

SEAL Team 6: A Secret History of Quiet Killings and Blurred Lines



Photo: Stephanie Freid-Perenchio / New York Times



Photo: Lisa Blas, *Two trenches*, Cold Harbor Battlefield, Virginia, 2007

Lisa Blas / June 21, 2015

Like many this week, I am stunned and engulfed in grief over the recent attack on nine American citizens in Charleston, South Carolina. Such grief equals outrage spilling over into disgust and then numbness. This was not just another episode of violence waged against Black people, that we have repeatedly witnessed via mobile phones, the Internet and news outlets over the past year. It was a clear message that our society is in a state of wreckage.

It is as if constitutional rights meant to protect citizens, and in this case, the right to attend prayer services in a historic Black church in Charleston, have no meaning in the face of sheer, brute force. (First Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.) As Jelani Cobb wrote in the [New Yorker](#), "How much longer can we live like this?"

We have witnessed attacks on innocent people play out in varying degrees at schools, universities, government buildings, movie theaters and now churches. We have been living amidst a climate of police brutality directed against Black people, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries. Ferguson brought back chilling memories of the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots, in early 1990s Los Angeles, the city where I grew up. Whatever gains we thought we made during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s were not enough — or, in the space of our individual lives and pursuits, we've become complacent about its legacy and significance for all Americans.

The image above taken at Cold Harbor battlefield in Virginia adjacent to a news photo chronicling the U.S. military's secret organization, [Seal Team 6](#), (The New York Times, June 6, 2015) might seem like an odd juxtaposition. The historical distance between the American Civil War and the ongoing wars in the Middle East since 9 / 11, is roughly 150 years. The wars on both ends of this timeline have addressed a named enemy within and outside, yet, the invisible, temporal space in between, hides a long neglected war of race relations. Its disavowal has become a lethal poison damaging the health and well-being of American society at large and instituting a permanent scar on our collective consciousness.

In the aftermath(s).....I am tired of repeatedly watching an ineffectual Congress in the wake of domestic mass tragedy. I am tired of listening to the experts on mental health and gun control. I am tired of hearing the speech, 'When is our country going to get serious about "this" issue'. The issue they dare not name.

I studied the overwhelming sadness and restrained anger on Barack Obama's face, trying to keep his Presidential composure while addressing a country adrift. If it were me, I would have broken down. These are the days when I miss my father, as he was the first person who talked to me about the history of race in the U.S., as a very young child. He is the first person I would have called to discuss what happened. So much damage, so little understanding of why we are in a worse place than ever before.

I'm not sure what the future holds, but it is clear that we are in dire need of mandatory civil rights education at the primary, middle and high school levels. An extended period of civil service with a focus on civil rights, should be required for all persons, replacing military service that existed in previous generations.

What does it mean to be a citizen today? What does your citizenship mean to you beyond your right to live and work in a particular country? It is time to re-learn, and re-define the notion of citizen; re-define individual responsibility, as being and taking part in a community, a public. It is time to acknowledge one another as fellow human beings living together and sharing resources on the planet. Our shared history as Americans is a painful one that can no longer exist in the demarcated spaces of commemorative sites and national holidays. It is here, it is now, and it isn't going away.



**CITIZENSHIP, CITIZENRY, TO
BE A CITIZEN**

LISA BLAS 2013

Lisa Blas, *Citizenship*, from the series, *Civil (dis)obediencies*, Archival Inkjet print, 19 x 26 inches, 2011-present



Lisa Blas, *Two trenches*, Cold Harbor Battlefield, Virginia, 2007



Photo: Stephanie Freid-Perenchio / New York Times

Caption: Navy SEAL training exercises carried out in Coronado, Calif., include rapid descents from helicopters.