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Tom Palaima: Remember the costs of war

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American soldiers have been risking and losing their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan for seven Memorial Days, longer than any American war except Vietnam. Omar Bradley's wisdom "nothing succeeds like excess" only applies to conventional warfare. Our overwhelming advantages in mobility, manpower and firepower are negated in guerilla wars of insurgency. Why have we let this happen?

In "Just How Stupid Are We?," historian Rick Shenkman cites John F. Kennedy: "The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie - deliberate, contrived, and dishonest, but the myth - persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Belief in myths allows the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."

Shenkman offers doses of cold, uncomfortable truth on many topics, but especially on our collective willingness to believe the myths surrounding our ongoing use of preemptive military force in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For example, the 9/11 Commission reported in July 2004 that Saddam Hussein had not supported al Qaeda. Yet a Newsweek poll in September 2007 found that 41 percent of Americans still believed "Saddam Hussein's regime was directly involved in financing, planning or carrying out the terrorist attacks on 9/11."

Since we are trying to extract our fighting men and women while believing in the Iraqi version of the myth of Vietnamization, I recommend Larry Engelmann's "Tears Before the Rain: An Oral History of the Fall of South Vietnam." Read Pete McCloskey's sobering account of the congressional delegation sent out in February 1975 to see whether we should pour our money to sustain the illusion that South Vietnam was ready to wage war successfully on its own as a stable western-style democracy. McCloskey saw the handwriting on every wall he looked at, and he firmly believed then that U.S. officials had to know that "the south Vietnamese were going to collapse."

Another antidote to myth-induced political myopia is World War II veteran Edward W. Wood Jr.'s "Worshipping the Myths of World War II: Reflections on America's Dedication to War." It was sent to me by another WWII veteran, who, like Wood, believes that we have been seduced by the myth of the "greatest generation" into believing we can and should spread our versions of justice, government and freedom by using major military force. Wood devotes a full chapter to how the greatest-generation myth clouded our judgment after 9/11.

Lastly, I recommend Dwight D. Eisenhower's speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 16, 1953, sent by yet another WWII veteran. Eisenhower enunciates five principles that we should follow in pursuit of a just world peace. We have violated all five since 9/11, including Ike's fourth principle: "Any nation's attempt to dictate to other nations their form of government is indefensible."

Eisenhower also warns that using the weapons of war has a terrible cost: every gun, warship and rocket is "a theft from those who hunger and are not fed"; a modern heavy bomber is "a modern brick school in more than 30 cities"; and "we pay for a single fighter plane with a half-million bushels of wheat."

Our soldiers pay, too, with their lives, bodies, minds and souls.

Here is one moving passage by Brian Ellis, then of CBS News, from Engelmann, *Tears Before the Rain*, p. 197. It reminds us that our wars, really all wars, are fought largely by college age kids. The Greeks called them ephebes, literally those who are at the point of blooming. As Eisenhower cautioned, we should send them out to risk their lives and their well-being for better reasons and as a last resort.

The first time I went down to see the Vietnam memorial, I was with a Vietnam vet. Most people think Edward Alvarez was the longest-held POW--but there's another guy who was held a lot longer than he was, who lived down in Key West. And he suffered a stroke not too long ago. When I was doing the program in 1985 I was looking for POW's to go back to Vietnam, and I had not been to the memorial until then. Anyway this fellow came to Washington, and I met him in a restaurant. It was obvious that I couldn't interview him because he had trouble, speech was difficult for him. And I said, "Tomorrow would you like to go out and look at the memorial? ... Have you ever seen it? And he said, "No." I said, "Would you like to go out?" He said, "Yeah."

He was wearing his uniform. He had not worn his uniform in I don't know how many years, but he felt like he should wear his uniform to the monument. We walked down there. It just seemed like a wall with names. I really wasn't struck too much by it. We walked by it and he kept looking at it. He kept shaking his head, saying, "All those names, all those names." Then we got to the statue, and he stood there and kept looking at it. And he started crying and said, "They were just boys, good boys." And the suddenly it hit me what he was saying, they were just boys! You kind of separate soldiers--men who are paid and trained to go out and kill--from kids. But these were just kids. It was at that moment, I guess, that it really came home to me and I realized they were just a bunch of boys on that wall. It struck me. Here's a guy who spent almost fourteen years in a prison camp, and he felt sorry for them. The guy stood there, tears rolling down his cheeks. and since then I've gone back a number of times.

NOTE: I believe Ellis is speaking of Col. Floyd James Thompson who was a POW from March 1964 to March 1973, nine years, not fourteen.