

The Labor of War: At What Cost?

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*Four things support the world:
the learning of the wise,
the justice of the great,
the prayers of the good, and
the valor of the brave*

— Muhammad

Call to Worship

It's Labor Day weekend, the annual celebration of honest work, the work ethic, and the labor movement. The holiday was initiated either by Peter J. McGuire, secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners or by Matthew Maguir, who was secretary of a local chapter of the International Association of Machinists in New Jersey. It was first celebrated in New York City in 1882 with a parade as Peter McGuire is quoted as saying, to honor those "who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold."



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This year we focus on the labor of those who work on our behalf in military service. Our focus is on the enlisted men and women — the soldiers, airmen, sailors, and grunts who make up the majority of the 2.2 million personnel in active duty, the reserves, and the National Guard.

Retired Marine Corps Major H. G. Duncan defined “grunt” as a “term of affection used to denote that filthy, sweaty, dirt-encrusted, footsore, camouflage-painted, tired, sleepy beautiful little son of a bitch who has kept the wolf away from the door for over two hundred years.”

This morning we honor the work of the men and women who labor to keep the wolf at bay — to protect the grandeur McGuire celebrated as the fruits of the trades — as we explore some of the costs and benefits of military service as employment. Come, let us worship together.

Reading

from *Awakening the Heroes Within*

by Carol S. Pearson

When most of us think of the hero, we imagine a Warrior. The Warrior escapes from a confining environment and begins the journey in search of treasure. On the journey, he or she is called upon to face and slay many dragons. Such heroes have courage and subscribe to high ideals, and they are willing to risk their lives to defend their kingdoms and their honor or to protect the weak from harm.

The Warrior within each of us calls us to have courage, strength, and integrity; the capacity to make goals and stick to them; and the ability to fight, when necessary, for ourselves or others. ...

Warring is about claiming our power in the world, establishing our place in the world, and making that world a better place. In practice, this means that as Warriors, we identify the aspects of our individual or collective lives that displease or dissatisfy us, and we seek to change them by force or persuasion. It is about being tough enough not to get pushed around, and forceful enough to have things “one’s own sweet way.”

Reading

The Strongest Force in the World from US Army Recruiting Command²

The U.S. Army, a key component of the U.S. Armed Forces, is made up of the best-trained, most dedicated, most respected Soldiers in the world — protecting America's freedoms at home and abroad, securing our homeland, and defending democracy worldwide.

A Soldier in the U.S. Army is the embodiment of physical strength, emotional strength and strength of purpose. As a Soldier, you will be prepared to serve our country whenever and wherever you are needed, combat-ready at all times, trained to counter any threat, anywhere. ...

Well prepared and highly adaptable, Enlisted Soldiers are regarded for their sense of duty and the sacrifices they have made for their country. Much like employees at a company, Enlisted Soldiers perform specific job functions and have the knowledge that ensures the success of their unit's current mission within the Army.

Sermon

Duane Fickeisen

In recognition of Labor Day, I wanted to talk about the labor of war; the *job* of being a soldier and the consequences of employment in the military as an enlisted man or woman. I want to separate the *politics* of the current war from consideration of the *labor* of the warriors, though of course they are intertwined and confounded in ways that make it impossible to consider one without recognizing the relationship with the other.

The arguments on both sides of the debate about whether we should have a volunteer army or compulsory service have mostly been laid out before. The fact is that we do have an all-volunteer military (sort of — I'll come back to that point). Despite some attempts to reinstate the draft, the lack of political will to do so and

²www.goarmy.com

the strong public opinion against it make it seem extremely unlikely that mandatory conscription will be reinstated soon, even with the current difficulty in meeting recruiting goals.

Some of the arguments in favor of mandatory service to the community for all able young men and women have merit — I would expand that service beyond the military to include public works. One effect would be to encourage a demand for more accountability and justification before going to war. With stronger public opposition to wars that didn't meet the test of public support, perhaps our government would be less eager to engage in pre-emptive warfare. If more of the children of middle- and upper-class families were on the front lines of battle surely our elected leaders would be reluctant to engage in warfare that didn't have clear public support.

But that's not where we're at this Labor Day weekend. For many years we've relied on all-volunteer Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps bolstered by voluntary service in the National Guard. But for many young adults military service may be the only viable option for employment. The Army has become, for many, the employer of last resort. It may technically be an all-volunteer force, no one is, after all bonked on the head and awakens in the Army, but for many recruits there are few or no other viable alternatives and they might as well have been involuntarily conscripted.

That's not to disparage the recruits who join for the many benefits of military service or out of a sense of patriotic duty.

If you check into the recruiting websites, you'll quickly see that the emphasis is on the opportunities for employment, on jobs and career opportunities, and on the training benefits of military service. The language speaks to power, force, strength, and discipline to be sure, but the emphasis is on employment and the benefits of working in the military.

The lists of MOS (Military Occupation Specialties) are prominently featured on the websites with enticing descriptions and the invitation to pick your desired job. Recruiters feature employment opportunities because they are effective tools that respond to the interests of many potential recruits.

The Army's website includes a section for parents that emphasizes building character, learning discipline, and developing job

skills. You can download a discussion guide that acknowledges likely parental concerns and encourages open conversation and respect for the ability of the potential recruit to make an informed decision. I thought it was a pretty balanced guide that acknowledged and addressed likely parental fears.

The Princeton Review is a company that provides assistance to students preparing to take college entrance exams. It is independent of Princeton College. Their website has lots of advice for students seeking help in selecting a college or career path, including several pages describing military service. They say this about the benefits of working for the Armed Forces:

“Doing your civic duty to protect the American way of life is more than enough reason for many enlistees to sign up. These benefits include educational, housing, medical, and dental, benefits. Additional pay is also given for special duty. The benefits the military provides are legendary and virtually unparalleled by any corporate package.

“The specific educational benefits available to you for military service today are plentiful in number and generous in kind. For instance, if you get a direct commission in the Army after you graduate from college, the Army will in most cases pay off your student loans while you serve in addition to issuing you a regular paycheck.

“Almost anybody involved with getting people to join the military will tell you that even if you don't want to make a career of it, the skills you will learn while you serve will be applicable to almost everything in the private sector. You could learn a lot about a technical field, should you choose to specialize. And you will certainly learn about responsibility.”

And that's certainly a big part of the story of the benefits of military service. In addition to providing employment with decent wages and benefits, training, educational assistance, and — if you make a career of it — good retirement benefits, military service helps many young adults develop discipline and focus and a sense of purpose and pride. It offers a community of comrades.

One wife of a retired military officer told me that wherever her family moved she could count on two com-

munities — the community of military families and that of the nearest UU church — both of which helped her family quickly feel at home in their new location.

Of course the benefits come with significant costs. The risks of death or serious injury when one is deployed in combat are higher than any other occupation. In 2006 there were 822 deaths to US military personnel from hostile action in the Iraq war. With about 140,000 troops on the ground last year, that translates to a rate of nearly 600 in 100,000. The death rate (and the number of troops deployed) so far this year is even higher. There are 1.4 million total active duty US military personnel, a quarter million reserves and a half million in the National Guard for a total of about 2.2 million. About 1 in 14 is deployed to Iraq at any given time. The combat death rate for all US military is about 35 to 40 per 100,000. About as many more fatalities occur from accidents and disease, with vehicle accidents the leading cause of death after combat. That compares with about 141 accidental deaths per 100,000 for the most dangerous job category in the civilian sector — fishing — which is about twice as dangerous as the risks of death from combat and accidents combined in the Armed Forces.

The non-combat occupational fatality rate for the military is about half that for aircraft pilots and loggers and about the same as it is for mining, iron workers, refuse collectors, farmers, utility line installers, or roofers. It's about ten times the average occupational fatality rate across all civilian sectors of just under 4 per 100,000 workers. Interestingly the Army has reduced the rate of deaths in vehicle accidents by about half over the past decade, to a level that is less than that for young men in the general population. It is a safety record that few industries could match.

About 10 times as many soldiers as were killed were wounded in hostile action in Iraq and required air medical transport, and almost as many more were injured in non-hostile action. Disease and illness required the air evacuation of nearly 21,000 military personnel. Added up, the rate of serious injuries and illness was 26%.

In the last week the media reported an increased rate of suicide in the Army, particularly among troops in Iraq. There were 99 suicide deaths and 948 reported "serious" attempts in the last year. Most of the deaths were young men and the leading causes cited were failed personal relationships, legal and financial prob-

lems, and the stress of their jobs. Longer deployments and multiple deployments appear to be linked with higher suicide rates. However, the rate of suicide deaths is still slightly less than that in the general population for men in the same age group.

While continuing medical care for those who are wounded is promised, the recent scandals at Walter Reed Army Hospital showed that the reality of good care falls short of the promise. Troops who return with serious injuries or psychological problems may have to fight for effective care, despite efforts to help them find civilian employment and an espoused commitment to care.

Signs and symptoms of stress and psychological trauma are common, with about a quarter of troops serving in Iraq reporting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and about a third expected to seek mental health care after discharge for depression, anxiety, PTSD, and similar concerns. Multiple deployments increase the rate of reported mental health issues by 50%. For the National Guard troops that have been deployed, the mental health issues are of particular concern because it is more difficult for the Guard to monitor personnel who have returned from deployment to civilian life and mental health resources are not as readily available as they are for active duty troops.

One study of the effects of traumatic stress suggests that combat exposure to stress is associated with indicators of increased wisdom in later life. The authors speculated that how one responds and copes with stress may be key in understanding their results, suggesting that an effective response and use of good coping mechanisms can lead to positive adaptation and wisdom years after the event. Surely many of us who have experienced stressful events like the ending of a marriage, termination of employment, even the death of a spouse or child, have developed stronger coping mechanisms as a result. But many don't and suffer lasting trauma. It seems like a risky path to wisdom.

The families of deployed troops often suffer from the stress of having a spouse and parent in combat as well as the added burdens of household management in the absence of the soldier. One measure of that stress is an observed increased rate of child abuse. The reported rate of child abuse in military families is less than that in the general population, at about 5 per 1000 children aged 4 or under. However, when one parent is deployed the rate doubles.

The perpetrator is usually the parent who is at home, though when both parents are home the perpetrator is about as likely to be the military as the non-military parent.

Another indicator of stress is that families of deployed troops sought medical care for acute problems more frequently than those of non-deployed troops. Some 20% of families of deployed troops sought medical care at least 6 to 10 times in a six-month period.

It isn't only families that experience the stress. With increasing reliance on reserve and National Guard forces, call ups often take key employees and participants away from their communities. While there are laws to protect employment, employers may be forced to assign additional duties to remaining employees, to curtail services, or to incur additional costs of hiring and training temporary workers.

Police, fire, and other emergency departments are often particularly impacted as they tend to have a relatively high proportion of reserve and National Guard personnel working as first responders. In a poll of law enforcement agencies 44% reported loss of at least one police officer to call ups for deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. Since 80% of police agencies have 20 or fewer sworn officers, the absence of even one or two has a big impact, and because of the civil service and training requirements, it is often not practical to replace a sworn police officer for a relatively brief temporary period.

This impact has come close to home with the recent death of State Trooper Scott Ball while he was deployed in Afghanistan with his National Guard unit. He was a mentor to new troopers and served as a volunteer fireman in Shermans' Dale.

Some employers go well beyond the minimum legal requirements in their treatment of reserve or guard troops. Sears, for example, pays the differential in salary and maintains full benefits for up to two years for employees called up to active duty. Walmart pays the salary differential for up to five years.

Troops that return with psychological or physical injuries may be more prone to secondary injuries, illnesses, and accidents that are not readily linked to their military service, but result in loss of time, increased workers' compensation claims, and medical insurance costs which may ultimately be borne by civilian employers.

They are often outstanding employees, who are sought out for civilian jobs.

There is another cost of becoming a warrior. In order to build a sense of pride and belonging to the team, and deep commitment to the job of fighting a war, the Army works hard to develop a sense of being part of the tribe. That often involves casting those who are not part of the tribe as other and promoting xenophobia. At it's most highly developed state; the warrior archetype respects the enemy and applies force as a last resort to accomplish its goals.

But as the stories and photos of abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and recent courts marshal and convictions of troops for atrocities against civilians show, the line is too often crossed between combat and cruelty. In creating a sense of commitment to the tribe, we have also awakened the ability to see those outside the tribe as wholly "other" without a sense of their humanity.

I want to close with a story of hope that has moved me in recent weeks. Brandon Stolley is the son of members of this congregation. He's a Marine and has returned from a tour in Iraq. He was on reserve status, working in the recruiting office. On his way home from work one day earlier this summer, a car pulled out from a stop sign in front of his motorcycle and he was very seriously injured. He's recovering much more quickly than expected. His mother, a registered nurse, says the successes of his multiple surgeries are miracles.

Immediately after his accident the Marines put Brian back on active duty at the request of his commanding officer. That means he is getting full pay and full medical benefits while he recovers from the accident, which did not happen while he was on duty. It shows a high level of commitment to Brandon, who has demonstrated himself to be a model Marine. His favorite picture from Iraq shows him on one knee, holding his automatic rifle, with three grinning Iraqi kids surrounding him. He's proud of his work, and his fellow Marines (men and women) are standing with him in solidarity in his recovery.

How many civilian employers would go out of their way to ensure that an injured employee got the maximum possible benefits rather than trying to find loopholes to deny coverage? How many of us have co-workers as dedicated as Brandon's Marine buddies?

Let us celebrate on this Labor Day the commitment and dedication of troops like Brandon and the support they receive in return. They are doing their jobs, out of commitment to their country and for the skills, training, and other benefits that come through their work. They deserve our support and our gratitude in addition to their paychecks.

May those who are at war return soon and safely. May their families be supported. May all who seek meaningful work find it. May we celebrate the labor that strives for peace and freedom this Labor Day.

Amen.

Closing Words
by the Rev. Kathleen McTigue

May the light around us guide our footsteps,
and hold us fast to the best
and most righteous that we seek.

May the darkness around us nurture our dreams,
and give us rest so that we may give ourselves
to the work of our world.

Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives,
the weaving of light and shadow
in this great and astonishing dance
in which we move.

Image: A grief stricken American infantryman whose buddy has been killed in action is comforted by another soldier. In the background a corpsman methodically fills out casualty tags, Haktong-ni area, Korea. August 28, 1950. Sfc. Al Chang. (Army)