



Casting Soldiers as Victims of War

(Published in [The Heritage Foundation](#), May 9, 2007)

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Colaboraciones n° 1722

May 25, 2007

As members of a democratic republic, Americans are free to debate how, or even if, we should fight wars.

We argue about whether to go to war, we argue about how a particular war is being conducted and we argue for years about the outcome.

We do all that because democracies don't like war. Democracies believe war is the weapon of last resort — so when they're forced to fight, they want to see something good come of it.

But it's always possible to take robust policy debates too far. When war debate turns to undermining the civil society that allows for healthy disagreements in wartime, there's a problem.

Consider the latest move by MoveOn.org.

The group has announced it's "launching an important new project with our friends at VoteVets.org that will use the power of Internet video to help spread the truth about how veterans and military families feel about the war."

Really? All military families? That would require millions of videos.

No, the MoveOn.org project focuses on particular families — those that oppose our military interventions.

While there's nothing inappropriate about veterans voicing strong opinions about operations in Iraq or Afghanistan, it's wrong to use the uniform they wore to make an overtly political statement.

No one should play politics with the lives of the men and women wearing a military uniform. Those who oppose the course of the war in Iraq should find other ways to make their case.

Of course, that's exactly what has proven so difficult for anyone who opposes America's involvement in any war: how to oppose the war without appearing to oppose the troops.

Throughout its history, America's army has been filled with citizen-soldiers. Critics of the Iraq war have had to think hard about how to speak about their fellow citizens.

After all, wars cannot be fought without soldiers, and when critics want to end a war they often feel compelled to make the case that their neighbors — the very people facing death on the front lines while serving their country — are wrong.

In the Vietnam era, opponents chose to demonize the military. The war, they said, was "evil," and thus so was anyone who fought in it.

When John Kerry told the Senate in 1971 that American soldiers had "razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan," he was simply mimicking the rhetoric of the day.

Fortunately, the military-is-evil moniker didn't stand the test of time.

The "Winter Soldier Investigation" Kerry cited, for example, was a col-

lection of oral testimonies meant to highlight U.S. atrocities. But it proved to be largely a mess of undocumented assertions.

History showed that intentional acts of barbarism, such as the My Lai massacre, were tragic exceptions, not the rule.

In addition, over the next 20 years the junior officers and sergeants who fought in Vietnam proved pretty adept at building the best military in American history, so they couldn't have been so bad after all.

Sober assessors of the anti-war movement would acknowledge that demonizing the military was wrong. It was simply a fiction promoted to push a political agenda.

As a result, today, almost no one attempts to replicate the Vietnam approach. Everybody wants to "support the troops," recognizing that deplorable incidents such as Abu Ghraib don't reflect the true character of the millions in uniform.

But the temptation to play politics again is proving too strong. Hence a new anti-war narrative: the "soldiers are victims" rhetoric.

Some claim the burden of fighting the war falls on the poor and uneducated who can't find any other job. Yet studies examining the geographical distribution and income of recruits show this isn't the case.

Portraying members of the armed forces as victims may be an effective

way for the anti-war crowd to win sympathy. But just because it's effective doesn't make it right.

The fact that Americans argue about the course of the war in Iraq isn't a sign of American weakness; it's the symbol of the nation's greatest strength, a vibrant civil society that can be questioning and self-

examining even during the course of conflict.

But we shouldn't drag the military into the argument. If our missions are going to succeed, we must also leave the troops to do their job while the rest of us argue about what we want them to do.

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