

The Marines Have Landed—in the Toy Box

By Mary Beaudoin



Official poster of Toys for Tots.

Every year, all across the country from small towns to big cities, Toys for Tots drop boxes are ubiquitous. Civic and religious organizations, businesses such as retail stores and restaurants, corporations, banks, television and radio stations, and even hospitals, have partnered with the U.S. Marines and toy manufacturers to give toys at holiday time to children variously described as “less fortunate,” “needy,” “underprivileged,” and “poor.” The program is promoted by everyone from mayors and city councils to Hollywood celebrities, famous musicians, First Ladies, CEOs, boy scout troops, Catholic schoolgirls, Nascar drivers and sports teams (the NFL conducted a 2011 Touchdown for Tots Campaign at home games, in conjunction with Toys R Us). Nationwide PODs storage and UPS are helping facilitate collection and delivery. Toys for Tots campaigns have gone electronic as well, with Paypal, Facebook, Twitter, LivingSocial and EBay. Civil society is marching in step with the military to ensure that millions of children receive toys.

The tally isn't in yet for 2011, but in 2010, Toys for Tots distributed gifts to 7.2 million children in over 700 communities nationwide. The program has expanded a great deal since its origination after WWII with a Marine reservist whose civilian job was as a public relations director for Warner Brothers Studio. He was able to garner celebrity support, but the program truly burgeoned in 1995 with the Secretary of Defense designating it an official mission of the Marine Corps Reserve. Standard Operating Procedures of the U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters at Quantico, Virginia, states that Toys for Tots "was created by, is owned by and is directed by the U.S. Marine Corps" and that the actual direction and management of the program is the responsibility of the commander of the Marine Corps Reserve.

Who else but the Marines has the organizational ability and capacity to conduct such an enormous humanitarian undertaking as seeing that millions of children in the country receive millions of toys at holiday time? Reinforcing this concept, Sony Pictures Animation and Toys for Tots have partnered around a specially created animated movie, *Albert's Christmas*, in which Santa's workshop is depicted as being manned by thousands of elves, outfitted in military uniforms, working in a secret, high-tech underground facility at the North Pole.

Who but Scrooge or the Grinch who stole Christmas could object to getting toys into the hands of poor children at holiday time? One in five children in the United States lives in poverty. One in four, or 17 million, are living with some "food insecurity," as Toys for Tots promoters themselves are quick to point out. Poor children are sometimes hungry, but wouldn't "bringing hope" to them, as Toys for Tots says it does, be a good thing?

While misty-eyed TV announcers and public relations professionals sing praises for the program, it would be worth deconstructing. For starters, among other forms of economic injustice, if the country didn't spend so much on the military and its weapons and wars, there would be money to provide for children's needs. Parents would be able to ensure that their children had adequate food, clothing, and shelter, as well as some toys. But that's not the objective of the Marine Reserve. The Corps has other agendas tied to its seemingly unlikely philanthropic mission of playing Santa Claus.

Aside from "helping less fortunate children throughout the United States experience the joy of Christmas," Marines Toys for Tots lists as its stated objective, "to play an active role in the development of one of our nation's most valuable resources—our children." So we are just supposed to accept that the Few and the Proud have a role to play in developing our children—our children, whom they regard as a "valuable resource?" Valuable resource for what? For the Marine Corps, of course. Given a few years, these "less fortunate" children that the Marines are focused on will be a good demographic from which to draw recruits. They may not even have to wait for very long for some children. Toys for Tots often puts out calls for toys for teenagers, which they say they have a difficult time getting enough of. In New York City, Toys for Tots was distributed from a seven-ton military supply truck near the Armed

Forces recruiting kiosk in Times Square by Marines wearing battle fatigues. Kids will know where to come when it's time.



Sending in the Marines. Two Corps members stand at attention to collect toys for tots outside a toy store in Augusta, Georgia.

Photo: Associated Press

Toys for Tots can involve even more impressive staged events that make a sleigh and reindeer seem like archaic relics of Christmas past. In November of 2011, a C130J Lockheed Martin transport plane that is used as support for the Blue Angels demonstration team fleet flew into New Orleans and Birmingham, Alabama, to deliver \$20,000 worth of toys, collected by Lockheed Martin employees at its Marietta, Georgia, location. Lorraine Martin, vice president of Lockheed's C-130 Programs, took to a podium decked with a banner which read, "'Tis the season." Remarking on the generosity of Lockheed employees, she announced that she was "delighted to be part, of not only our Lockheed family, but our extended war fighter and customer community..." There was a video of this on the Toys for Tots Foundation website, accompanied by the cheery sound of jingle bells—altogether a rather amazing display of the military-industrial underpinnings of the endeavor.

The military has become ever more adept at integrating itself into the fabric of civilian society, so that it is enmeshed, in an effort to ensure support for itself and its future. It attempts to win "hearts and minds" within the country in the same way that we hear it attempting to do in foreign countries. In case there is any doubt about this—it's worth taking a look at the handbook "Marine Corps Public Affairs, 33.3," part of the Marine Corps Warfighting Publication. It describes the Marine Corps' "doctrine on public affairs." The foreword states:

The two most important things the Marine Corps does for the Nation are to make Marines and to win battles. Public affairs has become an integral part of warfighting

and heightens an existing, indispensable bond between the Marine Corps and the American public.

And it goes on to say:

The functions of public affairs apply during peace as well as war. Whether the Marine Corps is involved in a humanitarian effort, a peacekeeping operation, a major regional contingency, or collecting toys for tots, public affairs plays a critical role in the military information environment.

The Marine Corps may state that it's involved in "humanitarian efforts," but anything it does is in eventual preparation for and under the umbrella of "warfighting" and within the context of "making Marines" and "winning battles." Toys for Tots is another vehicle to help accomplish these ultimate goals.

Local communities throughout the country around military bases are key for the overall support of the Marine Corps and Marine Corps Reserve. According to the "Marine Corps Public Affairs" handbook, "Well-conducted community relations enhance readiness by fostering hometown support..." In other words, Marines integrate into local communities through community activities to garner acceptability and support, setting the stage for when they are called up to go on missions somewhere in the world. Taken by surprise, unaccustomed to the idea of military personnel among them, people could offer resistance to the idea of their deployment in foreign lands. But if people are accustomed to interacting with uniformed military and the military have become an integral part of the established formal or informal institutions of the community, they develop positive associations with them and are more likely to trust that the military know what they are doing when they answer Uncle Sam's call and are less likely to question it.

And, as for positive associations for very young people, can there be anything more positive than Santa Claus? The handbook further states that good community relations:

also help reinforce the idea that the Marine Corps is a meaningful and rewarding career choice for America's youth. Close, positive relations with neighboring communities inspire patriotism, and that patriotism translates into recruitment and retention opportunities.

While most individuals and even individual Marines may not have a cynical attitude and actually do believe that they are doing good by participating in Toys for Tots, it's disturbing to think that poor children and people's feelings of generosity can be so exploited. And it's really disturbing to think that our country and our culture is so militarized. You have to wonder: Could peace on earth be any more inverted?

If people really want to do something for poor children, there are other charities to give to while we work on eradicating one of the systemic causes of poverty—war.

Peace on earth. Good will to all.

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