

PRAYER FOR SOLDIERS

Years ago, when I was yet a small child, I looked forward to watching television shows that glorified soldiers and their bravery under fire. Who among us, aged fifty or so, doesn't remember "Combat" or "Twelve O'Clock High." Both of these weekly serials glorified the heroism of the American soldier- and I will use the word soldier as shorthand for all military personnel in the uniformed services. In those days, when we thought of soldiers, we thought of brave men who exemplified duty, honor, country, going into harm's way to preserve our liberties and democratic values.

Once, the historian Stephen Ambrose was engaged in a group interview in preparation for one of his many volumes. He recounts the story of one speaker who summed up the significance of the great crusade of World War II. He said, "Imagine this. In the spring of 1945, around the world, the sight of a twelve-man squad of teenage boys, armed and in uniform, brought terror to people's hearts. Whether it was a Red Army squad in Berlin, Leipzig, or Warsaw, or a German squad in Holland, or a Japanese squad in Manila, Seoul, or Beijing, that squad meant rape, pillage, looting, wanton destruction, senseless killing. But there was an exception: a squad of GIs, a sight that brought the biggest smiles you ever saw to people's lips, and joy to their hearts. Around the world this was true, even in Germany, even- after September 1945- in Japan. This was because GIs meant candy, cigarettes, C-rations, and freedom. America had sent the best of her young men around the world, not to conquer but to liberate, not to terrorize but to help."¹

But times changed. The heroes of "Combat" and "Twelve O'Clock High" became the bumbling idiots of "McHale's Navy," the goofy "Gomer Pyle," and finally the anti-military whackos of "M.A.S.H.," purportedly about the Korean War, but more and more transparently a commentary on what was believed to be our misguided venture in Vietnam. And of course the movies followed suit. The heroes of the "Sands of Iwo Jima," "The Longest Day," and "A Bridge Too Far," were replaced with the demented G.I.s of "Full Metal Jacket," "Platoon," and "Apocalypse Now." Not even the incredible victory of Desert Storm was able to banish the lingering memory of Vietnam and its image of the soldier as social misfit.

Look at this from another angle. Once, most aspiring politicians believed military service was "a ticket they needed to punch on their way to a successful career. Not so any more, for today a shrinking minority in Congress has experience in the armed services. In the early 1970s as many as three out of four members of Congress were veterans. Today only 35 of 100 senators have served. In the House, it's 119 out of 435, down from 140 four years ago. 'There used to be a veterans' bonus in Congress,' said Peter Feaver, a Duke University political scientist who has studied the change. 'Now there's a veterans' deficit. That's quite a remarkable turnaround.'"²

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the percentage of veterans in Congress was 10 percent to 15 percent higher than among the same age group of men, generally, he said. But that changed with the 1994 election. "For the first time, there were fewer vets in Congress than in society as a whole," he said. Added his colleague, Ole Holsti, "These days, not serving in the military is not a barrier to serving in politics."

¹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Victors* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 352.

² "Fewer Veterans in Today's Congress Than in the Past," *Veterans Against the Iraq War*.

<http://www.vaiw.org/vet/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=43> ; accessed 3 April 2006.

Analysts cite several reasons for the change. The Vietnam War tarnished the idea that serving in the military was a civic duty. Many college students found ways to avoid it. With the creation of the all-volunteer military in 1973, service became more of a career goal than a widely shared temporary responsibility. As the military shrank, fewer people were needed to serve. Every post-World War II president until 1993 wore a uniform.

But times have changed.³

Today is a different world. As Loyola political scientist, John Allen Williams stated, “Americans may love their military, but it is in the same way they might love their Rottweiler: They are happy enough for the protection, but do not want to become one themselves.” He added, for the average American, serving in the armed forces is “as unfathomable as life on another planet.”⁴ Indeed, only four-tenths of one percent of the American people wear the uniform.⁵ This has led Thom Shanker of the *New York Times* to observe that “America is not a nation at war, but a nation with only its military at war.”⁶

And at some level I can understand this. War is not something we want to think about. For the Christian, war is the absolute antithesis of what we are supposed to be about, for we are called to be peacemakers. Indeed, in our relations with other believers, we are told to “prefer one another,” to “forgive one another”; in fact, even in our relations with those outside the church, we are commanded, “as much as we are able, live at peace with all people.” And so the bar is raised high—and we are ambivalent about the warriors in our midst.

Yet even as we reflect on these Scriptures, there are other texts that come to mind. In Matthew 8, Jesus healed the centurion’s servant, commending the faith of the centurion, and saying nothing derogatory about his life’s calling. In Luke 3, when the soldiers came to Jesus and asked him what should they do, he instructed them to be content with their wages and not to extort money by threat or by force. Again, not a word of reproof for their chosen vocation.

Elsewhere, Jesus told his disciples, “to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22). This places upon us a burden to balance the responsibilities that we have as Christians with those which we have as citizens. As a Christian, the soldier is obligated to forgive those who would persecute, slander, or despitefully use him (Matt. 5). As a citizen, wearing the uniform of the duly-established magistrate, the soldier does not bear the sword in vain but is to use the force of arms as an instrument of righteousness (Rom. 13).

You know, the Bible itself is filled with warrior images. Indeed, the first promise of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 predicts a time when the seed of the woman will deal a deathblow to the serpent by crushing its head. In Exodus 23 the Lord promises to send his Angel ahead of the children of Israel to strike terror into the hearts of their enemies and to give victory as Israel wages war to “demolish” their enemies (Exodus 23:24). In Joshua chapter 5, the pre-incarnate Son of God appeared to Joshua with a drawn sword in his hand and identified himself as the commander of the army of the Lord. And for those of you who think, well, those references to the Old Testament don’t apply to us today, hear these words from Revelation 19:11-21:

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richard Kolb, “Society and the Soldier,” *VFW* (April, 2006): 14.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Quoted in Kolb, “Society and the Soldier,” 15.

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." ¹⁹ And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. ²¹ And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Now, I would not try to argue that this is to be taken literally. I think the Apocalypse is much more complicated and certainly more subtle than that. But granting that, the fact remains that God chooses to describe his actions in these strikingly martial terms.

But, there is still more to the story. God is not only the ultimate warrior against wickedness, he is the ultimate peacemaker. For after the destruction of Satan and the Great White Throne judgment, God reveals the New Heavens and New Earth, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. It is here that God brings to an end all war-making and the sorrows that are the constant companion of soldiers and others who experience the horrors of war. God wipes away all tears, for there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

This is the message of the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah. In Isaiah 9, the prophet speaks of a people who walked in darkness. He speaks of the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, "the two northeastern tribes of the land west of the Jordan (later known as upper and lower Galilee), [which] were first devastated" by the Assyrian invaders.⁷ There was the darkness of the invader, but more deadly was the darkness that characterized the "inward condition of the nation, the plight of sin and misery which it carried on its life."⁸

The land of Galilee was a land on the frontier where the presence of Gentiles resulted in a mixed population, a land in which the laws of God were dishonored. "Being most remote from Judah it was nearest to the foreign countries and so subject to heathen influences."⁹ The darkness that fell upon this land, however, was not without remedy. For Isaiah prophesied,

⁷ E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:323.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

“the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Matthew’s gospel tells us that this prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus returned to Capernaum from his wilderness testing and began to preach that “the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 3:12-17).

And this brings about great rejoicing, Isa. 9:3, and the cessation of warfare. There is a shattering of the yoke that binds the people of God; they are delivered from the oppressor. And verse 5 bears the message that every soldier longs to hear—that the war is over! Stack your arms and go home. The text says “every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for fire.” That is not the case today. When I left Active Duty in 1996, I packed away many articles of military clothing and pieces of equipment that I had used daily- in hopes that I would never have to use them again. I tucked them away in the attic and forgot about them.

Until December 2003. Then I dragged out my uniforms, boots, rucksack, and webgear—to use them to go to war. Today they are packed away again. What a joy it would be to drag them out one last time! Not to wear them off to war, but to pile them on the fire and burn them to ashes because they will never be needed again. This text ties the cessation of war to the peace that comes from a child who will be born, a child who will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. This Prince of Peace will reign until all his enemies have been placed under his feet (I Cor. 15:25), “for of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end” (Isa. 9:7).

This blessing of peace, which began to be fulfilled in the first coming of the Messiah, will be completely fulfilled in his second coming. Isaiah says, “He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. How will this happen? Not through the miserable offices of the hopelessly corrupt United Nations. Not through the Armed Forces of the United States serving as the world’s “Nine-One-One” emergency responder. No, “the zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” It is God’s own zeal for his honor and God’s own love for his people that will establish the kingdom and bring lasting peace.

Until that day, we will need soldiers—to stand in the gap and to walk the dangerous paths. Until then, we will need soldiers to stand guard in the frigid cold and in the burning heat; to be vigilant during the dark hours of the night, that the rest of us may sleep soundly. We need soldiers to go in harm’s way so that those who would harm our families will instead meet the doom they would gladly visit upon others—without cause. And so we need to pray. Until that day when peace reigns from the rising of the sun to the setting of the same, we need to pray. For those who serve, that they will fulfill their duty without becoming full of hate—we need to pray. We need to pray that the Angel of the Lord will camp round about our soldiers and protect them, and that those who long for their soldiers during their absence will be lifted up by God’s Spirit and comforted by His presence. Until that day when God makes our warfare to cease— we need to pray for our soldiers.

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