

What draws us together as a nation hasn't defeated the forces that divide us

One of the surest ways to build strong bonds between human beings is through shared suffering. The military knows that and builds cohesion among troops-to-be through the hardships they experience in basic training. Troops become bands of brothers by going through the hell of combat together.

However, it is much harder to figure out what can draw us together as a nation.

As we move into the year that will mark the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, we might wonder why we are so disunited. Where did the strong national unity in the days, weeks and months after 9/11 go? When and why did it slip away?

If 9/11 is a modern Pearl Harbor, why have the wars our troops continue to fight not brought us together? Why are we not ready to move forward as we did during and after World War II?

Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen's book "The Casualty Gap" traces statistically

how in all of our wars since World War II, some parts of American society and some classes of citizens get killed at greater rates than others. Factors include income level, education, race and ethnicity, political affiliation, employment opportunities, and even regional histories.

The authors conducted surveys in 2007 and 2009. These proved that Americans still believe in the principle of "shared sacrifice" enunciated first by George Washington who said that every citizen who enjoys the rights and privileges of citizenship "owes not only a portion of his property, but even of his personal service to the defense of it." But none of our wars in the last 60 years were waged as truly shared sacrifices.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life's work and martyrdom are sources of unity among many Americans, spoke out against the racism that seemed to underlie the high rates of combat deaths of African American soldiers in Vietnam. But Kriner and Shen argue that

racism itself did not cause such unfair losses. What caused it was wealth disparity.

The casualty rates between the top and bottom income groups differ by 10 percent during the Vietnam and Korean wars and by 15 percent in Iraq. Differences in educational opportunity are linked to casualty disparities. But education levels, too, are correlated with income.

Recent statistics should shame anyone who advocates cutting funding for public higher education. As Kriner and Shen report, "the communities that have suffered the highest casualty rates in the Iraq War possess levels of college educational attainment that are almost 40 percent lower, on average, than those of communities that have not yet suffered a casualty."

If you are poor, you are likely to be less educated. So your employment opportunities are limited. So you are more likely to "volunteer" to become a soldier. Once you enlist, your lower education level will ensure that you do poorly

on armed services aptitude tests. You will therefore have a greater chance of being assigned to front-line infantry positions instead of support positions that require educated know-how.

Thus it has always been. Ironically, the need for troops was so urgent in WWII and skills tests so underdeveloped that assignments to positions of maximum combat danger were more egalitarian.

It is hardly a cause for self-congratulation that we readily send the children of the poor off to fight and die regardless of their skin color. Most disturbing is that our poor communities experience another gap. They lose confidence in government and disengage. In Kriner's and Shen's words, "the populations with the most to lose in war become those communities with the least to say to their elected officials."

And that may be the way at least some Americans like it.

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