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BULLETIN

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#3

“VETERANS STANDING UP FOR EACH OTHER”

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OCCASIONALLY AN ARTICLE COMES ALONG THAT SUMMARIZES OUR CONCERNS SO SUCCINCTLY AND SO WELL THAT IT DESERVES SPECIAL DISTRIBUTION. BELOW IS SUCH AN ARTICLE [ED.].

SOCIETY & THE SOLDIER

Richard K. Kolb – VFW Magazine April issue p14

Only a fraction of the population is making a sacrifice in the current wars. What does this mean for the nation's well-being?

“America is divided between the vast majority who do not serve and the tiny minority who do,” T. Trent Gegax and Evan Thomas wrote in Newsweek. In fact, only four-tenths of 1% of citizens wear a military uniform, even amidst the highly touted war on terrorism.

Let's take a look at what some other commentators have had to say about this state of military affairs in America today.

“Americans may love their military,” Loyola University political scientist John Allen Williams wrote in 1999, “but it is in the same way they might love their Rottweiler: They are happy enough for the protection but do not want to become one themselves.” Serving in the armed forces is “as unfathomable as life on another planet,” he concluded.

Consequently, few citizens have a direct link to those who do serve. Princeton University political economist Uwe E. Reinhardt calculated that “no more than 10 million Americans have any real emotional connection to these wars.”

In his Washington Post essay entitled “Who's Paying for Our Patriotism?” Reinhardt figured “these wars visit no sacrifice of any sort—neither blood nor angst nor taxes— on well over 95% of the American people.”

None of this should come as any surprise. As Scott Curthoys wrote in Army Times: “Since the war in Vietnam and the end of compulsory service, the military has become an entity increasingly outside of American society – an organization that serves the society but is not really of the society. As a result, most young Americans are content with letting someone else do the fighting.”

Indeed, they are, and so are their parents. “America's elite would prefer somebody else's daughters to die rather than one of their own sons,” says Northwestern University military sociologist Charles Moskos.

Guilt is Well-Placed

There is little dispute on this point, and much to sustain it. Under the heading “Patriotic Guilt” in the Los Angeles Times, 28-year-old Oren Rawls readily admitted: “I know full well that relatively few in my generation buy into the ‘for flag and country’ bit, and that my sense of patriotic guilt would probably make for a good joke or two in the service. The honest truth is that nothing less than a full-fledged draft could get me to put on a uniform.”

This does not bode well for national cohesiveness. What we have is “a society which pays a fraction of its population to take all the real risks of citizenship,” said Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“The reality is you will have had a group of Americans who bore almost all of the burden of citizenship. For most Americans it [the war] is being fought by other families' sons and daughters, who are both out of sight and often out of mind.” As Thom Shanker succinctly put it in the New York Times: “America is not a nation at war, but a nation with only its military at war.”

And that military has only a handful of service-age males among its ranks. As Moskos observed of serving in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: “It's not a generational experience.”

Support for those in uniform is strong. But is it superficial? Do those on the lines think it is genuine? In a Time essay—“The Danger of Yellow Ribbon Patriotism”—Joe Klein quoted an Iraq vet as saying, “You just get the feeling that the rest of the country doesn't understand. They're not part of this. It's peacetime in America, and a few of us at war.”

Moskos agrees: "The whole country is undergoing patriotism lite." While troop support efforts receive well-deserved publicity, some symbolic gestures such as sporting bumper stickers demand little. "These acts are small ways of showing some recognition, because we're not doing it any other way."

Societal Covenant Inviolable

With the absence of a draft and the underlying notion of civic obligation lost for more than a generation now, the rest of the country does not get it. What does all this mean for the nation's future defense? Joan Vennoch, writing in the Boston Globe, answered this way: "Understanding history means understanding that countries are born, survive and flourish because individuals are willing to die for them."

Still, those serving and their families are content with what exists in terms of support. "I think that's the difference," Army wife Jacqui Coffman told the Los Angeles Times. "When you go back to Vietnam, you were looking at the American public actually disliking the American soldier. That isn't true anymore."

Is that enough, though? Like all wars, soldiers want their sacrifices to have meaning. As one serviceman told his mother before he was killed in Iraq, the prayer of every warrior is universal: "Just don't forget me."

Remembrance is crucial, but so is assisting those who survive near death. "As a society, we still do not know how to welcome home the wounded warrior—how to express deep appreciation and respect at the same time as profound grief," Nancy Sherman wrote in the Boston Globe. Her book on this subject called *Stoic Warriors* will soon supplement Sherman's editorial, "When Johnny Comes Home."

Like many other Vietnam vets, Marine veteran and Los Angeles Times staff writer John Balzar is greatly concerned about the post-war reception. "Today's heroes are in danger of becoming tomorrow's damaged goods," Balzar wrote in the paper. "Public opinion can be fickle."

Balzar got to the essence of the matter. "How society collectively greets and treats overstressed veterans, now and in the years to come, is one of the most significant factors in whether they heal and how quickly," he wrote.

Veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq, no matter how small their relative numbers, are bound to make valuable contributions to the society for which they sacrificed so much. Just as their predecessors have done.

Early on, Army Special Forces Maj. Roger D. Carstens offered this assessment in *USA Today*: "They will throw their war-born maturity and wisdom into the machinery that runs this country. They will run ethical and energetic companies; provide expert and values-based service to your families; serve us well in elected office; and raise their children to be good citizens."

That is quite a bargain for a society that gives so little in return.

Society has a pact with its armed forces. That unwritten agreement is implicit in its intent. It's an obligation more important than ever, with so few protecting so many. Thomas Mockaitis, a DePaul University history professor, has called this pact "A Covenant with the American Soldier."

No matter the ultimate outcome of the wars, we as a nation have a debt to repay long after the fighting stops.

So, as Knight Ridder senior military correspondent Joseph L. Galloway asked, "What are we doing as a people and a nation to deserve the service and sacrifice of such men and women?"

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