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Enough with America's 'thank you for your service' culture. It's betrayal, not patriotism.

America's military is misused and our service men and women are perpetually abused and misled. Perks like priority airline boarding won't fix that.

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Joseph Biden just became America's fourth post-9/11 "war president." He now ends all speeches with "May God protect our troops." First Lady Jill Biden even penned a children's book titled, "Don't Forget, God Bless Our Troops." Their son, Beau, was a soldier — and his parents suspect toxic "burn pit" exposure on his Iraq tour caused the brain cancer that later killed him. Both Jill and Joe repeatedly foreground military and veteran sacrifices — with good reason.

But just what is the best way for Americans to honor and respect veterans' sacrifices?

Responses to this question tend to be as diverse as America, itself. There's no single "right answer," but there are plenty of wrong ones. One thing has become abundantly clear: America's "thank you for your service" culture doesn't help veterans — or society.

Our country's military is continually misused, and no amount of pyrotechnics, flag-waving, priority airline boarding, discount nachos, bumper stickers, or military flyovers can fix that. For over 19 years, the U.S. government knowingly sent its service members to self-perpetuating and self-defeating wars.

That's not patriotism — that's betrayal.

Deception in broad daylight

A more effective alternative to such lobotomized patriotism — and a better way to honor veteran's service — is to get informed about how the troops are used, and to dissent whenever the military is not used wisely. Historically, veterans sacrificed plenty to preserve the rights that Americans enjoy. Return the favor. Get informed, demand transparency, prevent the squandering of such service.

But respect for our military must begin before they become veterans — before they've sacrificed limbs, lives, and mental health supporting bad policy. Because by then, it's already too late. Instead, respect military service by ensuring that everyone who dons a uniform — beginning the moment when minors approach recruiting tables in high school lunchrooms — has informed consent about what they're actually signing up for.

Isn't it fascinating that many teachers would never expose children to graphic images of dead soldiers in classrooms, but those same students can be misled in broad daylight,

at schoolhouses turned de-facto recruiting stations? Consequently, American youths could unwittingly become those very dead bodies.

Informed consent is a critical component of respect. And if our society believes images of amputees or dead civilians — and statistics about suicide, PTSD, or drug abuse — too explicit for underage audiences, perhaps its military should quit recruiting children.

Therefore, we advocate for our Pentagon and the rest of America's war making machine — the ever-euphemistic defense establishment — to adopt a code consistent with the American Medical Association's ethics opinion on informed consent: that "Patients have the right to receive information and ask questions about recommended treatments so that they can make well considered decisions about care." The AMA guidance further states that physicians — in our scenario, war doctors — should present relevant information about the "burdens, risks, and expected benefits of all options."

Needless suffering, home and abroad

What, then, are some of the recruiting risks worth mentioning?

For starters, a survey by the Washington Post and Kaiser found the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan "have caused mental and emotional health problems in 31% of vets" — more than 800,000 of them. In one of the largest surveys available on post-9/11 soldiers, "40% of veterans polled had considered suicide at least once after they joined the military" and roughly 20 veterans and active-duty service members committed suicide daily in the past several years — a truly staggering figure. That's "more suicides each year than the total American military deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq," as a New York Times editorial board member characterized it.

Divorce, alcohol, drugs, depression, endless "zombie" medication to mitigate endless deployments — the whole nine yards. All of it ought to be raised before any American enlists but we do not know of a single instance where a recruiter discussed the risks of military service.

Likewise, since it is one of the most traumatic, highly personal elements of combat, recruits should recognize that America's war on terror has resulted in the deaths, often violent, of more than 100 9/11s' worth of civilians from Africa to Central Asia. In the final sense, war offers only needless suffering. Ignorance to its evils is more needless still.

Taken collectively, burdens and risks seem subtle and are more easily dismissed. Most citizens prefer to avert their eyes than view war through honest lenses of fear, apathy, ignorance, and guilt. The Pentagon, incidentally, seems quite happy with the current arrangement.

More money, fewer victories

Americans have hardly exercised informed consent for their own defense, since so few even comprehend the immensity of Pentagon largesse — the largest segment of the

discretionary budget — its tradeoffs, or that it's more than the next 10 countries combined (many of them U.S. allies). Informed consent's absence extends to the Overseas Contingency Operations account, a slush fund designed by defense hawks to circumvent spending controls imposed on all other government agencies.

Such consent-free exorbitant expenditures might be excusable if they produced positive results. Only the U.S. military's win/loss record since WWII is paltry at best: a tortured tie in Korea, losses in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and embarrassments in Beirut and Somalia — hardly offset by "big" wins in small wars like Grenada and Panama. That scarcely justifies such extravagant spending. Yet fear mongering from the military-industrial-congressional complex, and cynically crafted cries to "support the troops," stifles patriotic dissent.

Demands for informed consent are unlikely to emerge among Americans long-trained to quietly capitulate to war industry whims. So, for now, it may fall on veterans themselves to disavow endless wars — the death and injury caused — and the unsustainable spending underpinning it all.

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