Value of Valor: Soldiers’ Tenets Should Guide All Americans

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It’s a cliché to say that the meaning of Memorial Day often is lost in our rush to get to the beach, crank up our barbecues, and take advantage of “this-weekend-only” sales. It’s a cliché, but it’s true.

Still, you can be sure that no one whose relative or friend died in military service forgets the holiday’s original purpose. Those memories never fade. Our country’s debt is never fully repaid.

The First Amendment gives Americans the right to criticize government decisions about when and where to deploy our soldiers. Yet however fiercely we may debate military policy, we should be united in support of our troops. These young men and women volunteer to possibly risk their lives so that the rest of us can be safe. Their act of signing up is an act of heroism. It is the essence of selflessness, the embodiment of courage.

Hopefully, each of us will take a moment this weekend to appreciate those who currently serve or have served in the military, and especially to remember those who lost their lives in the line of duty. “In the end,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” To honor these soldiers fully, we must do more than remember them once a year. We must fulfill our own responsibilities as Americans. While soldiers protect our democracy from external threats, citizens must ensure that our democracy does not corrode from within.”

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“Change can be frightening. Our population is rapidly diversifying. Technology is transforming every aspect of society. We can face these changes with courage. We can stand up for those who are different and assist those who need help adjusting to the new economy. Or we can be riddled with fear and look for scapegoats to blame. Which are we doing?”

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Loyalty

The Army says that loyalty means bearing “true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution.” What could that mean for citizens?

It cannot mean giving blind faith and allegiance to the government. Indeed, part of our job is to be a check on government. But it could mean giving unflinching loyalty to the goals set forth in the Constitution’s Preamble: to “establish Justice,” “promote the general Welfare,” and “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Civilians, as well as soldiers, are need ed to achieve those goals.

Have we been true to those goals? Do we strive to promote the general welfare? Or are we focused on promoting only our personal welfare?

Duty

The Army says that “duty” means fulfilling one’s obligations. Are we fulfilling ours? Many of us don’t even vote. Of those who do, many don’t give the act the seriousness it deserves. We can’t be experts in domestic and foreign policy. But we can seek out news sources that strive for accurate reporting, and we should try to learn all we can about significant issues and candidates running for office.

Do we have duties beyond voting? Are we obliged to see that children are given the opportunity to succeed or that the sick and elderly are cared for? What, after all, does it mean to be an American? Is it merely that we live on the same piece of real estate? Or are we a community whose people watch each other’s backs?

Respect

The Army requires soldiers to “treat others with dignity and respect.” “Respect,” it says, “is what allows us to appreciate the worth in other people.”

Do we citizens treat each other with dignity and respect? Do we appreciate what’s best in others?

Nothing in the Constitution compels us to do this. To the contrary, the First Amendment gives us power to express opinions that are hateful, prejudiced, or fearful. As Justice John Harlan explained, the First Amendment was “intended to remove governmental restraints from the arena of public discussion, putting the decision as to what views shall be voiced largely into the hands of each of us.”

We’ve been given the keys to the public discourse car. We decide whether we drive down the smooth road of respectful civil discourse or the rough and muddy road of uncivil discourse. Which road have we taken?

Selfless Service

The Army requires each soldier to “[p]ut the welfare of the nation… before your own.” How many of us do that? Do we care whether the environment will be healthy for future generations or only how it will be for ours? When we spend money for our needs do we consider the debt burden we’re imposing on our children?

Integrity

The Army says that “integrity” means doing “what’s right, legally and morally.” How many of us live up to that standard? We don’t put our lives on the line as combat soldiers do. Our primary contribution is paying taxes. But even that responsibility is vitally important to our nation’s welfare. Our tax money ensures that soldiers have adequate supplies and receive quality care if they are injured. Our taxes keep bridges standing and provide teachers and books for our children. When tax time comes, do we do what’s “legally and morally” right and proudly contribute? Or do we try to reduce our taxes by failing to report income and exaggerating expenses? Do those with the most resources welcome the opportunity to pay their fair share or use their influence to minimize their tax burden?

Personal Courage

The Army says soldiers should “face fear, danger or adversity” with courage. What could this mean for the average citizen? Justice Louis Brandeis said that “[t]hose who won our independence by revolution were not cowards. They did not fear political change. They did not eschew order at the cost of liberty.”

Change can be frightening. Our population is diversifying. Technology is transforming society. We can face these changes with courage. We can stand up for those who are different and assist those who need help adjusting to the new economy. Or we can be riddled with fear and look for scapegoats to blame. Which are we doing?

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