

**“Every Soldier a Hero? Hardly”**

*By William J. Astore, Los Angeles Times, July 22, 2010*

When I was a kid in the 1970s, I loved reading accounts of American bravery during World War II. And I was proud that my uncle had earned a Bronze Star for his service on Guadalcanal. So it came as something of a shock when, in 1980, I first heard Yoda's summary of warriors and war in "The Empire Strikes Back."

Luke Skywalker, if you remember, tells the wizened Jedi master that he seeks "a great warrior."

"Wars not make one great," Yoda replies.

I was struck by the truth of that statement even then, as I was preparing for a career in the military. Certainly, military service (especially the life-and-death struggles of combat) can provide an occasion for the exercise of heroism, but simply joining the armed services does not make you a hero, nor does the act of serving in combat.

Still, ever since the events of 9/11, there's been an almost religious veneration of U.S. service members as "Our American Heroes" (as a well-intentioned sign puts it at my local post office). But a snappy uniform — or even dented body armor — is not a magical shortcut to hero status.

A hero is someone who behaves selflessly, usually at considerable personal risk and sacrifice, to comfort or empower others and to make the world a better place. Heroes, of course, come in all sizes, shapes, ages and colors, most of them looking nothing like John Wayne or John Rambo or GI Joe (or Jane).

I come from a family of firefighters, yet our hero was my mother, a homemaker who raised five kids and endured without complaint the ravages of cancer in the 1970s . . . In refusing to rail against her fate, she set an example of selfless courage and heroism I shall never forget.

Whether in civilian life or in the military, heroes are rare — indeed, all too rare. Heck, that's the reason we celebrate them. They're the very best of us, which means they can't be all of us.

But does elevating our troops to hero status really cause any harm? What's wrong with praising our troops to the rafters and adding them to our pantheon of heroes?

A lot.

By making our military a league of heroes, we ensure that the brutalizing aspects and effects of war will be played down. In celebrating isolated heroic feats, we often forget that war is guaranteed to degrade humanity as well.

"War," as writer and cultural historian Louis Menand noted, "is specially terrible not because it destroys human beings, who can be destroyed in plenty of other ways, but because it turns human beings into destroyers."

When we create a legion of heroes in our minds, we blind ourselves to evidence of destructive, sometimes atrocious, behavior. Heroes, after all, don't commit atrocities. They don't, for instance, dig bullets out of pregnant women's bodies in an attempt to cover up deadly mistakes, as the Times of London recently reported may have happened in Gardez, Afghanistan. Such atrocities, so common to war's brutal chaos, produce cognitive dissonance in the minds of many Americans, who simply can't imagine their "heroes" killing innocents and then covering up the evidence. How much easier it is to see the acts of violence of our troops as necessary, admirable, even noble. . . .

In rejecting blanket "hero" labels today, we would not be insulting our troops. Quite the opposite: We'd be making common cause with them. Most of them already know the difference between real heroism and everyday military service. . . .

Whatever nationality they may be, troops at the front know the score. Even as our media and our culture seek to elevate them into the pantheon of demigods, the men and women at the front are focused on doing their jobs and returning home with their bodies, their minds and their buddies intact.

So, next time you talk to our soldiers, Marines, sailors or airmen, do them (and your country) a small favor. Thank them for their service. Let them know you appreciate them. Just don't call them heroes.

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