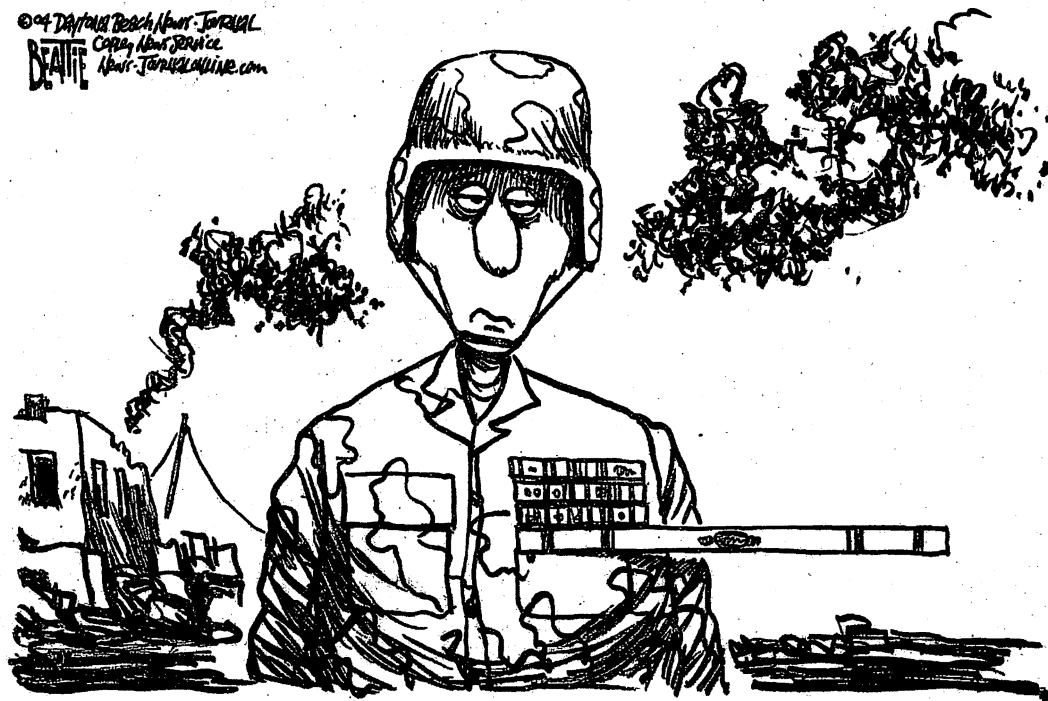


Commentary

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IRAQ TOUR OF DUTY RIBBON

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Their service is over; don't make them fight on

I don't know how long or how widely Tim O'Brien searched for the epigraph for his masterwork on the experience of war, in Vietnam, "The Things They Carried."

But he eventually chose a passage from John Ransom's "Andersonville Diary," a grim account of life in a Civil

War prison camp written by a 20-year-old northern soldier. Why? Because all soldiers in combat feel like prisoners of war. And most of them



are young.

No matter how good and just the cause, how dedicated the individual soldiers, how evil the enemy, in all firsthand accounts of war written by the soldiers who are actually fighting, at some or many points the objectives for which they are asked to risk their lives seem, and in many cases actually are, senseless — i.e., literally not worth dying, or even killing, for.

Such feelings of helpless imprisonment are captured vividly in Joseph Heller's "Catch-22." The hero Yossarian's plight — as he tries to escape being manipulated by remote higher powers into serving beyond the fair and stipulated number of bombing runs — has become a Jungian archetype. He captures the sense of betrayal that common soldiers feel when government authorities do not hold up their side of the moral bargain; when the officers commanding them are motivated by their own career goals, their own egos or in some cases their own venality, incompetence or cowardice; when doctors despair that their interventions can't do any good; when chaplains are naive, weak or platitudinous; when God seems to be sadistic or off on holiday.

If you think Heller's work is pure

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fiction, or an aberrant view of the greatest generation's achievements in World War II, read Studs Terkel's oral history, "The Good War," (the ironic quotation marks are part of the title) and Paul Fussell's "Wartime" and "The Boys' Crusade." The fierce anger in Fussell about how working-class infantry recruits were expended during the last months of the war in Europe still rages almost 60 years after his own firsthand experience.

There is no other job in our society where we can be ordered to put ourselves at mortal risk and where we have to serve out our "commitment" under penalty of imprisonment or worse. Under such circumstances, it is absolutely imperative that the authorities who control the lives of citizen soldiers scrupulously uphold all terms of the social contract. The consequences of failing to do so are dire.

After all, Veterans Administration psychiatrist Jonathan Shay has argued persuasively that the fundamental cause of post-traumatic stress in combat veterans is "betrayal of what is right," usually by authority figures whose job it is to do the right thing. Likewise, those same authorities are under a strict obligation to make sure that all those who commit themselves to military service do so as true volunteers — intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and socially.

In a re-enactment of "Catch-22," our government is now using stop-loss

orders to compel soldiers to serve in Iraq beyond their discharge dates. It is also manipulating back into combat veterans who thought that their full active and reserve service had been fulfilled. Both these practices are simply immoral. They are clear betrayals of what is right and should not even be prettified with the euphemism "back-door draft."

You might have seen the "60 Minutes" segment about the 4-foot-8-inch, 55-year-old female veteran, the disabled male veteran and the veteran who is now a mother of three young children who all have been called back to fight in Iraq.

How does the military justify this? By a "six-digit reference to an Army regulation . . . in a remark section" on the recruiting agreements these veterans all signed long ago. A West Point graduate and former judge advocate general says this "borders on being a deceptive recruiting practice."

It is worse than that. It is an outright swindle.

On stop-loss, eight soldiers have now begun legal actions against the U.S. government — and rightly so. How can our commander-in-chief, a veteran war-time National Guardsman himself, countenance policies that make a mockery of the term "all-volunteer army"?

On the other side are the new soldiers in our armed forces. In my opinion, there are questionable moral practices in how they are recruited. More about this next time.

For now, please read what the ground war in Iraq is really like and imagine being called back into this maelstrom after you had already devoted eight years of your life to our armed services.

Then think of your own adjective to describe what our government is doing. Mine is "immoral," at least in polite company.

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