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 epi-
gram for his masterwork on the expe-
rience 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 23-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 imprison-
ment are captured vividly in Joseph
Heller's “Catch-22.” The hero Yossari-
an’s plight—as he tries to escape being
manipulated by remote higher powers
into serving beyond the fair and stipu-
lated number of bombing runs—has
become a Jungian archetype. He
captures the sense of betrayal that com-
mon soldiers feel when government
authorities do not hold up their side
of the moral bargain; when the offi-
cers commanding them are motivated by
their own career goals, their own valen-
ty, incompetence or cowardice; when
doctors despair that their interven-
tions can’t do any good; when chaplains
are naive, weak or platitudinous; when
God seems to be sadistic or off on
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 benefits for combat
veterans who thought that their full
active and reserve service had been
fulfilled. Both these practices are sim-
ply 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 “90 Min-
utes” 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 regu-
lation . . . in a remark section” on the
recruiting agreements these veterans
all signed long ago. A West Point grad-
uate 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,
commander in-chief policies that make
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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studies in the College of Liberal Arts at the
University of Texas at Austin.

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