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*From Where I Sit***Reconciliation***Kim Jong Un**President Trump*

Stefan Merken

Anything that stresses diplomacy over war is a step in the right direction.

STEFAN MERKEN
is chair of the Jewish
Peace Fellowship.

It's better to talk about peace than start yet another failed war. Reconciliation requires that both sides give a little and find some middle ground that will satisfy some of the needs on both sides. All parties need to feel that they have achieved some sort of success and have a vested interest in a final agreement which can avoid a catastrophic nuclear war resulting in hundreds of thousands of civilian and military casualties.

The tension between North Korea and the United States has been on the front burner for the past several years. North Korea has been stoking the fires by testing long range nuclear-armed missiles. Our President has been equally threatening with juvenile name calling (Rocket Man), tough dialogue and threats of devastating retaliation, frightening both North and South Korean populations.

But now President Kim Un has invited President Trump to sit down and talk, an invitation which our President has accepted. Presumably they will meet some time before May. Will it solve anything? We certainly hope so, though hawks on all sides will hope they fail. We do not. The

proposed meeting between the two leaders is the first step in making reconciliation a real possibility. Will it happen soon? Not soon enough to satisfy us, but like justice the wheels of progress always move slowly.

We believe that anything that stresses diplomacy over war is a step in the right direction. And this surely is a right direction. Name-calling and threatening dialogue will get us nowhere.

Let's hope that this meeting will lead to more substantive conversations that can build a trust and friendship and help work out our differences. We live in a nuclear world, remember? ☆

*Great Antiwar films***Wag the Dog***Directed by Barry Levinson, U.S.A., 1998*

For those who reject, out of hand, the idea that political conspiracies exist—unless, of course, one is talking about conspiracies perpetrated by “bad guys”—this film may prove either troublesome or enlightening. In an age when the best way to satirize something is to make a factual report of it, this film of a contrived war engineered to enliven a presidential reelection campaign has all the ring of a documentary.

**Aftermath:
The Remnants of War***Directed by Daniel Sekulich, Canada, 2001*

One of the most powerful of all antiwar films, particularly since it doesn't show any battle scenes. It is a documentary, produced by the Canadian Film Board, of the various messes that the war system leaves to the rest of mankind to deal with decades after the wars have ended (e.g., the unexploded munitions from WWI and II that continue to kill French farmers each year). ☆

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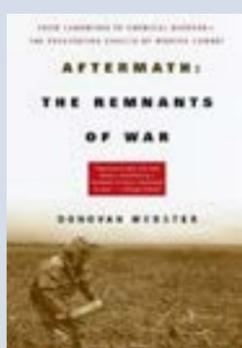
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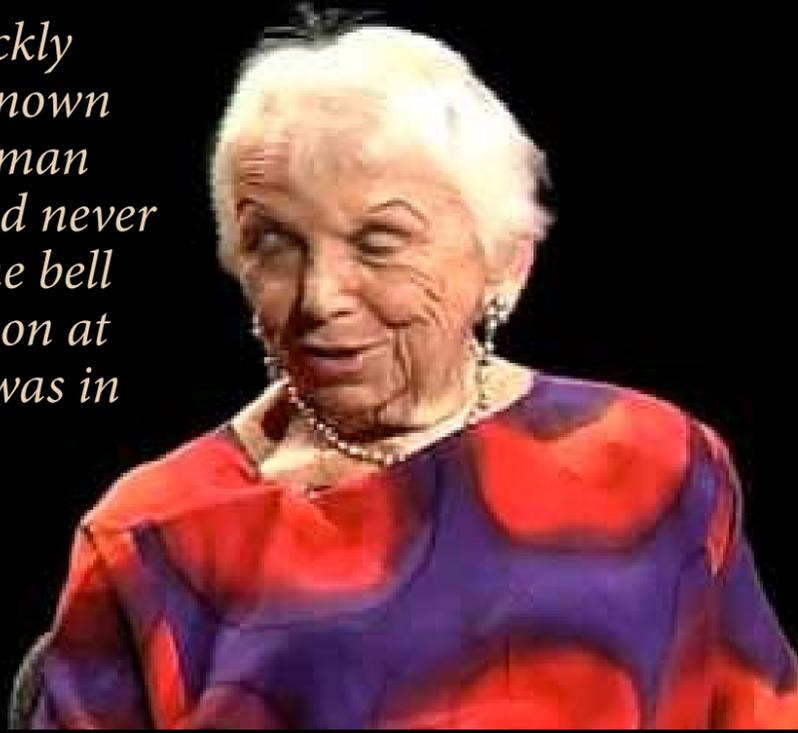
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BUTLER SHAFFER
is a professor at Southwestern University School of Law.



Irena quickly became known as the woman who would never answer the bell if the person at the door was in uniform



Beyond Fear

Irena

Patrick Henry

When she first moved into the neighborhood in November 1954, with her husband and their two young sons, Irena quickly became known as the woman who would never answer the bell if the person at the door was in uniform. I remember distinctly yelling to the Parcel Postman one afternoon: "Don't bother. She's there. But she won't come to the door."

I was born into that neighborhood in Flushing, New York in 1940. It was mainly Catholic, Irish and Italian, and Jewish, composed partly of immigrant homes like mine but mostly of first-generation families. As we grew up there, talk of the Holocaust was *verboten*. No matter how much time I spent with my Jewish friends, in their homes, in mine, playing ball and socializing in the local Jewish Center and in the street, we never spoke about the Holocaust. Not once.

Not even, my sister recently reminded me, after a half-naked Mrs. F..., in the very late 1940s or early 1950s, ran frantically down the street screaming: "The Germans are coming...the Germans are coming." But all that came was the ambulance, to take her to Creedmore State Hospital.

Not even after an earlier incident that burned itself into my psyche either in 1946 or 1947. My mother and I had stopped in a candy store in the neighborhood on Union Turnpike. The woman at the cash register was emaciated, with stringy disheveled bleached orange hair. She was staring off into another world. When she reached down to hand me my change, I saw the tattooed number on her arm.

I had recurring nightmares about this incident which remained troubling and unresolved. I would see the tattooed arm detached, as it now appears to me, as if in a Surrealist painting of the Holocaust.

When I left that neighborhood in 1960 to go into the Army, I could not say that the Holocaust was the unspeakable (certainly, I assumed, Jewish people must have spoken about it among themselves) but, in my experience, between Christians and Jews, it was the unspoken. I would later learn, with astonishment, from my Jewish friends that, for the most part, they never spoke about it either.

When I was discharged from the service in 1962 and continued to live at home while I attended Saint John's

Irena carried guns and grenades in her muff that she tossed over the wall into the Ghetto to be used later in the Ghetto Uprising.



Above: Photo of Janusz Korczak with the children of his orphanage on August 5, 1942. They all would be sent to Treblinka. Inset lower right: Korczak's orphanage still stands today. The stone object in the lower left corner is a monument with Korczak's name on the base and a bust of him in the center.



Today, Irena has been spiritually transformed.

University, I got to know Irena much better. She was once again my next door neighbor and her younger son, Jackie, liked to ride in the Good Humor ice cream truck I drove from 1962-1965. Irena and I became good friends who discussed many things including aspects of her childhood in Poland during WWII. I left New York City in 1965 and have never lived there since. Irena also moved out of the old neighborhood into an apartment in Manhattan. She was the first Holocaust survivor I knew personally.

About twenty years ago, we renewed our friendship and Irena sent me copies of some of her unpublished accounts of her youth in and around Warsaw, accounts that take the form of four illuminating stories: "Being Jewish," "My Gold Key," "There Will Be a War" and, above all, "My Dog John."

Irena was born in May 1929 to Jewish parents in Warsaw. When she was three years old, her father divorced her mother, who shortly thereafter married a non-Jew who officially adopted Irena in August 1939. Her maternal grandmother and her father were deported from the Warsaw Ghetto and gassed in Treblinka. Her stepfather, a chemical engineer, was one of the sappers in the Resistance who made gun deliveries to the ghetto, issued false papers to Jews who escaped from the Ghetto and blew up German supply and ammunition trains headed to the Russian front. He was arrested and executed by a firing squad in Warsaw in May 1944.

Irena and her mother never lived in the Warsaw Ghetto. They were in hiding in the family house in the city and by themselves in the country.

Irena visited the Ghetto once with her mother in February 1942. They walked past starving people in the street and avoided thieves who snatched at packages in the hope that they contained something to eat. There she saw her grandmother and her father for the last time.

As a child, Irena felt alienated, particularly from her maternal grandmother and friends her own age all of whom lived in the Ghetto. She was fearful and conscious of the fact that she endangered the life of everyone she spoke to who knew she was Jewish. But she was

Continued next page

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also courageous. With her stepfather, she carried guns and grenades in her muff that she tossed over the wall into the Ghetto to be used later in the Ghetto Uprising.

One Saturday afternoon in August 1942, thirteen years or so before I yelled out to the Parcel Postman, while her parents were visiting friends and Irena was home with her dog and the maid, she heard the doorbell ring. "Answering the doorbell," she writes in "My Dog John," "we found two men who stood there and asked to see my mother. One of the men had on a German Army Officer's uniform. I became so frightened that for a little while my legs became paralyzed...I had very sudden and severe cramps in my stomach." Despite her fear, Irena told the German officer and the Polish informer that her mother had died in the 1939 bombardment. After an hour, the two men left. Irena's mother



Left: Monument to ghetto heroes in Warsaw



Right: One of the three milk cans used by Warsaw ghetto historian Emanuel Ringelblum to store and preserve the secret "Oneg Shabbat" ghetto archives.

Irena urges all to move out of the past, beyond fear, to forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and love of life.

PATRICK HENRY

is Cushing Eells Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Literature at Whitman College. He is the author of *We Only Know Men: The Rescue of Jews in France during the Holocaust* (2007) and the editor of *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis* (2014).

did not return to her home for almost two years.

With her mother, Irena survived the Warsaw Uprising. As members of the partisan army, they cared for young men wounded defending the barricades. In October 1944, when the Germans reentered Warsaw, Irena and her mother were transported by cattle car to Germany. They were liberated in May 1945 when the Russians entered the POW camp in Milheim in Saxony where they had been incarcerated. From there they went to Holland and arrived on Ellis Island in February 1947.

The highlight of our renewed friendship came in January 2004 when my wife, our daughter and I spent a week with Irena in Poland. Exactly fifty years after she had moved into the old neighborhood in Flushing, we were together on her native soil. Irena was our guide walking through her WWII Warsaw past.

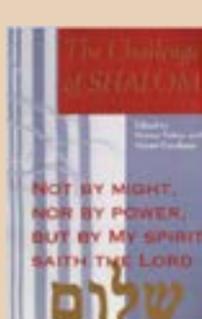
We saw the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier where Ghetto fighters are honored along with other Polish heroes; the superb monument to the Ghetto heroes; the

monument to the Warsaw Uprising; the monument erected in memory of the 500 people killed by a booby-trapped tank, a catastrophe that took place only half a block from Irena's house and one she narrowly avoided; and the monument built on the spot where she, her mother and the other partisans descended into the canals.

We also visited the *Umschlagplatz*, where trains departed for the concentration camps, and the remarkable museum of the Jewish Historical Institute where we saw materials related to the Holocaust in Warsaw, including the milk cans in which Emmanuel Ringelblum buried the diary he kept from January 1940 until December 1942.

It was an honor to spend time at Janusz Korczak's orphanage. Korczak, a pediatrician, teacher and radio personality, who ran an orphanage for 200 children, had every opportunity to escape from Poland. He chose to stay with his orphans and went to the gas chamber with them. Korczak, who co-directed a second orphanage in Warsaw for poor Catholic children, would be happy to know that the building is still an orphanage, now run by an order of Catholic nuns. When asked what he would do if he survived the war, this great Jewish humanitarian replied: "Take care of German orphans."

Like Korczak, Irena is married to the present. Today, her beloved Warsaw has been physically rebuilt from ruins. She herself has been spiritually transformed. She still paints, sculpts and teaches art but now spends six months a year in Poland hosting workshops on forgiveness throughout the country. In a land still struggling with long-standing enmities between Poles and Germans, Poles and Russians and Poles and Jews, she urges all those she engages in her seminars to move out of the past, beyond fear, to forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and love of life. ✪



The Challenge of Shalom: The Jewish Tradition of Peace and Justice

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Publishers Weekly concluded: "There is much to learn here for anyone, Jew or Gentile, interested in global issues of peace and justice."

\$25.00 per copy, plus \$5.00 for shipping

*Forever Wars***What I've been reading lately**

"All that I ask is that, in the midst of a murderous world, we agree to reflect on murder and to make a choice."—Albert Camus, 1948

Murray Polner

Milton Viorst's probing and relevant *Zionism: The Birth and Transformation of an Ideal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016) will not be appreciated by our obedient American Israel lobby and the many American governments and politicians whose support for Jewish money and votes have ruined any possibility for a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian bitter dispute.

For me, the book recalls my former American Jewish Committee boss, David Gordis, who bravely and publicly called today's Israel "a failure... distorted by a fanatic, obscurantist and fundamentalist religion which encourages the worst behavior rather than the best"—as it also tries to silence any and all criticisms of Israeli policies by American Jews and non-Jews.

Viorst, a longtime observer of the Middle East, poses a central problem and offers some answers to "How did Zionism, over the course of a century, evolve from the idealism of providing refuge for beleaguered Jews to a rationalization for the army's occupation of powerless Palestinians?" And, too, how and why did "Zionism [become] increasingly defined by military power?"



Milton Viorst



The New York Times, which initially approved George Bush's decision (aided and abetted by the neo-cons—who (and whose kids) rarely if ever serve in the military—to invade Iraq and spread uncontrollable violence throughout the Greater Middle East, recently, published an angry editorial, "America's Forever Wars" (22 Oct. 2017), in which it asked Americans "how many new military adventures, if any, it is prepared to tolerate." The august newspaper had the gall to quote Andrew Bacevich, a conservative dove, and retired army colonel and Boston University professor, whose soldier son was killed in Iraq, writing that "a collective indifference to war has become an emblem of contemporary America..."

True enough, but in his essential, no, imperative book, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Holt, 2008), Bacevich wisely points to the continuing bloody blunders and misinterpretations born of ignorance and set in concrete—of war crimes by our leaders "from the era of Forrestal and Nitze to the present, [they] have repeatedly misconstrued and exaggerated existing targets with vicious effects." If anyone needs yet another example and they haven't already done so, they need to view the latest Ken Burns-Lynn Novick fascinating if at times imperfect documentary about our defeat in Vietnam.

So who's next? Iran? North Korea? Syria? Russia? Maybe we're crazy enough to invade Venezuela? Iran, where our civilian neoconservatives who brought us the invasion of Iraq—would love seeing it smashed by Americans storming the beaches of Iran, an imaginary replay of D-Day, and its bombers killing millions of ordinary Iranians.

Writing in the paleo-conservative *The American Conservative*, Harry J. Kazianis, director of defense studies at the Center for the National Interest, offers his take.

In "I Fought a War Against Iran—and It Ended Badly," he referred to war games he had participated in back in 2013, which ended with the U.S. and Iran at war but which now has him wondering, "Is war with Iran inevitable?" His answer: "It seems possible." And then he appends his personal feelings: "I'm scared to death," and explains, "It doesn't take a lot of imagination to dream

up a situation where Washington and Teheran come close to the brink of war quite quickly. Indeed, it isn't out of the question that America could soon face what could be the ultimate foreign policy nightmare—crises with both Iran and North Korea at the same time."

Lawrence Wilkerson, a former army colonel who now teaches at the College of William & Mary and was chief of staff for Secretary of State Colin Powell and no supporter of the Iraq War, now warns confused, indifferent Americans in "A Familiar Road to War" (*New York Times* Op Ed, 5 Feb. 2018; also titled "I Helped Sell the False Choice of War Once. It's Happening Again"), that, as with Iraq, American propaganda and "shoddy or cherry-picked intelligence" (the Putin-helped-defeat-Hillary myth too?). "Trump and his

team are trying to do it again. If we're not careful, they'll succeed." One omission: Bibi's hardline Israel would love to see a US-Iranian war. If that disaster should ever occur, we need to keep in mind the hoary but very true adage, "If you liked Iraq you'll love Iran."

"The lifeblood of anticommunist propaganda was conspiracy theory," argues Nick Fischer, an Austrian scholar in his compelling *Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2016), dangerous nonsense which soon became the rationale for our worthless wars and baloney like the Cold War's Domino Theory, the widely-accepted notion that the Commies were everywhere and every place, a potent menace, at home and abroad, an overstatement repeated ad nauseam and which became the unquestioned mantra for why we had to

kill so many people.

Our hysterical obsession with Communism since the Bolshevik Revolution led to ugly and indefensible Red Scares and blacklists—and decades of fear.

The lack of interest by our courts in our unconstitutional presidential wars (see what the Founding Fathers said about the process of going to war) meant that people were deported or went to prison for their political beliefs. Thus, many of our wars could never end without the approval of those who started and defended them.

Many of our wars could never end without the approval of those who started and defended them.

Continued next page

Conspiracy theory was at the heart of baloney like the Cold War's Domino Theory as well as ugly Red Scares and blacklists.



Andrew J. Bacevich

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“The intellectual, moral and psychological paralysis of paranoid anti-communist conspiracy theory,” wrote Fischer, was fostered and operated by those who benefitted politically and financially from 1917 to the first Cold War era and now threatens to continue as a sequel. And of course, “It led to the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers in external wars of choice,” about whom few Americans care or remember.

And what about future wars involving Russia and NATO—the latter basically a Washington rental?

Dave Majumdar is the defense editor for the centrist National Interest and his essay, “This is What a NATO vs. Russia War Over the Baltics Would Look Like” concludes that such a war isn’t in the immediate cards, at least for now (Moscow has lots of nukes), but some unexpected mix-up could always lead to big trouble, a la Sarajevo. Majumdar winds up: “If NATO forces cross into Russian territory that might provoke a nuclear response from Moscow.” Now here’s the good news. “Such a war will almost certainly escalate into a full-up nuclear war between the planet’s only two nuclear superpowers—which means everyone and I mean nearly everyone, loses.”



But back to The New York Times and why Americans haven’t protested our nonstop, losing and senseless wars. An editorial implies that one explanation is the absence of a draft. (As a veteran of eight years reserve and active duty, I absolutely disagree.) With a draft, it means non-military families will then allegedly care about protesting our wars

and their sons and daughters will once again shut down their campuses, while marching on Washington shouting “Hell No, We Won’t Go.” To which retired Col. Bacevich

All a draft can do is stimulate the appetite of hawks and lead to more wars, more graves and more monuments.

smartly adds that sort of hot air is “akin to the notion that putting Christ back in Christmas will reawaken American spirituality. A pleasant enough fantasy, it overlooks the forces that transformed a religious holiday into an orgy of consumption in the first place.” The truth is that all a draft can do is stimulate the appetite of our conservative, neocon and liberal hawks and lead to more wars, more graves and more monuments in Washington. How would you like non-vet Trump to have an army of conscripts at his disposal?



Then to Central America, where the underlying principle—especially during Reagan’s years—was that the Commies were coming. Still, Nick Fischer shrewdly understands the propaganda barrage aimed at the U.S. public about the Red Menace and wrote that it also “justified the violent overthrow of democratically elected governments in Latin America (and Iran).” *Secrets of State: Declassified History of the Chilean Dictatorship*, recently shown as an exhibition in Santiago, Chile, revealed once more about U.S. assistance offered by the Nixon regime in overthrowing the democratically-elected Salvador Allende, the Socialist President and which brought Chileans the U.S. puppet Pinochet, a dedicated homicidal fascist, as in Guatemala where they and their Israeli friends tried to evade congressional limitations on arms for the Guatemalan army which the Guatemalan Truth Commission concluded had executed 100,000 of their countrymen and women.

Much the same happened in El Salvador, one of the poorest and most repressive nations in the Western Hemisphere. There, its repressive rulers were backed by—who else?—the U.S.A. Their civil war lasted twelve gory years. And at war’s end, some 75,000 Salvadorans were dead and its Truth Commission for El Salvador reported in 1993 that “the government forces”—our buddies—were responsible for eighty-five percent of the atrocities and human rights abuses.

Raymond Bonner’s brilliant investigative report, *Weakness and Deceit: America and El Salvador’s Dirty War* (OR Books, 2nd ed. 2016) was one of two intrepid reporters (Bonner of The New York Times and Alma Guillermoprieto of The Washington Post and later The New Yorker) were the first to tell of the El Mozote mass murders, when some 900 residents of the small village of El Mozote were butchered by our pals in the Salvadoran army in December 1981.

Bonner is on the mark when he closes. “Having learned little or nothing from the Vietnam debacle, the U.S. read the coming of the leftwing Sandinistas in Nicaragua as the start of yet another version of the Domino Theory”—which sees the entire Western Hemisphere as American private property, yet denies Russia and China the right to define it own—equally unjustified—national interests in their regions of influence.”



Cindy Sheehan



Cindy Sheehan, whose soldier son was killed in Iraq, was then mocked by our war lovers for her public mourning when she camped out near George W. Bush’s Texas ranch in 2005. Referring to the recent dustup about what to say to a dead soldier’s family, Sheehan told The Daily Beast:

“I wish the conversation [with Trump and Bush and the family of dead military men] was about the barbarism of war and, in this instance, why are there special ops forces in Niger. Where is the movement to oppose U.S. wars, instead of liberal handwringing over botched messages of condolences? My grief was exploited by Democrats and Republicans alike to score political points and win elections. And the wars I swore to stop are still going, and have expanded dramatically.”

Dear Cindy Sheehan: Thank you for your wonderful words of wisdom. But the truth is that our historic addiction to war will go on and on and on. Sadly, Plus ça change.... ✧

MURRAY POLNER
is co-editor of
SHALOM.

*Poetry***Parrhesia:
In Introduction***Tim Bagwell*

I am Tim Bagwell. I am a Marine Corps combat veteran of the American war in Vietnam. I was in Vietnam seven months, January to July 1969. I am the author of these poems. I enlisted in the Marine Corps at 17. I was out of combat—and Vietnam—by age 19, meaning I have lived my entire adult life with post-traumatic stress.

The anger in these words is mine. The pain is real. I claim it. I live it daily. These are not “pretty” poems; these are not written to entertain you. They are an attempt to keep me alive...I want these words to cut into your complacency as I have been cut—and continue every day—by the memories behind them.

Poem by Tim Bagwell:

War No. 3

When you go to war
your sons and daughters will die
Is this okay with you?
When you go to war
Your daughter will be raped
by their peers and officers
When you go to war
your sons will come home
as murderers
When you go to war
your children will return crippled—
maybe in body, certainly in brain
Is this okay with you?

***Just Another One of the Dead***

Alex Shimkin—American civilian, 27, killed by an American grenade thrown at his feet by NVA soldiers in Quang Tri City, Vietnam, July 1972.

....Alex Shimkin—Indiana university alum, committed to building a better world than the one he lived in, killed by an American grenade thrown at his feet by NVA soldiers,

Alex Shimkin—a former Mississippi Freedom Rider, voter registration activist for disenfranchised blacks, twice arrested by Southern Bull cops because he wouldn't do what they said, killed by an American grenade thrown at his feet.

Alex Shimkin—fluent in Vietnamese, a “stringer” reporter for *Newsweek* after being fired from International Volunteer Services for reporting America war atrocities—using Vietnamese civilians to clear mine fields—to a *New York Times* reporter, killed by an American grenade thrown by NVA soldiers.

Alex Shimkin—self-taught expert on criminal American military strategies in the Mekong Delta, documenting that US soldiers and aviators intentionally murdered civilians; the highest hours of American death was the hour after schools let out.

Dead, dead Alex Shimkin; killed by a damn American grenade. ☆

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Bagwell, 2016

Hero Worship

Who Is a Hero?

Dr. Lawrence
Wittner

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. occupation authorities in Germany, checking on the effectiveness of their “denazification” program, polled Germans on whether they believed a civilian was “less worthy than a soldier.” One wonders what they would think of the exalted status that many Americans currently accord to anyone serving in the U.S. armed forces, as announcements ring out from airline flights to sporting events with calls to applaud “Our Heroes.”

This adulation of everyone wearing a U.S. military uniform is a fairly recent phenomenon. Although the popularity of triumphant military commanders like George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, and Dwight



Many returning veterans report that they struggle to adjust to civilian life and speak of missing the adrenaline rush, camaraderie and teamwork when they return from active duty. They often lack a sense of purpose, a sense of being valued. An awareness campaign promoted by Services for the Underserved aims at highlighting a deadly crisis creeping across our nation.

Eisenhower helped pave their way to the White House, the status of “hero” was not necessarily accorded to them or to the millions of other people who served in the U.S. military. As the journalist Stephen Kinzer has noted: “Past generations of Americans saw soldiers as ordinary human beings. They were like the rest of us: big and small, smart and dumb, capable of good and bad choices.” Today, he added, “we pretend they are demi-gods.”

A hero, according to the standard definition, is a person noted for courageous acts or nobility of character. How well do soldiers measure up to this standard?

Some measure up rather well, especially when they do things like persevere against overwhelming odds, rescue fallen comrades under withering fire, and defend civilians against enemy attack. Although the wisdom and justice of wars in which soldiers fight can certainly be questioned, soldiers do behave heroically in many instances.

Other soldiers measure up badly, especially when they engage in massacring civilians, torturing or shooting prisoners, raping women, and other war crimes: things that have characterized the behavior of some U.S. troops from the nation’s early wars to more recent times.

Most American soldiers, though,

Most soldiers are not trying to act like heroes.

have been neither heroes nor villains but, rather, dutiful, if sometimes reluctant, participants in the armed forces. As one former U.S. soldier told me, upon his return

from the Vietnam War, “I just kept my head down and tried to survive.” In recent years, in the context of an all-volunteer army, most young people have enlisted because they have little economic opportunity in civilian life, are continuing a family’s military tradition, or have a youthful taste for adventure. Although some might end up displaying extraordinary valor or nobility of character, most are not trying to act like heroes but, simply, to do their jobs.

Defenders of their heroism argue that, by joining the armed forces, U.S. soldiers are courageously risking their lives and limbs. And it’s certainly true that some pay a terrible price for their military service. But, in fact, most modern U.S. soldiers never or rarely see combat. In 2017, only about a third of active duty U.S. military personnel were located outside the United States, and the vast majority of these were not deployed in combat zones.

Civilian employment also has serious, though rarely mentioned, hazards. During 2016, there were 5,190 fatal work injuries in the United States, with the highest fatality rates among loggers, fishermen, and aircraft pilots and flight engineers. Firefighters, police, and farm workers also held exceptionally danger-



Today’s returning veterans need understanding and help, not fawning adoration.

ous jobs. According to the AFL-CIO, 50,000 to 60,000 Americans died of occupation-related diseases in 2015, while work-related injuries and illnesses have numbered between 7.4 million and 11.1 million per year.

But is there anything harmful about the blanket lauding of soldiers as heroes?

Well, yes. It inculcates the dangerous myth that soldiers can do no wrong. As Lieutenant Colonel William Astore has pointed out: “When we create a legion of heroes in our minds, we blind ourselves to evidence of destructive, sometimes atrocious, behavior. Heroes, after all, don’t commit atrocities.” These atrocities, “so common to war’s brutal chaos, produce cognitive dissonance in the minds of many Americans, who simply can’t imagine their ‘heroes’ killing innocents and then covering up the evidence. How much easier it is to see the acts of violence of our troops as necessary, admirable, even noble.”

Also, when American soldiers are idolized, respect for militarism and war grow accordingly. Military training, military expenditures, military intervention, and military escalation become ways to “support the troops” or, at the least, take on a friendlier glow.

In addition, as soldiers, fervently applauded by the public, adopt the popular notion that they are the saviors of the nation, they have a tendency to stage armed takeovers of democratically-elected governments. After World War I, Mussolini and Hitler began their own assault on democracy by mobilizing fellow veterans of that conflict to seize power.

Fortunately, the founders of the United States, fearful of “Caesarism,” placed control of the military in the hands of the elected civilian authorities. But glorification of the armed forces could alter this arrangement.

Being uniformly lauded as “heroes” is also harmful to many soldiers, for it sweeps much of their actual experience under the rug. Large numbers of American troops come home from combat suffering from PTSD, alcoholism, and drug dependency. Indeed, an estimated 22 U.S. veterans a day commit suicide. In these circumstances, they need understanding and help rather than fawning adoration.

Finally, the across-the-board hero-worship of soldiers not only devalues the heroism of those soldiers who have shown extraordinary courage, but the heroism, usually unsung, of many civilians. What about the heroism of civil rights activists risking their lives in the cause of racial justice? What about the heroism of journalists imprisoned or murdered for revealing private or public corruption? What about the heroism of “whistleblowers” who risk lengthy imprisonment for exposing criminal behavior? What about the heroism of workers who dare to organize or go on strike at the risk of their jobs?

For these reasons, among others, even soldiers themselves have objected to being labeled “heroes.”

Shouldn’t we stop singling out “the troops” for adulation and applaud heroism wherever it occurs? ☆

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