

"Supporting the troops": a crisis of perspective

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It doesn't take much more than few minutes of watching a network news program or a quick read of virtually any newspaper's editorial page to recognize that the level of political discourse in the United States approximates the intellectual maturity and insight of a cartoon scrawled on the door of a public bathroom stall.

Among the most disorienting and unexamined features of what passes for a "debate" over the war in Iraq is a cultural phenomenon that must be grasped and confronted: the call for all Americans, regardless of their politics, to "support the troops" once war has started and a military occupation is under way, ostensibly on their behalf.

Clouding matters is the fact that the phrase "support the troops" means different things to different people. For the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have a parent, a child or spouse in uniform, "supporting the troops" is motivated by the instinctive desire to see loved ones return home alive and uninjured. It hardly needs to be said that this is an entirely legitimate response.

To be sure, no compassionate person—and certainly, no politically conscious person who is armed with a working class perspective—could not sympathize with these families and feel some solidarity with the majority of soldiers themselves. They are, ultimately, working people who are paid relatively little for the extraordinary hardships and personal risk they bear. They did not choose to be where they are. Given the conformist character of military life, they also are less able than their civilian counterparts to protest the injustices perpetrated by their commanders.

The rallying cry, however, is fraught with political and social implications that merit serious study. It also begs a broader question: Who are the troops? What social layer do these men and women represent? Who is in uniform, and why did they choose to serve in the US military? Who isn't in uniform, and why?

One doesn't need a political science degree to understand that within the ruling class, the call by government and media elites to "support the troops" has a meaning that has little to do with the soldiers' actual well-being. To be blunt, it translates to "support the policy" of sending troops to Iraq in the first place.

There are variations on this theme, and they all primarily serve the political interests of President George W. Bush: "support the president," "rally behind the president" or "stand united" behind the policies of war and imperialism.

That it means precisely that—and has little to do with the men and women in uniform—is illustrated by a refrain that has appeared in dozens of newspaper editorials and been repeated by countless politicians in recent weeks. "It is time," they say, "to support the troops."

The significance of this qualifier cannot be emphasized too strongly. It explicitly implies that two mutually exclusive windows of time exist for specific types of political speech, and that one of them is for a debate, while the other—which begins once the shooting starts—is not for debate. Which is to say, now that the debate is over and the very policy we were debating is being implemented and lives are at stake, it is "time" to

support that policy.

There is a remarkable irony at work here. To the extent that some pro-war apologists grasp that the soldiers themselves shouldn't be blamed for policies crafted by their civilian commander, tossing in the "it's time" qualifier effectively shatters the distinction, exposing the actual phrase's real meaning, while simultaneously illustrating that it really has little to do with the troops themselves.

At the highest level of government, the national media and the military, such an admonition represents a conscious effort to stigmatize protesters and marginalize dissent, no matter how tepid. By suggesting that not supporting the government's war plans may be equated with not supporting the troops—or, to interpret this refrain literally, opposing the troops—the specter of Vietnam and the mythologized figure of the spat-upon soldier is raised in a crude and disingenuous manner.

Following this line of thinking to its logical conclusion leads one to the following proposition: To oppose the war and those who designed it has a commensurate, and objective, effect on the battlefield—military defeat and the body bags to go with it.

For an example of this nonsense, there's the recent spat between the Baseball Hall of Fame, which is headed by former Reagan administration official Dale Petroskey, and actors Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, who both are vocal war protesters and critics of the Bush administration. Robbins and Sarandon had been scheduled to appear at an event sponsored by the Hall celebrating the baseball film "Bull Durham," in which they both performed.

Petroskey canceled the event, which had been scheduled for April 26-27 in New York, and wrote the following in a letter to the actors:

"We believe your very public criticism of President Bush at this important and sensitive time in our nation's history helps undermine the US position, which ultimately *could put our troops in even more danger* [emphasis added—NP]. As an institution, we stand behind our president and our troops in this conflict."

This is not a new phenomenon. During the twentieth century the most reactionary elements of aggressor nations seized upon this idea, including the Free Corps movement that ultimately formed the vanguard of Nazi Germany. As a political tool, it's been used by a succession of US presidents—in Vietnam, in the first Gulf War, and now. The formula is: Equate the agenda with the soldiers; those who oppose the former are, it follows, "against" the troops, unpatriotic, or worse, traitors.

A particularly egregious example of this sort of intellectual slight-of-hand may be found in Germany after World War I. In the 1920s, the proto-fascist Freikorps, which was popular among certain sections of youth and embraced by some German soldiers, came to believe that the war had been lost not on the battlefield, but at home. The troops were "betrayed" by a cowardly government and undermined by domestic foes who included, but were not limited to, Marxists and intellectuals. Anyone who is vaguely familiar with the American loss in Vietnam will recognize these fraudulent arguments.

William Shirer's voluminous history, *The Rise and Fall of Peace Activist from West Virginia*, contains a passage that illustrates how this myth was internalized and expressed by a young German soldier, Corporal Adolf Hitler. Here, the future dictator is recalled by one of the soldiers in his company:

Hitler, the man said, would sit "in the corner of our mess holding his head between his hands, in deep contemplation. Suddenly, he would leap up and, running around excitedly, say that in spite of our big guns victory would be denied us, for the invisible foes of the German people were a greater danger than the biggest cannon of the enemy." According to Shirer, Hitler concluded that "[T]he German Army had not been defeated in the field. It had been stabbed in the back by the traitors at home."

This myth of the soldier "stabbed in the back" and the powerful imagery that goes with it provide the intellectual foundation, shaky though it is, for an illusion that the bourgeoisie and imperialist leaders must necessarily reinforce in bolstering public support for war: The nation's military goals are equal to the welfare of individual soldiers. They are, in fact, the same thing.

This technique was used during the latter half of the 1960s when it became clear that the United States was losing its imperialist war in Southeast Asia, along with public support for it. Within the administration of President Richard Nixon there was a deliberate effort to quell increasing public opposition to the war by equating his policies with the welfare of the soldiers themselves.

Jerry Lembcke, a Vietnam veteran who is now sociology professor at Holy Cross College, examines this issue in his 1998 cultural history *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York University Press, 1998).

"From the spring of 1969 on," Lembcke writes, "the war was going to be first and foremost about the men who were being sent to fight it" instead of the politicians who had sent them there.

This effort found expression in a campaign launched on May 19, 1969 at a press conference by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird. Although the public then was spared the twenty-first century spectacle of round-the-clock media coverage, the specific issue that Laird presented—American prisoners of war in Southeast Asia—had the desired effect: a media feeding frenzy.

Lembcke writes: "Enthusiastically promoted by the media, the POW issue ... dominated war news to such an extent that the writer Jonathan Schell [quoted in a book on the POW issue by H. Bruce Franklin] observed that many people were persuaded that the United States was fighting in Vietnam in order to get its prisoners back."

It is not possible to underestimate the powerful effect that the climate of political reaction has had on the public consciousness during the current Bush regime, particularly since the September 11 terrorist attacks. In both the rhetoric of administration officials, their media cheerleaders and the reactionary policies they embrace, one gets the sense that the literal meaning of Bush's infamous sound bite—"Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"—has, to some degree, been absorbed at a subconscious level.

Among those who oppose to the Bush administration, but have perhaps not thought through the political issues involved or who have tuned out the war coverage, there is an almost reflexive, dutiful character in the way that "... but I support the troops" is issued as a qualifier. The administration's demand for political unanimity has been heard and, in a limited sense, understood.

How could one not understand it? Nearly every day there is some new report of a citizen who dares to express, even within the narrow ideological confines of bourgeois politics, opposition to the insanity and indiscriminate butchery he sees in Iraq—only to have his intelligence, integrity and even his sanity questioned.

Two recent examples illustrate this point well.

Earlier this month, Angelica Amaya, a 33-year-old office worker and

peace activist from West Virginia attended a "Valley Rally for America," which drew a few hundred. Amaya carried a sign declaring, "I love America, but..."

A report in the *Globe & Mail* quoted an angry veteran who was standing a few feet from Amaya as saying, "She's sick, mentally disturbed." Such a remark, which represents the most backward views, which may be found even among broad layers of the working class, absurdly implies that no sane and rational person could, much less should, criticize the ruling elite during wartime.

For an even more extraordinary example, there's broadcast journalist Peter Arnett. For the "crime" of reporting honestly on the war during an interview with a state-run Iraqi television station, Arnett was branded a traitor by a US Senator, Jim Bunning (Republican of Kentucky). Speaking to reporters, Bunning declared that Arnett "should be brought back and tried as a traitor to the United States of America, for his aiding and abetting the Iraqi government during a war."

Bunning's remark cannot be attributed to a quick temper in the heat of a press conference; later he issued the same call on the floor of the US Senate.

In one sense, the way in which the more backward and politically disoriented layers of the population have embraced the phrase "support the troops" suggests that there is at least a dim recognition that the soldiers are only an instrument of a foreign policy and ought to be regarded separately from the civilian commanders who designed and wield the instrument. And yet, such an awareness ought to raise some fundamental questions.

Such as: Who are the troops that we're supposed to be supporting? What social layer do these men and women represent? Who is in uniform, and why did they choose to be there? Who isn't in uniform, and why? What are the consequences for those who see battle and survive, regardless of whether anyone "supports" them or not?

The social character of those who serves in the US military has changed dramatically over the last 60 years. The parents of the Vietnam generation, what NBC journalist Tom Brokaw has dubbed the "greatest generation," were in their prime at a period of American history when military service was much more universal. Roughly 12 million American men served during World War II, representing nearly all able-bodied men of military age.

In Vietnam, this changed with the emergence of a largely working-class military. Although attention on the demographics of the Vietnam generation has tended to focus in the last 20 years on questions of race (blacks, as is well known, were significantly over-represented), the primary factor in determining who fought and who didn't was class.

One recent study, Christian G. Appy's *Working Class War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993) estimates that about 80 percent of the 2.5 million American enlisted men were from poor and working class families. As several scholars have noted, this was not an accident.

Appy notes that one of the primary tools of the Vietnam-era draft system, the student deferment program, "was the most overtly class-biased feature." According to US Census records, young people from families earning \$7,500 to \$10,000 were almost two-and-a-half times more likely to go to college than boys from families that earned \$5,000 or less.

Class bias was also built into the some 4,000 draft boards around the country. A 1966 study of more than 16,000 draft board members found that more than 70 percent were white-collar professionals over the age of 50; only 9 percent represented blue-collar workers. It was a social makeup, Appy argues, that "reinforced the class inequalities underlying the broad national system of manpower channeling." Another program, known as "Project 100,000," was specifically designed to rehabilitate what then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara called "part of America's subterranean poor."

The draft system amounted to a discriminatory social policy that served a political purpose: It kept the middle class quiet. By drawing overwhelmingly from the bottom of the country's economic and social strata, President Johnson was able to turn down the military's request that he activate reserves and the National Guard. As Appy explains:

"Johnson also realized that reservists and guardsmen were generally older than regular army troops and were, as a group, socially and economically more prominent. By relying on the draft and the active-duty military to fight the war, Johnson hoped to diffuse the impact of casualties among widely scattered, young, and powerless individuals. He wanted, as David Halberstam put it, 'a silent, politically invisible war.'"

While today's army is built largely with volunteers, the change in the social character of the troops from their Vietnam counterparts has been one of degree, not of kind. Soldiers serving in the 1.2 million-strong military today are less likely to represent the ranks of the working poor, but they disproportionately mirror the American working class—and they are sent into battle by reactionary elites who used the class-biased policies of the 1960s to duck military services themselves: George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, to name the most obvious.

As the *New York Times* observed in a lengthy piece published March 30, both the poor and wealthy are "essentially absent" in the ranks of today's volunteer military, which "seems to resemble the makeup of a two-year commuter or trade school outside Birmingham or Biloxi far more than that of a ghetto or four-year university in Boston."

The example of 19-year-old US Army Private Jessica Lynch is an illustrative one. While her story is extraordinary—she was taken as a prisoner of war, rescued, and now faces the trappings of being a celebrity in America—her background is fairly typical.

Lynch, who is from Palestine, West Virginia, saw military service as "a way out of circumstance," which is how an article published April 5 in the *Globe & Mail* put it. To be precise, the circumstances from which Lynch sought a "way out" are similar to those faced by millions of working class Americans: poverty, few educational opportunities, and vanishing jobs.

West Virginia, with its population of 1.8 million, is not unlike many other states that face deepening economic and social ills. Between 1994 and 2000, according to US Census Bureau statistics, West Virginia lost 14,458 jobs related to the North American Free Trade Agreement. In Wirt County, where Lynch was raised, unemployment hovers around 15 percent.

According to a report issued in April 2002 by the Economic Policy Institute, West Virginia had one of the largest increases in inequality in the nation during the last twenty years. The report said that in West Virginia, the average income of the middle fifth of families increased five percent, which amounts to about \$1,640. The richest fifth of West Virginia families saw their incomes increase by an average of 37 percent, or \$27,870.

"There's no jobs around here," said one Vietnam veteran interviewed by the *Globe & Mail*. "There's no employment. Most of them go into the service because they know the government will pay well and they'll come out with some training."

In story after story, the media in recent weeks have been filled with accounts of soldiers whose social and economic background, and motivation for joining the military, are not substantively different from Lynch's.

There's Private First Class Brandon Tobler, a 19-year-old Oregon native who signed up for the reserves, "attracted by the promise of money and school for the future," according to one report.

There's Lance Corporal Jose Gutierrez, who grew up poor on the streets of Guatemala and worked in a sweatshop there. Both were among the first US casualties in Iraq.

Private First Class Michael Philbert, an 18-year-old who was interviewed by the *New York Times* for its report on military

demographics, had this to say while browsing at a military uniform and equipment store near Fort Benning in Georgia:

"It's not fair that some poor kids don't have much of a choice but to join if they want to be productive because they didn't go to a good school, or they had family problems that kept them from doing well," he said. "So they join up and they're the ones that die for our country while the rich kids can avoid it."

The military comprises flesh-and-blood human beings who are conditioned, systematically, to put aside and suppress basic moral instincts so they will carry out—without question or hesitation—horrific crimes on behalf of what ultimately is a deeply reactionary and dangerous instrument of American foreign policy.

This is not to suggest that virtually every man in uniform has been transformed by his training into a bloodthirsty automaton with a shattered moral compass and no inclination for individual thought or restraint. There can be no question that there is such an element in what constitutes a small minority of the armed services. But for the rest, the sacrifices they endure on the altar of US imperialism are enormous, both psychologically and physically.

The almost desperate character of the effort to silence or drown out antiwar protests suggests that something more than mindless flag-waving is going on here.

To a significant degree, there appears to be a deliberate, though not necessarily coordinated, effort to isolate these largely working class soldiers from criticism about the war and the Bush administration, effectively ensuring that the only public sentiment they hear is pro-war in nature.

Why shouldn't the soldiers be exposed to these views? Many claim, after all, that they are "protecting our freedoms" to say such things, so why shouldn't the troops be allowed to hear them? What's the real worry? That troops on the front lines will have their feelings hurt by an antiwar speech? Or is it the fear that a soldier will listen to one, have his eyes opened to the reactionary character of the imperialist exercise he is participating in, and become the next Ron Kovic?

The obvious reticence by troop "supporters" to allow criticism of the Bush administration to seep into the public sphere stands as a testament to the moral and intellectual integrity of principled opposition to wars that arise as an inevitable and organic product of imperialism.

Understood in this context, the "support the troops" campaign, besides being disingenuous, is an insult to those who serve in the military. The Pentagon's expectations of conformity notwithstanding, rational human beings do not surrender their capacity for independent thought and political consciousness upon entering the armed services. Since they ultimately are the ones who are being used as cannon fodder, they surely have a right and a responsibility to understand the political and social character of those who dispatch them into battle and light the fuse.



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