



The Art of War

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The greeting is now a familiar one. Strangers at airports approach khaki-clad soldiers, hands extended, and say, “Thank you for your service to our nation.” Sporting events are interrupted to salute veterans. Public gatherings acknowledge their presence. What’s not to like about these expressions of thanks?

Veterans are increasingly making their views known about their service in Afghanistan and Iraq and about the welcomes home they are receiving. They do so in conversations and interviews, letters and poetry, photographs and graphic arts. The treasure trove of materials is burgeoning, including commentary gathered in collections like the Veterans History Project in the Library of Congress and the three volumes of poetry and prose published by the Warrior Writers project.

Many veterans contrast the welcomes they are receiving as they return home from Afghanistan and Iraq with the often hostile receptions accorded US troops returning from Vietnam. Veterans find in the warmth of the current receptions a gratifying indication that Americans post-Vietnam have learned to separate the warriors from the war.

But some veterans find themselves wondering whether their well-wishers have any real idea of what their “service to our nation” has involved. Nathan Lewis, who joined the Army in August 2001 fresh out of high school 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 confides in a poem 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. He shares his views in writing, he says, because doing so helps bring “order to the internal chaos” he feels.

While the vast majority of US military personnel do not publicly question what they were tasked to do in the two post-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” — among whom he includes chief executives who presided over earlier wars as well as the global war on terror — Raymond Camper, who served in Iraq with Virginia and Minnesota National Guard units, makes an impassioned appeal to US 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,” Joshua Casteel recalls being told in an ROTC training session, “because violent men do violence on our behalf.” But is all such violence legitimate, and are US 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, some veterans trace the lines of ricocheting violence back to the US body politic, which in the broadest sense bears responsibility for US 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 a convenient shorthand for everything from keeping US soldiers on the ground for the foreseeable future to accelerating their return. Jacob George, who served three Iraq tours as a combat engineer, demands that we listen carefully because he himself is one of those troops. If you are really serious about supporting the troops, he writes,

*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 and members of Congress but also the American public, to whom elected officials are accountable. Aidan Delgado, posted at Abu Ghraib, is convinced that "if people could see the bodies, the blood, they wouldn't be able to support this war with a clear conscience." Some veterans believe and hope that 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 who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq and who now make bold to express their hard-won convictions in poetry and prose, in conversation and art. Yes, we need to thank them for their service, express concern about their well-being, and speed their reintegration. But we also owe it to them to struggle with the issues they raise. Especially on this Veterans Day, let us listen to their voices rather than drowning them out with our own.

Larry Minear, a resident of Orleans, is author of "Through Veterans' Eyes: The Iraq and Afghanistan Experience." The poems excerpted here are used with permission.