

Service and Sacrifice, Part II: For What? For Whom?

UUCGV Sermon by
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“Thank you for your service,” she said smiling as she noticed the VA card in my wallet. But she doesn’t know, I tell myself. As always, I cringed inside; bracing for the flow of dark memories; of things I did to “them” that I would never do to “us” while serving my country in a war I opposed. But the moment passed. I stopped the flow just in time and smiled back.

Good morning. Tomorrow is another Memorial Day; the 156th since it began as a day set aside after the Civil War to honor and mourn those who died in war. Tomorrow is another *chapter* in the story of military service and sacrifice for our country spanning 11 major wars, and 66 smaller conflicts foreign and domestic, since 1775.¹ These were wars fought both by volunteers and by draftees conscripted for this purpose until the latest version of the draft was ended in 1973.

Last year, I focused on 5 stories about 5 young men from Mesa County who died in 5 wars over the past century:

- George Robbins World War I
- Homer Biggs, Jr. World War II
- Clyde Hewitt Korea
- Thomas Doody Vietnam
- Wade Oglesby War on Terror

They were young; average age 23. They lived close by and attended high schools we all know. I told you who they were, where they served, and how they died.

I then asked a difficult question: what did they and their 118 other fellow soldiers from Mesa County die for? Or, more appropriately, for what were they sacrificed? Their country, of course. But why? Apart from World War II and possibly Korea, the possible answers were dark and unsettling, especially for the most recent wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq where the last 4 young men of Mesa County died in 2004 during the invasion and occupation of that country.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_military_casualties_of_war#cite_note-46

Their names were:

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|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------|
| • Mark Engel | Marines-Grand Junction. | Killed at Fallujah. | He was 21. |
| • Wade Oglesby | Army-Grand Junction. | Killed at Taji. | He was 27. |
| • Chance Phelps | Marines-Clifton. | Killed in Al Anbar Province. | He was 19. |
| • Michael Shackelford | Army-Grand Junction. | Killed at Ramadi. | He was 25. |

That invasion was part of the War on Terror unleashed by George W. Bush after the attacks of 9/11. A war of revenge waged against enemies, indistinguishable from friends. A war that has taken 801,000 lives, among them 7,000 US soldiers, and cost our country over \$6.4 trillion dollars, substantially more than the total US cost of World War II (\$4.1 trillion in 2020 dollars).^{2 3}

This war —our longest war—will end as we formally withdraw from Afghanistan on September 11, 2021. There will be no victory celebrations. Only sadness at the losses, and anger at the decisions, that brought us to this point.

On this Memorial Day, our country is in a dark place and I find it hard to speak what I feel as a veteran. Phil would understand, as perhaps, others of you might as well. But Phil would not dwell in this darkness. He would seek the larger story, the deeper meaning and move on with life and love, sharing what he learned poetically along the way.

So, perhaps now is a time to take stock, learn from the wars and the decisions that led to them, and resolve to do things differently as we move forward with our lives and those of our families. Others have done this:

- Ambulance drivers of the American Field Service serving with the US Army in Europe during World War 1 who channeled their trauma and grief into a program of international and inter-cultural exchange for teenagers from all countries: AFS. Their conviction was to build peace and eliminate war through promoting knowledge and understanding of each other, family by family.
- Veterans of World War II like my father who saw working with youth professionally through the Boy Scouts of America to be the most effective way to build character, self-reliance and compassion locally, nationally and internationally. I remember that all the Scouting professionals he worked with in those early years were returning war veterans.

² Brown University, Watson School of International & Public Affairs.
<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary> Does not include future interest costs on borrowing for the wars, which will add an estimated \$8 trillion over the next 40 years.

³ US Congressional Research Service, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/c/costs-major-us-wars.html#costs>

- Veterans of the Vietnam War like me who saw in the War on Terror a ghastly repetition of the same flawed decisions that took the lives of young friends in Vietnam. My response was to work with counter-recruiting efforts aimed at persuading high school students to think twice before acting on the dubious promises of military recruiters and signing up with one or another of the military services.

But this last story has a twist that I want to share with you, for it leads to a broader story of service and sacrifice that I want to tell.

In 2012, while teaching at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, I had an emotional encounter with one of my students, a veteran of the Iraq war and occupation. His wartime horrors re-awakened mine. I shared the story of that encounter with you in an earlier sermon. I still remember the emotions as I write these words.

Shaken by that encounter, I joined a small group of teachers and citizen activists alarmed at the post-9/11 expansion of JROTC and other military recruitment programs at area high schools. Operating out of a Mennonite Church, this diverse group of volunteers had created a counter-recruitment organization –the *Houston Committee for Youth and Non-Military Opportunities (HCYNO)*-- aimed at these same high schools.

Our message to the students: *think twice before signing up for military enlistment*. Our activities and dedication taught me much about how deeply the War on Terror had militarized our society. Even members of the military were concerned by this development. In the words of an instructor at the US Naval Academy, this was the “Permanent Militarization of America”:

“From lawmakers’ constant use of “support our troops” to justify defense spending, to TV programs and video games like “NCIS,” “Homeland” and “Call of Duty,” to NBC’s shameful and unreal reality show “Stars Earn Stripes,” Americans are subjected to a daily diet of stories that valorize the military while the storytellers pursue their own opportunistic political and commercial agendas”⁴.

It was a classic David vs. Goliath situation. Where we had one volunteer assigned to work with guidance counselors in multiple high schools, the military had several JROTC instructors and retired military teaching in each high school. Our mimeographed literature on non-military careers competed poorly with the military’s glossy brochures on the patriotism of military service. A few facts from a strategy document we prepared tell the story:

⁴ Aaron B. O’Connell, Op-Ed Contributor. “The Permanent Militarization of America” New York Times, November 4, 2012.

- Military recruiting is well organized. In 2013 there were 19,394 recruiters operating nationwide grouped into 14 regional commands, further sub-grouped into state and local recruiting battalions, targeting high school youth in a systematic and disciplined way.
- Military recruiting is well funded. In 2013, \$1.9 billion of the Defense budget was dedicated to military recruitment including JROTC, which is classified under "recruiting".
- Military recruiting focus is on high schools. The US Army Recruiter's Handbook lays out a detailed "network centric recruiting" plan for approaching each targeted high school.⁵ It rivals the marketing efforts of many businesses. For example, it advises recruiters to:
 - Cultivate coaches, librarians, administrative staff and teachers.
 - Be so helpful and so much a part of the school scene that you are in constant demand.
 - Know your student influencers. Students such as class officers, newspaper and yearbook editors, and athletes can help build interest in the Army among the student body.
 - Coordinate with school officials to eat lunch in the school cafeteria several times each month.
 - Deliver donuts and coffee for the faculty once a month.
- In Houston, a JROTC program was operating in all 25 comprehensive high schools in the Houston Independent School District, and 4 additional programs at as many middle schools. Program staff included 90-100 retired military who served as instructors but were not subject to teacher certification requirements. Is the situation the same in Mesa County?
- In Houston, there was a lack of adequate information and support for exploration of non-military opportunities for all students. Funding for school counselors had been cut. Consequently, many students were joining the military without adequately exploring non-military options for education and employment. This was especially so for schools whose students were largely black or Latino. Is the situation the same in Mesa County?

As part of our work, each of us attended College/Career Night at our assigned high school hoping to talk with students and often, their parents as well. Our table was usually adjacent to the Recruiter table staffed by members of the 4 services in full dress uniform. Their purpose was obvious. Ours seemed unclear.

What did "think twice" mean, we were asked? Looking through our literature, they could find nothing that had the "sabers in the sun" appeal at the adjacent table. Conversations were few and more than one parent questioned our patriotism. Yet we kept trying. David vs. Goliath indeed!

For them and I think for most other fellow citizens then and now, the meaning of "service" got skewed after 9/11 toward "military service" as the only truly honorable way to serve. It has taken 20 years of war on terror and a significantly revived military-industrial complex to get us to this level of militarization in our country.

⁵ US Army Recruiter's Handbook (USAREC Manual 3-01)

The Naval Academy instructor summed it up well:

“Uncritical support of all things martial is quickly becoming the new normal for our youth. Hardly any of my students at the Naval Academy remember a time when their nation wasn’t at war. Almost all think it ordinary to hear of drone strikes in Yemen or Taliban attacks in Afghanistan. The recent revelation of counterterrorism bases in Africa elicits no surprise in them, nor do the military ceremonies that are now regular features at sporting events. That which is left unexamined eventually becomes invisible, and as a result, few Americans today are giving sufficient consideration to the full range of violent activities the government undertakes in their names.

Were Eisenhower alive, he’d be aghast at our debt, deficits and still expanding military-industrial complex. And he would certainly be critical of the “insidious penetration of our minds” by video game companies and television networks, the news media and the partisan pundits. With so little knowledge of what Eisenhower called the “lingering sadness of war” and the “certain agony of the battlefield,” they have done as much as anyone to turn the hard work of national security into the crass business of politics and entertainment.”

So given what we know about how we got to this point, what should we do? On this Memorial Day commemorating those who served and were sacrificed, perhaps it is most fitting that we undertake the daunting task of “*de-militarization*”. Obviously, this is a huge challenge likely to be viewed as unpatriotic in these times of extreme nationalism. But we must try for the sake of our children and grandchildren.

A first step might be to restore the full meaning of “service and sacrifice” to include multiple forms of service as well as military service. We should explore these in the future. Today I want to focus on one through 3 short stories to conclude this Memorial Day sermon.

A Colorado Springs Story

Every Fall, the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) conducts a memorial service for those who died in service during the preceding year and those who died in retirement. Founded in 1918 as a labor union, the IAFF represents 324,000 professional firefighters and paramedics across the US and Canada. The memorial service is held on a site designed for this purpose –the *Fallen Fire Fighter Memorial*—located in the City of Colorado Springs. Granite walls, similar to those of the Vietnam Memorial, containing the names of the fallen by year are aligned in rows with Pike’s Peak as backdrop.

Some 1,500 firefighters from fire department locals all over North America usually attend, together with family members. Many come attired in Scottish kilts carrying fifes, drums or bagpipes in order to pay tribute to the fallen through music and marching during the ceremony. The harmonies, movements and color fuse with the emotion of the occasion. It is a deeply spiritual moment of recognition of service and sacrifice.

I am accompanied by my wife, Jan and my firefighter older son, Ben. We are moved. All around us is a special kind of *comraderie* of those who face death in saving lives. As I wander back through the plaques of names after the Memorial Service, I stop at the year 2001 and am stunned. There I see the names of 343 New York City firefighters who died on 9/11.

This year, the Memorial Service will add 96 more names to the honor roll of those who died in 2020. Included will be two fire fighters from Colorado. Their names are:

- Ricky Lee Fulton, Fire Fighter/Pilot, from Sterling, Colorado. Died fighting a wildland fire in September, 2020
- Joshua MacDonald, Fire Investigator, from Berthoud, Colorado. Died while providing EMS medical care in April, 2020.

Service and sacrifice. For what and for whom are painfully clear.

A Storm King Mountain Story

Leaving Colorado Springs, the 3 of us travel northwest to Glenwood Springs where, we have learned, there is a special memorial just West of the town along I-70. Finding the tiny memorial parking area is a challenge. Ascending the trail up Storm King Mountain is a bigger challenge especially for one my age. The trail is narrow, rocky and steep and may not have even existed in July 1994 when a lightening strike started a fire on the ridge of the mountain.

On the afternoon of July 6, a dry cold front increased wind and fire activity, pushing the firefighters to a highly flammable Gambel oak area. Within seconds a wall of flames raced up the canyon toward the firefighters on the west flank fireline. 14 smokejumpers, Hotshot and helitak crewmembers were not able to escape and were killed as they tried to flee. Nine of these (5 men and 4 women) were members of the Prineville Hotshots, based in Oregon. All were in their 20's.

Service and Sacrifice. For what and for whom are sadly clear.

A Firefighter/Paramedic Story

As Ben and I re-trace the markers of the 14 fallen fire fighters on the ridgeline, I feel the wind blowing up the canyon from the valley below, rustling the leaves of the trees that remain. Blackened stumps are everywhere. For a moment, the sacredness of this place overwhelms me and I hear their voices in the wind, wondering about their bravery, wondering who they were, and thanking them for their sacrifice.

The feeling persists as we follow the trail downward. It is a somber time of deep meaning for Ben, and I am curious and concerned. As I usually do, I ask him about how his work as a fire fighter and paramedic in San Antonio, Texas is going. But this time, my questions and his answers seem to take us to deeper levels.

Ben, it's been 11 years now, 4 as a paramedic. I know you have been through some tough times. There have been many challenges. Is it still what you want to do?

"Pop, this is the greatest job in the world! Where else would I face so many mental as well as physical challenges? What other job teaches so much about honor, so much about the human body, so much about service? What other job forces you to question your spiritual beliefs?"

Honor, service? Tell me more about those.

"Well, I'm proud of what I do. It's an opportunity every day to be that person who is somebody's hero; the hero that that somebody needs. It's a duty, a responsibility I take seriously. In the Department, reputation is everything; whether you can be trusted, whether you are honorable, your professionalism, your compassion for the patient. When that call comes in, and when—not if—it's a potential trauma, a bad call, your partner, the patient, the Department, the public depend on how you respond. Over and over again. It never stops."

Bad calls. What has been your worst day so far?

"Sorry, Pop. I can't tell you that. That's all under the yellow blanket. I lock those times away in a sealed vault. It's the only way I can keep going. To answer your question, I would have to empty out that vault and relive all those times. Every day could be a worst day. There is no predictability in what I do. When those days happen, my partner, the brother/sisterhood of other fire fighter/paramedics are there. They know. They understand. They hold me up during the trauma. It's a bond forever."

What's your best day so far?

"Pop, hard to say. There are many. Could be the 3rd grade class asking about our fire engine at the station. Could be the patient that grabbed my hand after arriving at the hospital and saying, "don't leave. Thank you."

Service and sacrifice. For what and for whom are profoundly clear.

The dead we remember today have taught us. War perpetuates war. Ending war and building peace are hard. They require new ways of thinking about "us" and "them"; new ways of understanding the world we share; and new ways of thinking about service and sacrifice with heart and mind. Perhaps, working together, step by step, we can find these ways so that our children's children will celebrate Memorial Day as a day of peace, not war.

And to help me bring this to a close, here is another young man from Mesa County.