

How to Honor Memorial Day

From the Archive: Memorial Day should be a time of sober reflection on war's horrible costs, not a moment to glorify war. But many politicians and pundits can't resist the opportunity, as Ray McGovern explains in this updated commentary from May 24, 2015.

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How best to show respect for the U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and for their families on Memorial Day? Simple: Avoid euphemisms like “the fallen” and expose the lies about what a great idea it was to start those wars in the first place and then to “surge” tens of thousands of more troops into those fools’ errands.

First, let’s be clear on at least this much: the 4,500 U.S. troops killed in Iraq so far and the 2,350 killed in Afghanistan [by May 2015] did not “fall.” They were wasted on no-win battlefields by politicians and generals cheered on by neocon pundits and mainstream “journalists” almost none of whom gave a rat’s patootie about the real-life-and-death troops. They were throwaway soldiers.

And, as for the “successful surges,” they were just P.R. devices to buy some “decent intervals” for the architects of these wars and their boosters to get space between themselves and the disastrous endings while pretending that those defeats were really “victories squandered” all at the “acceptable” price of about 1,000 dead U.S. soldiers each and many times that in dead Iraqis and Afghans.

Memorial Day should be a time for honesty about what enabled the killing and maiming of so many U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama and the senior military brass simply took full advantage of a poverty draft that gives upper-class sons and daughters the equivalent of exemptions, vaccinating them against the disease of war.

What drives me up the wall is the oft-heard, dismissive comment about troop casualties from well-heeled Americans: “Well, they volunteered, didn’t they?” Under the universal draft in effect during Vietnam, far fewer were immune from service, even though the well-connected could still game the system to avoid serving. Vice Presidents Dick Cheney and Joe Biden, for example, each managed to pile up five exemptions. This means, of course, that they brought zero military experience to the job; and this, in turn, may explain a whole lot

– particularly given their bosses' own lack of military experience.

The grim truth is that many of the crème de la crème of today's Official Washington don't know many military grunts, at least not intimately as close family or friends. They may bump into some on the campaign trail or in an airport and mumble something like, "thank you for your service." But these sons and daughters of working-class communities from America's cities and heartland are mostly abstractions to the powerful, exclamation points at the end of some ideological debate demonstrating which speaker is "tougher," who's more ready to use military force, who will come out on top during a talk show appearance or at a think-tank conference or on the floor of Congress.

Sharing the Burden?

We should be honest about this reality, especially on Memorial Day. Pretending that the burden of war has been equitably shared, and worse still that those killed died for a "noble cause," as President George W. Bush liked to claim, does no honor to the thousands of U.S. troops killed and the tens of thousands maimed. It dishonors them. Worse, it all too often succeeds in infantilizing bereaved family members who cannot bring themselves to believe their government lied.

Who can blame parents for preferring to live the fiction that their sons and daughters were heroes who wittingly and willingly made the "ultimate sacrifice," dying for a "noble cause," especially when this fiction is frequently foisted on them by well-meaning but naive clergy at funerals. For many it is impossible to live with the reality that a son or daughter died in vain. Far easier to buy into the official story and to leave clergy unchallenged as they gild the lilies around coffins and gravesites.

Not so for some courageous parents. Cindy Sheehan, for example, whose son Casey Sheehan was killed on April 4, 2004, in the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City, demonstrated uncommon grit when she led hundreds of friends to Crawford to lay siege to the Texas White House during the summer of 2005 trying to get Bush to explain what "noble cause" Casey died for. She never got an answer. There is none.

But there are very few, like Cindy Sheehan, able to overcome a natural human resistance to the thought that their sons and daughters died for a lie and then to challenge that lie. These few stalwarts make themselves face this harsh reality, the knowledge that the children whom they raised and sacrificed so much for were, in turn, sacrificed on the altar of political expediency, that their precious children were bit players in some ideological fantasy or pawns in a game of career maneuvering.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is said to have described the military disdainfully as “just dumb stupid animals to be used as pawns in foreign policy.” Whether or not those were his exact words, his policies and behavior certainly betrayed that attitude. It certainly seems to have prevailed among top American-flag-on-lapel-wearing officials of the Bush and Obama administrations, including armchair and field-chair generals whose sense of decency is blinded by the prospect of a shiny new star on their shoulders, if they just follow orders and send young soldiers into battle.

This bitter truth should raise its ugly head on Memorial Day but rarely does. It can be gleaned only with great difficulty from the mainstream media, since the media honchos continue to play an indispensable role in the smoke-and-mirrors dishonesty that hides their own guilt in helping Establishment Washington push “the fallen” from life to death.

We must judge the actions of our political and military leaders not by the pious words they will utter Monday in mourning those who “fell” far from the generals’ cushy safe seats in the Pentagon or somewhat closer to the comfy beds in air-conditioned field headquarters where a lucky general might be comforted in the arms of an admiring and enterprising biographer.

Many of the high-and-mighty delivering the approved speeches on Monday will glibly refer to and mourn “the fallen.” None are likely to mention the culpable policymakers and complicit generals who added to the fresh graves at Arlington National Cemetery and around the country.

Words, after all, are cheap; words about “the fallen” are dirt cheap especially from the lips of politicians and pundits with no personal experience of war. The families of those sacrificed in Iraq and Afghanistan should not have to bear that indignity.

‘Successful Surges’

The so-called “surges” of troops into Iraq and Afghanistan were particularly gross examples of the way our soldiers have been played as pawns. Since the usual suspects are again coming out the woodwork of neocon think tanks to press for yet another “surge” in Iraq, some historical perspective should help.

Take, for example, the well-known and speciously glorified first “surge;” the one Bush resorted to in sending over 30,000 additional troops into Iraq in early 2007; and the not-to-be-outdone Obama “surge” of 30,000 into Afghanistan in early 2010. These marches of folly were the direct result of decisions by George W. Bush and Barack Obama to prioritize political expediency over the lives of U.S. troops.

Taking cynical advantage of the poverty draft, they let foot soldiers pay the “ultimate” price. That price was 1,000 U.S. troops killed in each of the two “surges.”

And the results? The returns are in. The bloody chaos these days in Iraq and the faltering war in Afghanistan were entirely predictable. They were indeed predicted by those of us able to spread some truth around via the Internet, while being mostly blacklisted by the fawning corporate media.

Yet, because the “successful surge” myth was so beloved in Official Washington, saving some face for the politicians and pundits who embraced and spread the lies that justified and sustained especially the Iraq War, the myth has become something of a touchstone for everyone aspiring to higher office or seeking a higher-paying gig in the mainstream media.

Campaigning in New Hampshire, [then] presidential aspirant Jeb Bush gave a short history lesson about his big brother’s attack on Iraq. Referring to the so-called Islamic State, Bush said, “ISIS didn’t exist when my brother was president. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was wiped out ... the surge created a fragile but stable Iraq. ...”

We’ve dealt with the details of the Iraq “surge” myth before both before and after it was carried out. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s [“Reviving the Successful Surge Myth”](#); [“Gen. Keane on Iran Attack”](#); [“Robert Gates: As Bad as Rumsfeld?”](#); and [“Troop Surge Seen as Another Mistake.”](#)]

But suffice it to say that Jeb Bush is distorting the history and should be ashamed. The truth is that al-Qaeda did not exist in Iraq before his brother launched an unprovoked invasion in 2003. “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” arose as a direct result of Bush’s war and occupation. Amid the bloody chaos, AQI’s leader, a Jordanian named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pioneered a particularly brutal form of terrorism, relishing videotaped decapitation of prisoners.

Zarqawi was eventually hunted down and killed not during the celebrated “surge” but in June 2006, months before Bush’s “surge” began. The so-called Sunni Awakening, essentially the buying off of many Sunni tribal leaders, also predated the “surge.” And the relative reduction in the Iraq War’s slaughter after the 2007 “surge” was mostly the result of the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad from a predominantly Sunni to a Shia city, tearing the fabric of Baghdad in two, and creating physical space that made it more difficult for the two bitter enemies to attack each other. In addition, Iran used its influence with the Shia to rein in their extremely violent militias.

Though weakened by Zarqawi’s death and the Sunni Awakening, AQI did not

disappear, as Jeb Bush would like you to believe. It remained active and when Saudi Arabia and the Sunni gulf states took aim at the secular regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria AQI joined with other al-Qaeda affiliates, such as the Nusra Front, to spread their horrors across Syria. AQI rebranded itself “the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” or simply “the Islamic State.”

The Islamic State split off from al-Qaeda over strategy but the various jihadist armies, including al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front, [then] seized wide swaths of territory in Syria – and the Islamic State returned with a vengeance to Iraq, grabbing major cities such as Mosul and Ramadi.

Jeb Bush doesn’t like to unspool all this history. He and other Iraq War backers prefer to pretend that the “surge” in Iraq had won the war and Obama threw the “victory” away by following through on George W. Bush’s withdrawal agreement with Maliki.

But the crisis in Syria and Iraq is among the fateful consequences of the U.S./UK attack 12 years ago and particularly of the “surge” of 2007, which contributed greatly to Sunni-Shia violence, the opposite of what George W. Bush professed was the objective of the “surge,” to enable Iraq’s religious sects to reconcile.

Reconciliation, however, always took a back seat to the real purpose of the “surge” buying time so Bush and Cheney could slip out of Washington in 2009 without having an obvious military defeat hanging around their necks and putting a huge stain on their legacies.

The political manipulation of the Iraq “surge” allowed Bush, Cheney and their allies to reframe the historical debate and shift the blame for the defeat onto Obama, recognizing that 1,000 more dead U.S. soldiers was a small price to pay for protecting the “Bush brand.” Now, Bush’s younger brother can cheerily march off to the campaign trail for 2016 pointing to the carcass of the Iraqi albatross hung around Obama’s shoulders.

Rout at Ramadi

Less than a year after U.S.-trained and -equipped Iraqi forces ran away from the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, leaving the area and lots of U.S. arms and equipment to ISIS, something similar happened at Ramadi, the capital of the western province of Anbar. Despite heavy U.S. air strikes on ISIS, American-backed Iraqi security forces fled Ramadi, which is only 70 miles west of Baghdad, after a lightning assault by ISIS forces.

The ability of ISIS to strike just about everywhere in the area is reminiscent of the Tet offensive of January-February 1968 in Vietnam, which persuaded

President Lyndon Johnson that that particular war was unwinnable. If there are materials left over in Saigon for reinforcing helicopter landing pads on the tops of buildings, it is not too early to bring them to Baghdad's Green Zone, on the chance that U.S. embassy buildings may have a call for such materials in the not-too-distant future.

The headlong Iraqi government retreat from Ramadi had scarcely ended when Sen. John McCain, (R-AZ), described the fall of the city as "terribly significant" which is correct adding that more U.S. troops may be needed which is insane. His appeal for more troops neatly fit one proverbial definition of insanity (attributed or misattributed to Albert Einstein): "doing the same thing over and over again [like every eight years?] but expecting different results."

As Jeb Bush was singing the praises of his brother's "surge" in Iraq, McCain and his Senate colleague Lindsey Graham were publicly calling for a new "surge" of U.S. troops into Iraq. The senators urged President Obama to do what George W. Bush did in 2007 replace the U.S. military leadership and dispatch additional troops to Iraq.

But *Washington Post* pundit David Ignatius, even though a fan of the earlier two surges, was not yet on board for this one. Ignatius warned in a column that Washington should not abandon its current strategy:

"This is still Iraq's war, not America's. But President Barack Obama must reassure Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi that the U.S. has his back, and at the same time give him a reality check: If al-Abadi and his Shiite allies don't do more to empower Sunnis, his country will splinter. Ramadi is a precursor, of either a turnaround by al-Abadi's forces, or an Iraqi defeat."

Ignatius's urgent tone was warranted. But what he suggests is precisely what the U.S. made a lame attempt to do with then-Prime Minister Maliki in early 2007. Yet, Bush squandered U.S. leverage by sending 30,000 troops to show he "had Maliki's back," freeing Maliki to accelerate his attempts to marginalize, rather than accommodate, Sunni interests.

Perhaps Ignatius now remembers how the "surge" he championed in 2007 greatly exacerbated tensions between Shia and Sunni contributing to the chaos now prevailing in Iraq and spreading across Syria and elsewhere. But Ignatius is well connected and a bellwether; if he ends up advocating another "surge," take shelter.

Keane and Kagan Ask For a Mulligan

The architects of Bush's 2007 "surge" of 30,000 troops into Iraq, former Army General Jack Keane and American Enterprise Institute neocon strategist Frederick

Kagan, in testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, warned strongly that, without a “surge” of some 15,000 to 20,000 U.S. troops, ISIS would win in Iraq.

“We are losing this war,” warned Keane, who previously served as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army. “ISIS is on the offense, with the ability to attack at will, anyplace, anytime. ... Air power will not defeat ISIS.” Keane stressed that the U.S. and its allies have “no ground force, which is the defeat mechanism.”

Not given to understatement, Kagan called ISIS “one of the most evil organizations that has ever existed. ... This is not a group that maybe we can negotiate with down the road someday. This is a group that is committed to the destruction of everything decent in the world.” He called for “15-20,000 U.S. troops on the ground to provide the necessary enablers, advisers and so forth,” and added: “Anything less than that is simply unserious.”

(By the way, Frederick Kagan is the brother of neocon-star Robert Kagan, whose Project for the New American Century began pushing for the invasion of Iraq in 1998 and finally got its way in 2003. Robert Kagan is the husband of Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who oversaw the 2014 coup that brought “regime change” and bloody chaos to Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis also prompted Robert Kagan to urge a major increase in U.S. military spending. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“A Family Business of Perpetual War.”](#)])

What is perhaps most striking, however, is the casualness with which the likes of Frederick Kagan, Jack Keane, and other Iraq War enthusiasts advocated dispatching tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to fight and die in what would almost certainly be another futile undertaking. You might even wonder why people like Kagan are invited to testify before Congress given their abysmal records.

But that would miss the true charm of the Iraq “surge” in 2007 and its significance in salvaging the reputations of folks like Kagan, not to mention George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. From their perspective, the “surge” was a great success. Bush and Cheney could swagger from the West Wing into the western sunset on Jan. 20, 2009.

As author Steve Coll has put it, “The decision [to surge] at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush’s] presidency would not end with a defeat in history’s eyes. By committing to the surge [the President] was certain to at least achieve a stalemate.”

According to Bob Woodward, Bush told key Republicans in late 2005 that he would not withdraw from Iraq, “even if Laura and [first-dog] Barney are the only ones

supporting me.” Woodward made it clear that Bush was well aware in fall 2006 that the U.S. was losing. Suddenly, with some fancy footwork, it became Laura, Barney and new Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. David Petraeus along with 30,000 more U.S. soldiers making sure that the short-term fix was in.

The fact that about 1,000 U.S. soldiers returned in caskets was the principal price paid for that short-term “surge” fix. Their “ultimate sacrifice” will be mourned by their friends, families and countrymen on Memorial Day even as many of the same politicians and pundits will be casually pontificating about dispatching more young men and women as cannon fodder into the same misguided war.

[President Donald Trump has continued the U.S.’s longest war (Afghanistan), sending additional troops and dropping a massive bomb as well as missiles from drones. In Syria he has ordered two missile strikes and condoned multiple air strikes from Israel. Here’s hoping, on this Memorial Day 2018, that he turns his back on his war-mongering national security adviser, forges ahead with a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jung-Un rather than toy with the lives of 30,000 U.S. soldiers in Korea, and halts the juggernaut rolling downhill toward war with Iran.]

It was difficult drafting this downer, this historical counter-narrative, on the eve of Memorial Day. It seems to me necessary, though, to expose the *dramatis personae* who played such key roles in getting more and more people killed. Sad to say, none of the high officials mentioned here, as well as those on the relevant Congressional committees, were affected in any immediate way by the carnage in Ramadi, Tikrit or outside the gate to the Green Zone in Baghdad.

And perhaps that’s one of the key points here. It is not most of us, but rather our soldiers and the soldiers and civilians of Iraq, Afghanistan and God knows where else who are Lazarus at the gate. And, as Benjamin Franklin once said, “Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”

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