminate Santa as he skirts past Lenin’s tomb. In other words, tracking Santa is a vehicle to extend US geopolitical fantasies of unfettered access into any sovereign territorial space – and all in the name of universal good, of course, and what could be better than making sure that Santa is on his way.

And then there’s the cultural message. The world may be a diverse place (just look at those crescent moons on the

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Pakistani mosque) but they are all part of Santa's realm. The western material culture, epitomized by a fat man in a red suit delivering that latest shiny toy, is applicable across the globe. Not only are we watching you Santa, we are implicitly aiding your mission to spread consumerism to all: A constant feature of the US geopolitics that has featured Admiral Perry, the Marshall Plan, a defense shield covering South Korea and Taiwan, and supporting anti-leftist regimes in South and Central America, to name just a few of the most recognizable moments.

The website has a page entitled "Why We Track Santa," but no answer is given. Instead, we are given a brief history of NORAD's tracking. Apparently, the tradition started as an accident in 1955 when Sears Roebuck misprinted a telephone number and children called NORAD (then CONAD – Continental air Defense Command) by mistake. Since then, "NORAD men, women, family and friends have selflessly volunteered their time to personally respond to phone calls and emails from children all around the world." And why not? Members of the US military are also parents, we all play multiple roles. Why not contribute to the festive season by maintaining the Santa myth for children? Is it any worse than, say, Sears or any other retailer using the idea of meeting with Santa to maximize their profits? But wait, there is a monetary transaction involved too. A link on the NORAD page allows you to go to US Allegiance, Inc. (I think Orwell would have a wry smile) where t-shirts, sweat shirts, tote bags, etc. with the message "I tracked Santa: NORAD" can be purchased. And most importantly, NORAD's efforts are endorsed by Mr. Claus. For a fee, children can be sent a personalized letter from Santa that concludes with a reminder for next year: "Also, be sure to follow my journey with NORAD Tracks Santa." There is even a trademark. US military surveillance with a global scope is a brand, and brand-loyalty must be cultivated through T-shirts and slogans. The end result is that we are all being brought into the mission: We are implicated in a global military mission with its particular political goals.

NORAD is not just there to protect Santa, it may also play a role in providing reliable information: "Based on historical data and more than 50 years of NORAD tracking information, we believe that Santa Claus is alive and well in the hearts of children throughout the world." The message being that the US military is to be trusted; it is a go to source for knowing the world. At an early age it is where to confirm beliefs about Santa, when writing school reports the CIA World Factbook is a readily quotable source, in adulthood trustworthy military briefings on, for example, the lack of collateral casualties in drone attacks provide a comforting release from troubling murmurs about breaches of international law. And so it goes on.

The tracking Santa site may not matter in and of itself, but it is not a singular or separate enterprise, despite the .org url. NORAD cannot track Santa alone. Website visitors are invited to peruse "Our Team" that turns out to be a combination of other US military entities (i.e. the bands of the US Military Academy and US Air Force Academy – just in case our Santa trackers are beginning to think of their future education, perhaps), or the Pentagon channel (to stay abreast of global affairs). Then there are the many corporate sponsors such as Sirius Satellite Radio, Verizon, Air Canada, Microsoft, and Hewlett Packard to name just a few. High-tech and military contracts being the consistent theme.

So why does this matter? A response could be that this is just a piece of fun, something for the kids at Christmas – it just is nothing to get vexed about. But it is the banality of the whole tracking Santa exercise what matters. It is just one more example of the pervasive and insidious manner in which all things military have become part of all things in American society. The US military is portrayed as a benevolent non-violent actor involved in making all that is good happen, including the appearance of Christmas gifts. Anywhere in the world, watching everything, but not killing just watching and escorting Santa. And for what purpose: spreading Western culture and practices across what are portrayed as countries and societies eager to adopt the American way. An alternative seasonal message is that peace and goodwill to all men need not be dependent on the largest and most geographically pervasive military machine the world has ever known.

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