

Reflections on Military Service, Remembrance, and Pacifism

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The origins of Memorial Day are in post-Civil War remembrances, in both the North and the South, of the 620,000 Americans who died in that war.

We also remember the estimated 37 million military casualties world wide in World War I including killed, wounded, captured and missing and the millions who died in the world-wide flux pandemic spread, apparently, by the global contact resulting from the war

At least 80 million casualties occurred in World War II, including about 36 million civilian deaths.

58,000 American military personnel died in Vietnam and an unknown number of Vietnamese, but no doubt hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

So far in Iraq, over 2,400 US military personnel have died and over 17,000 have been wounded. In addition there are unknown numbers of Iraqi dead with estimates ranging from 40,000 to as high as 100,000 to 200,000

I was raised a Unitarian, a pacifist, a socialist, and a democrat with a small d. My great-grandfather brought his sons to the United States in the 1880s so they would not have to serve in the Kaiser's army, a move that was probably more about German regionalism than opposition to war. My dad became a pacifist and a socialist in college in the late 1920s because like many Americans he was exposed in that period to revelations about the causes of World War I that led him, correctly, to believe that that war was largely about territory, empire, and trade, and had little of the redeeming value attributed to it by American, British, and French propagandists who had sold it as a war of democracies against tyranny, conveniently failing to note that Britain and France had world wide empires held in place by force and violence and where the colonized had no democratic rights.

Dad was a conscientious objector in World War II and my brother was a draft resister during the War in Vietnam. I had the good fortune to enter college at the height of the war and maintained a student deferment. Although I never faced the kinds of decisions that my dad and my brother had to make, I am deeply proud of my pacifist heritage.

Thirty-five years later, I even more firmly convinced that war is an atrocity against civilian populations and against the soldiers who fight in them and especially against those soldiers that die or return home injured in body or spirit or both. My conviction has deepened as I have studied and taught American History for the last 20 years. Indeed, recently, I have been working with my students on George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*, which makes a judicious and convincing case that that war was a terrible waste of lives and money fought, in large part, because we failed to understand the history, peoples, and culture of Vietnam, misunderstandings that led us to believe that their war for national independence was part of a monolithic, worldwide communist conspiracy, something we now know was wrong.

So how can someone like me who believes that war is a crime against humanity honor the men and women who have died and are dieing in war? I would argue that we can best honor the world's war dead by working to make certain that it is war itself that dies. As part of my attempt to contribute to this effort, eleven years ago, I gave a sermon from this pulpit at the invitation of Peri Murdoch, then the minister of First Church, whom I had chided for what I thought a too celebratory sermon on the occasion of the 50 anniversary of D-Day.

One of the questions, I asked in that talk, is how could the US have stayed out of World War II in the face of the evil that was Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese war lords. What else could have stopped them but American men and weapons? I had then and have now no answer to that, at least in the short term. In any case arguing with history is a fruitless task.

But, I believe that we can choose to make a different world in which we need not have to answer these kinds of questions war after war. We can do that by studying the history of war and learning from that. But, ultimately, I believe that war will end when we have economic justice – when the world's riches are redistributed so that people all over the world are assured of the essentials of a secure life: adequate food, shelter, medical care, education, security, and the love of family and friends. For most people at all times and all places in world history, life has had too little of these necessities and as a result desperate people have been willing cannon fodder when their leaders promised them riches and honor if they conquered their neighbors.

We must also find ways to heal the human spirit so that we all will be released from the pain and fear that millennia of wars and want have driven deep into our souls. Part of that healing must come from learning how to consistently treat each other with compassion in our daily lives and in a global context. When these conditions are met war will end. In our attempt to make this happen, I believe that we can learn something from those who have sought to persuade this country to eschew war as an instrument of foreign policy and who have sought to alter domestic policy through nonviolent resistance to oppression.

Fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., [*Stride Toward Freedom*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), pp. 211 ff.] argued against violence as a civil rights leader and as a committed pacifist. He said, "Violence often brings about momentary results. . . . But . . . , violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem; it merely creates new and more complicated ones.

"Violence . . . is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. . . . [I]t thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community. . . . It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. . . .

Instead, he argued, "With nonviolent resistance, no individual or group need submit to any wrong, nor need anyone resort to violence to right a wrong." . . . "I suggest this approach because I think it is the only way to reestablish the broken community. . . . [S]omething must happen so to touch the hearts and souls of man that they will come together, not because the law says it, but because it is natural and right. . . . Only through nonviolence can this goal be attained, for the aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community."

So I close by suggesting that in addition to our war dead who we may honor by working to end war, that we honor people like Unitarianism's own Henry David Thoreau, who went to jail 160 years ago rather than pay taxes for an immoral war and who wrote an essay on civil disobedience to immoral authority that echoes down the ages. I also would honor World War II era pacifists like James Farmer, a founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, an organization that helped invent during the war modern tactics of non-violent civil disobedience that came to lie at the center of the Civil Rights movement. We may honor A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, and Dorothy Day who sought to end war, racism, and poverty in the United States. Others we might honor include Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, both of whom died in the last year. We should also remember martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King, of course, but also, Medgar Evers, Jimmy Lee Jackson, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, Rev. James Reeb, Viola Luzzo and others who died seeking peaceful solutions to this country's racial problems. Among Cincinnatians who worked to create a just world, we should remember Rev. Maurice McCrackin, Theodore Berry, Ernest and Marion Bromley, Amos and Polly Brokaw, Wally and Juanita Nelson. And I think that we should honor the thousands of young men, who refused to fight in Vietnam because it was an immoral and illegal war and in so doing helped end that war.