

Our Military Heroes

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Over the last few years, with the Vietnam War fading into history and the military draft a thing of the past, the relationship between the general population of the United States and the U.S. Military has changed considerably. A conscious effort is now being made to honor American military personnel for the sacrifices they make on behalf of their country. This has long been needed and is a welcome development.

There are however a few troubling aspects surrounding these tributes. First, polls show that the actual wars that Americans are fighting and dying in are just a flicker in the public consciousness. Second, we know from all the many admirable fund raising efforts on behalf of veterans and their families that the government and the military have failed in caring for those who have served the nation. This has also been reflected in the high suicide rates among returning soldiers from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the high representation that veterans have in the homeless community.

At the same time American sports leagues and teams have been increasingly active in tying their brand to military veterans and active military personnel. Nearly all games in the National Football League begin with the national anthem and a tribute to veterans. The anthem is usually punctuated with a flyover of some type featuring high tech aircraft and a massive flag covering the field. On Veterans Day last November there were elaborate ceremonies honoring local veterans, particularly those who have paid a high price physically while in service.

This week at the All-Star Game in New York Major League Baseball will give special attention to the military. Baseball has teamed with *People* magazine to honor one military hero chosen by each team in a ceremony being marketed as a "Tribute for Heroes." The thirty chosen are veterans of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and World War II. There are men, women, Native Americans, and African Americans in this group, and all are decorated heroes of war. When they are introduced it will be a tribute to their efforts and their sacrifices.

When I first heard that each team would honor a military veteran I thought that this meant that a veteran from each team would be honored. I quickly realized that such a thing was not possible, because most teams do not have military veterans on their rosters, although some have veterans in their managerial offices. The fact is, that beginning with the Vietnam War, sports personnel serving in the military have been few in number. When there was a military draft in place most elite professionals in the NFL and MLB found ways to circumvent it, and if they served it was often in a six-month reserve unit allowing them to miss very little in-season time. Positions in these units were difficult to secure and often resulted from political intervention for athletes and others with the necessary connections.

Those professional leagues, like the NFL and MLB that are now actively demonstrating their patriotism were just as active in assisting their star players in avoiding or minimizing military service. When the draft ended these practices ended as well and there have been a paltry number of professional athletes who have volunteered for military service.

So what does any of this mean? It certainly points to some hypocrisy. It also points to a certain level of cynical exploitation of veterans, particularly wounded veterans and their families, for those who want to mark their brand with the American flag. The Pat Tillman case comes to mind as the worst example of attempted exploitation, and even now the NFL continues to invoke his memory.

So it is with mixed feelings that I will watch the ceremonies at baseball's all-star game Tuesday night, as it is with mixed feelings that I watch many of these spectacles of contrived patriotism. Only the coldest hearted among us could fail to feel for those veterans who are paraded in front of us in public, and then are neglected for much of the rest of the year.

It has been well over a year now since Ben Fountain's, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* was published. At the end of last year it appeared on a number of top ten lists of the best novels of the year. When I read it I found it more than troubling, as I still do, as it addresses this issue of the relationship of American sports fans and those who are considered to be military heroes.

The plot line is relatively simple. A small group of soldiers are involved in a fierce firefight in Iraq. It so happens that this group has a FOX News reporter and cameraman imbedded with them. As a result these soldiers are seen across America in action and they are then presented as, and no doubt were, heroic figures to those who saw the news reports.

The public reaction produces a deluge and these soldiers are acclaimed as great American heroes. Someone in the Pentagon seizes on the opportunity presented and pulls the soldiers off the front line and brings them back to the U.S. for a countrywide tour. It reaches its climax in Dallas on Thanksgiving Day at the Dallas Cowboys "traditional" football game.

Ben Fountain uses the tour to offer a critique of the shallow and hollow nature of the public response to these heroes, and the exploitation of their deeds by the pentagon. Written in Billy Lynn's voice, it is a haunting and deeply disturbing novel that should be read and discussed by all Americans who join the public tributes to support their troops. It challenges the depth and the sincerity of that support and the motives of those who sponsor these public tributes in our sports arenas.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be good sport to be a bad loser.

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