

Palaima: The Forever War on Terror and Thanking Our Veterans

By Tom Palaima

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There are 365 days in our non-leaping years. Let us hope we have spent our days in 2014 well, because we are never getting them back.

In the days from Thanksgiving through the seasons of Hanukkah-Christmas-Kwanzaa, we naturally focus on our own families. But a discussion I have been having with someone to whom 365 days were so meaningful that he wrote a book of that title, published way back in 1971, invites us to think about others in a broader sense.

His name is Dr. Ronald J. Glasser. His classic book "365 Days" is distilled from his service as a surgeon to the most critically wounded soldiers during the Vietnam War. "365 Days" should be read and reread alongside other books containing the truths about war by those who have experienced war firsthand. But there is more to be done than reading and developing the classic feelings of sympathy and fear.

Dr. Glasser recommended to me Phil Klay's "Redeployment," about Iraq, being there and coming back. I read it.

He then told me that it and other books written by and about soldiers and veterans of our prolonged military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, no matter how powerful, felt to him like "individual efforts unconnected to anything else," more or less about "our French Foreign Legion rather than our country," where the things that happen are "all just kind of individual bad luck."

This put into words some of my own feelings about how we have been invited to look at our ongoing "war on terror," our "forever war," to use the title of Dexter Filkins' Pulitzer-Prize-winning book on the subject. When do we question publicly or privately whether we should support the loss of American and non-American lives in distant lands?

In "Redeployment," a veteran meets up with a chaplain he knew over in Iraq. He is still seeking, almost unknowingly, help for his anger, sorrow, guilt and moral confusion. The chaplain points to the small cross on his collar, calls the cross on which Jesus died "a torture device" and declares that Jesus "only promised that we don't suffer alone," so long as we believe in Him. What the chaplain's words imply about the isolation from all of us felt by many soldiers and veterans every single day is almost too terrible to contemplate.

Ron's words made me hear again the invocation before a Texas A&M football game in College Station in November. We, over 100,000 strong, were invited to pray in thanks for the men and women "defending our country every day in foreign lands." We were not invited to pray for peace or to ask God that our leaders might find a better way to use the lives of all those men and women for the good of our society and the world.

I have other new words to ponder, spoken by a new friend, Joseph A. Costello. Costello is 33 years old, the age scholars hypothesize Jesus was when he was tortured and died upon the cross. Joseph served in the U.S. Army in Iraq during the early phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is finishing a master's in information science at the University of Texas at Austin as a prelude to doing graduate studies, he hopes, in social work. His goal is "to work with traumatized populations to help alleviate burdens of trauma related to issues such as combat experience."

Joseph told me that, like many veterans, he has had trouble processing the guilt and shame about what we are doing with our soldiers and contractors in the Middle East. He finds it especially troubling when as a veteran he is thanked for his service by people who do not know, or even seem to want to know, what effects the chaos and violence and amorality and senselessness of fighting a "war on terror" have on the men and women who are doing the fighting and on the men, women and children in foreign countries who are in the way of our shocking and awful military power.

We do not know how to see veterans as individuals, often with deep personal wounds. We take the easy way out. We thank them all and ask God to bless them and us.

Let us all resolve to look at and think about war, soldiers and veterans and our own relatively peaceful lives differently on each of the 365 days we are given in the year ahead.

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