

Veterans Remember

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The US would have us forget

11/12/06 -- Let's go back to the beginning of Veterans Day. It used to be Armistice Day, because at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, World War I came to an end.

We must not forget that conflict. It revealed the essence of war, of all wars, because however "just" or "humanitarian" may be the claims, at the irreducible core of all war is the slaughter of the innocent, organized by national leaders, accompanied by lies. World War I was its epitome, as generals and politicians sent young men forward from their trenches, bayonets fixed, to gain a few miles, even a few yards, at frightful cost.

In July 1916 the British General Douglas Haig ordered 11 divisions of English soldiers to climb out of their trenches and move toward the German lines. The six German divisions opened up with their machine guns. Of the 110,000 who attacked, more than half were killed or wounded--all those bodies strewn on no man's land, the ghostly territory between the contending trenches. That scenario went on for years. In the first battle of the Marne there were a million casualties, 500,000 on each side.

The soldiers began to rebel, which is always the most heroic thing soldiers can do, for which they should be given medals. In the French Army, out of 112 divisions, 68 would have mutinies. Fifty men would be shot by firing squads.

Three of those executions became the basis for the late filmmaker Stanley Kubrick's antiwar masterpiece, *Paths of Glory*. In that film a pompous general castigates his soldiers for retreating and talks of "patriotism." Kirk Douglas, the lieutenant colonel who defends his men, enrages the general by quoting the famous lines of Samuel Johnson: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."

The supposed moral justification of that war (the evil Kaiser, the Belgian babies) disintegrated quickly after it ended with sudden recognition of the 10 million dead in the mud of France and the gassed, shellshocked, and limbless veterans confronting the world.

The ugliness of that war was uncomplicated by the moral righteousness that made later wars, from World War II on, unsullied in our memory, or at least acceptable. Vietnam was the stark exception. But even there our national leaders have worked hard to smother what they call "the Vietnam syndrome." They want us to forget what we learned at the Vietnam War's end: that our leaders cannot be trusted, that modern war is inevitably a war against civilians and particularly children, that only a determined citizenry can stop the government when it embarks on mass murder.

Our decent impulse, to recognize the ordeal of our veterans, has been used to obscure the fact that they died, they were crippled, for no good cause other than the power and profit of a few. Veterans Day, instead of an occasion for denouncing war, has become an occasion for bringing out the flags, the uniforms, the martial music, the patriotic speeches reeking with hypocrisy. Those who name holidays, playing on our genuine feeling for veterans, have turned a day that celebrated the end of a horror into a day to honor militarism.

As a combat veteran myself, of a "good war," against fascism, I do not want the recognition of my service to be used as a glorification of war. At the end of that war, in which 50 million died, the people of the world should have shouted "Enough!" We should have decided that from that moment on, we would renounce war--and there would be no Korean War, Vietnam War, Panama War, Grenada War, Gulf War, Balkan War.

The reason for such a decision is that war in our time--whatever "humanitarian" motives are claimed by our political leaders--is always a war against children: the child amputees created by our bombing of Yugoslavia, the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children dead as a result of our postwar sanctions. Veterans Day should be an occasion for a national vow: No more war victims on the other side; no more war veterans on our side.

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