

“Thank you for your service to our country”

Larry Minear

Veterans Day Op-ed

The greeting is now a familiar one. Khaki-clad soldiers are approached by strangers at airports. Sporting events pause to salute the veterans in attendance. Public gatherings acknowledge their presence. What’s not to like about these expressions of thanks?

Veterans themselves are ambivalent. Many express pleasure that they have received a welcome home from Iraq and Afghanistan that has been warmer than the home-comings of U.S. troops returning from Vietnam. They credit Americans with having learned to separate the warriors from the war.

But some find themselves wondering whether their well-wishers have any idea of what their service to the nation has involved. Nathan Lewis, an E-4 specialist who joined the Army in August 2001 and served in Iraq, shares his thoughts in a poem titled “Golden Rule”:

Mothers teach shoelace loop, over under pull tight.  
Say thank you to the nice man  
Look both ways before you cross  
Wednesday night bath  
Be nice to your sister  
Mothers teach not  
Center mass aiming  
Ingenious torture methods  
Like the no-sleep game and the dig your own grave game  
Not elevation angle for grenade launcher  
Nor the high five yeehaw congratulations back slap  
Certainly they didn’t teach burning shit barrels and convoy ops  
Mothers don’t teach that.

Some veterans wonder whether the public, largely disengaged from the wars while they raged, is now playing catch-up. Reflecting on the welcome received following his army tour in Iraq, Lowell native Sean Casey confided that such a “celebration of his violent profession unnerves him. He understands now, by his time in the desert, that if they knew the true story of his profession, they’d be more reserved.” Indeed, some veterans would rather be understood than thanked, keeping their experiences to themselves rather than sharing them. Others are glad to be asked.

While the vast majority of U.S. military personnel did not publicly question what they were tasked to do in the two 9/11 wars, some express bitterness at the lack of accountability of those who dispatched them into the fray. In his “Letter to the War Presidents” – all those who presided over earlier wars as well as the Global War on

Terror -- Raymond Camper, who served in Iraq with the Virginia and Minnesota National Guards, makes an impassioned appeal to U.S. commanders-in-chief.

“Would you shed one drop of blood  
for the gallons that we’ve given,  
would you last one day in the conditions  
we’ve spent years in?”

Would you be able to sign on the dotted line,  
and follow the directives sent down from on high  
when they went against your convictions of wrong and right?

Would you be able to look your family in the face,  
and tell them it was worth it,  
when you can’t forgive yourself,  
for the carnage you partook in?

You have not engaged your enemy at close range,  
seen the sweat and fear upon his face,  
before you forever erased him away.

My generation has done this and more,  
some of us while questioning,  
others while adoring,  
nonetheless,  
we are the children who you will bury,  
without ever knowing what our level of sacrifice feels like.”

“We sleep comfortably in our beds at night,” military officials remind a still-unengaged public, “because violent men do violence on our behalf.” But is all such violence legitimate and are U.S. interests well served by violence of the sort that has characterized the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq? To the discomfort of those who will listen, veterans trace the lines of ricocheting violence back to the U.S. body politic, which in the broadest sense bears responsibility the wars and their prosecution.

The airport Thank You ritual, like the yellow ribbon campaign before it, strikes some veterans as a substitute for dialogue rather than as the opening of a serious conversation. “Supporting the troops” has also become an all-purpose shorthand for everything from staying the course to accelerating the return of U.S. troops. Jacob George, who served three Iraq tours as a combat engineer, demands that we listen carefully because he is one of those troops who are the object of the support of well-wishers. If you really want to support the troops, he comments,

“what we need are teachers who understand the meaning of this country  
what we need is a decent living wage so that people are not cold and hungry

what we need is a justice system that seeks truth  
what we need are more books and less boots.”

Veterans and new-breed veterans’ groups are challenging not only presidents but also members of Congress and the American public to whom elected officials are accountable. Aidan Delgado, posted at Abu Ghraib, believes that “If people could see the bodies, the blood, they wouldn’t be able to support this war with a clear conscience.” Long after the last American body is repatriated, questions about the wisdom of the wars and the effectiveness of the strategies and tactics employed will continue to insist on answers.

There is much to learn from those have served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yes, we need to thank them for their service and express concern about their well-being. But we also owe it to veterans to struggle with the issues they raise. Especially on this Veterans Day, they deserve to be heard. Let us listen to their voices rather than drowning them out with our own.

Larry Minear is the author of *Through Veterans’ Eyes: The Iraq and Afghanistan Experience*. The poems are used with permission.

900 words