

## IN RESPECT OF WAR

By Joseph R. Carvalko

The recent display of pomp, circumstance and military might honored the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D-day where the men and women of the great generation made unimaginable sacrifices in freedom's pursuit. The war well fought persists as the most poignant memory for my father, my uncles and many friends. I thank them for their success and sacrifice. But, should we not refrain from glorifying the combat they endured, that which we glimpse in otherwise solemn events orchestrated by great pomp and circumstance, where the media finds an outlet for sponsors and our leaders too often exploit audiences receptive to political rhetoric. Some wars may have virtue, but we should never glorify the battle by memorializing it through great shows of military prowess or extol the qualifications for political leadership by claiming a steely temperament to commit troops or launch cruise missiles, however justified.

Understandably we may want to credit the purpose served by a justified war, but this implicitly credits an inherently evil episode. Such reverence has a tendency to foster attitudes that perpetuate a righteousness that too often leads to political hegemony, or worse, other wars, ethnic cleansing and holocausts. We need to reject war whenever it seems to present an option. We need not find opportunity to honor it regardless how pious our intentions or to refer to it for political gain regardless how the game may have been played in the past.

I find it difficult to rail against my government once it commits us to war because something about patriotism draws upon a deep-seated willingness to support the neighbors and family called to duty. From this implied acceptance, I believe we then ignore the maiming and killing that follows because it racks up numbers to burdensome to count, because we show a stiff upper lip to our adversaries and because we give our beloved countries the benefit of the doubt in defense of our ideals. But, casually accepting the consequences of war also engenders a dearth of mercy for those caught up in war's wake. The government keeps confidential the statistics on civilians killed in places such as Afghanistan or Iraq. And, we do not ask. The nightly news about war becomes so familiar that it raises no more emotion than do soap commercials.

A society that lacks compassion for those caught up in war, famine, disease and pestilence creates the predicate for alienation. And, alienation leads to hatreds that lead to cycles of retaliation (perhaps what we see in Iraq today). Indifference also marginalizes the downtrodden; puts them out of sight, so that otherwise good people do not have to look at them. Television as of late honors dead soldiers by showing their pictures, names, ranks and the towns from which they hailed. As a people we send our citizens to die for an ideal and we send billions in dollars for repair, but neither the death of our soldiers nor the money we send translates into compassion for war's victims (ask any parent who loses a child).

Rather than applaud success in one or another armed conflict, governments, especially those that retaliate in the spirit of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”, must rationalize the innocent killing of civilians when it uses deadly force. Our law, our cowardice and our detachment support nearly any rationalization our government chooses to proffer and propagandize for its actions in these circumstances. Such, in my view, has been the case to support the war against Iraq. Ultimately, we must test our intentions and actions against a moral and a legal standard. In respect of the latter, a society’s law represents a social construct that plainly justifies a cultural and political predilection. But, Antigone reminds us that a standard for law does exist: “For me, it was not Zeus who made your order, nor did that justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could overrun the gods’ unwritten and unfailing laws. Not now, not yesterday: They always live, and no one knows their origins in time.”

We must not swell with pride in the face of arguably violating so fundamental a law. We might ask, “Upon what legal or moral grounds do we levy revenge and redemption, ever?” Perhaps the drum beat for nationalism, zealotry or patriotism beguiles us. We dare not ask. Following the drummer leads to a deafness, where we fail to hear the *mea culpa*, “we were only following orders”. Perhaps, not our hearing but our vision, clouds in times of war; a kind of blind obeisance, so that we fail to see those that do our bidding, those we send off to sacrifice life, mostly our youth, our proxies in khakis who inevitably kill or die. Yes, we must pay homage to those that sacrifice for our country, but when we feel the urge to glorify the war itself, especially through displays of pomp, circumstance or military prowess, let us not forget that war represents our failure to find a civilized solution, and no morally responsible people glorify such failures.