

Sound Off!



Bulletin The Newsletter of VETERANS UNITED FOR TRUTH, Inc.

#8

"Veterans standing up for each other"

30 august 2006

On the subject of sacrifice

Our organization is devoted to the serving member and the veteran, and to their families. We take no official organizational position on the current wars: our membership consists of both those who support and those who oppose these wars.

We talk a great deal about the sacrifices of those who are serving and of their families. When talking about these sacrifices, we who may disagree on the wars themselves need to have a framework in which to discuss the subject freely and without bias or rancor. That subject is not just about who is sacrificing and who is not, rather it is also about the true nature of the sacrifice.

One of the great stumbling points for those who oppose these wars, for whatever reason, is then to be able to honor the sacrifice that individuals are making without demeaning that sacrifice with the political overtones associated with the wars. For those who support the war, it is equally difficult to hear criticism of the politics of the war without translating that to personal criticism of those who are fighting the war on the ground.

The toughest of all of those questions is, "If you believe the war is wrong, or was entered into for the wrong reasons, is the sacrifice of my son or daughter, husband or lover, a sacrifice in vain?"

One father, an accomplished author, has answered that question clearly and unequivocally. He tells us that these heartbreaking sacrifices are not in vain, and why.

Agree or not, he has tackled one of the most difficult questions of the current era with wisdom and common sense. His answer to the question should let those of us on all sides of the political issue get on with the business of really supporting our young warriors and their families without animosity and without confusion over the difference between the honor of personal service, and the political question of national choice.

Sacrifice is Not in Vain

Frank Schaeffer | August 28, 2006

Salisbury, Mass. -- The Marine Corps has just announced that it is calling back several thousand Marines from inactive reserve units. After Sept. 11, all our president asked of most Americans was to go shopping, travel and maintain the economy. But our service members are asked to make sacrifices most Americans wouldn't dream of.

Many Americans are saying that our troops are sacrificing in vain. They are wrong. So are those who claim that if you want to support the troops, you have to support the president. Both misunderstand the meaning of military service in our democracy.

My youngest son, John, joined the Marines in 1999. Bill Clinton was president. The nightmare of Sept. 11 was still in the realm of the unthinkable. John was trained to serve as a Marine wherever he might be sent, not for any particular war. He served five years and returned safely from two combat tours in Afghanistan -- a "good war," according to most pundits and opinion polls -- and after a mission in Iraq, a war gone "bad."

I was fortunate. My son survived. A friend lost her only child.

Mindy Evnin's son was killed in Iraq. On a sweltering day last month, my wife and I drove from our home in Massachusetts to Burlington, Vt., to visit Mark's grave. Standing in front of that young Marine's headstone, I was overwhelmed by sorrow, fury at our president's mishandling of the war and by gratitude for Mark's life well-lived. Those emotions aren't as contradictory as they might seem.

I e-mailed a civilian friend about visiting Mark's grave. "To me," he answered, "the soldiers who are dying in Iraq should not have been there in the first place. ... If they die, they will have died in vain because the war is all a tissue of lies and/or failed policies."

Did Mark and thousands of others die in vain?

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We need to take a step back from the bitter debate over the Iraq war and look at the deeper meaning of service. Does it change when wars go badly? If Mark had been killed in Afghanistan, would that have been a more noble sacrifice than being killed in Iraq?

Maybe it would be helpful to consider the significance of service in a less politicized context. When a fireman runs up the stairs while everyone else runs down, the value of his action is unrelated to who started the fire, or whether those saved are "worthy." And the morality of his action doesn't depend on his motives or whether his leaders are truthful or wise. It is all about what he does once he's called upon to act on behalf of all of us.

While we are busy looking out for ourselves, that fireman is busy looking out for us. His willingness to serve is a victory for community, social responsibility, compassion and bravery.

What did Mark die for?

He did not die for George Bush's ever-changing rationalizations: "finding WMD," "freeing Iraq" or "bringing democracy to the Middle East." And in all probability, if he was like my son, Mark never thought much about why he volunteered. The point is, he did, and in combat he acted on the belief that the Marines standing next to him were more important than he was -- and, by extension that his country was more important than his individual right to comfort and safety.

Service in our democracy is not about politics. My son's volunteering in the Clinton era, then being sent to two "Bush wars," one "good" and the other "bad," handily illustrates the fact that the act of volunteering has nothing to do with fighting any war in particular and everything to do with service for service's sake.

Volunteering is a pre-political statement. And if you believe that American democracy is worthwhile, no matter what its imperfections, then the act of volunteering to be sent wherever your country needs you must be acknowledged as a priceless gift from the individual citizen to his or her country. This gift's morality doesn't depend on the rightness or wrongness of any war but on the soldier's high-stakes commitment to the value of our democratic experiment.

Mindy wrote me: "I don't know if Mark was a 'hero.' He did what he was asked to do, and he did it without hesitation. ... Maybe that is heroic."

It was. Our troops volunteer with no guarantee of success. They serve with or without support from other Americans. Now, some are being recalled involuntarily to participate in the fragile exercise of self-rule by equipping our government "of the people" to take action.

There are several thousand Marines who thought that their time of duty was done. Now they are going to be sent back into combat. They will be unhappy, even angry. Some will believe the president is wrong to send them, and their families will be sick with worry. But our Marines will go.

Their lives -- and, inevitably for some, their deaths -- present us with a stark question: Is citizenship only about enjoying personal preferences, or should we take responsibility for those around us, and by extension for our country?

We don't all need to serve in the military, but in the face of the sacrifice of those who do, what is our excuse for just going shopping? How we answer the question posed to us by their service will decide the health, morality and ultimately the survival of our democracy.

This column first appeared in the Baltimore Sun.

About Frank Schaeffer

Frank Schaeffer is a best selling author. His fiction, humor and non-fiction have received international critical acclaim. Frank has written for *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*, *Reader's Digest*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Baltimore Sun* and many other publications on topics ranging from his critique of American right wing fundamentalism to his experiences as a military parent and novelist.

Frank is the author of three critically acclaimed novels, translated into eight languages [Portofino](#), [Zermatt](#), and [Saving Grandma](#). Frank has also written four non-fiction books including [Keeping Faith A Father-Son Story About Love and the United States Marine Corps](#) (co-authored with his Marine son John. Frank's second book on the subject of his son's service in the military was [Faith Of Our Sons - A Father's Wartime Diary](#) published in 2004. Frank's book [Voices from the Front -Letters home From America's Military Family](#) was followed by [AWOL?The Unexcused Absence of America's Upper Classes From Military Service ? And How It Hurts Our County](#) (Co-authored with former Clinton White House aid, Kathy Roth-Douquet, Harper Collins, foreword by Gen. Tommy Franks.)

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