



America's Fighting Myth

There was a night in Vietnam that stands out in my memory. I think it was Christmas Eve, and I was on guard duty on the perimeter of some small base and feeling rather noble that I was spending my Christmas defending my country on "the frontiers of freedom." I often wonder about that now.



The feeling was quite real and hardly seemed worth questioning at the time. I was at my lonely outpost thinking of loved ones back home and how they would be spending their Christmas. I wondered what they thought of me. I knew at least members of my immediate family — my mother, father, grandmother, brother, sister — would be thinking of me. Like Bobby Bare and other recorded troubadours, I also thought about "the girl I left back home." Although in my case, she never noticed I was gone. After high school, I realized my choice boiled down to staying in my home town and trying to catch that little blonde butterfly between boyfriends or signing on with Uncle Sam and going to Vietnam. Vietnam, I concluded, was the safer place.

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Which brought me to that Christmas Eve and my thoughts on guard duty and how I felt noble by the deprivation I experienced far from friends and loved ones back home. I thought of the comforts of home as I sat on a rock and forced myself to stay "always on the alert." I did not question the justice of our cause — not until years later. Then I felt sort of like Elvis Presley said he felt when after a couple of years had passed, he realized that despite the realism of the wedding scene in "Blue Hawaii," he wasn't really married to Joan Blackman.

And it was years before I realized I wasn't really defending my country in Vietnam. I was never very good at geography, but I knew we had boarded planes and flown across the Pacific Ocean. I knew when we landed in Da Nang, we were a long way from the United States. The topography, the people, the language were all different. I knew I was an ocean and several thousand miles from my homeland. I knew I belonged to a wide and wonderful country, but it wasn't *that* wide. I was defending something, but it wasn't my country.

I remember watching and listening to a comedian on the Ed Sullivan Show during the Vietnam War. The comic said he went to his local tax office and asked for an explanation of where all his and his countrymen's tax dollars were going. The official pulled out a pie chart that illustrated the distribution



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 11, 2009

of tax dollars. The comic immediately went to the biggest slice.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Why, that's for national defense," the taxman answered. "That's to protect you."

"Protect me from what?" the comic asked.

"Why, the Viet Cong," the taxman answered.

"Would you believe," the comedian said, "that in all the years I've lived in New York City, I haven't seen a single Viet Cong?"

"See what a good job we're doing?" the taxman said gleefully.

I heard history, and irony, repeating themselves several years ago when I found someone at a nearby restaurant who had been a passionate defender of "Operation Iraqi Freedom." By this time it had been established that the "weapons of mass destruction" were not where Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld "knew" they were, nor anywhere else where they could be found. So I asked this defender of the delicatessen if he still thought invading Iraq was a good idea.

"Best idea this country ever had!" he insisted. I asked him if he were serious. He assured me he was.

"Where do you live?" he asked. "Do you live here in Manchester?" I told him I did.

"Have you seen any terrorists lately in Manchester?" he asked. I didn't know what to say. I knew the comic on the Ed Sullivan Show was joking. I wasn't sure about the commando of the coleslaw.

On the day we voted in the last New Hampshire presidential primary, someone called a talk show in Concord and said he hoped people would get out and vote, because "that's what our troops are fighting for in Iraq."

"That's right," the talk-show emcee agreed. I thought about that for a few minutes. Then I called in and said that while I also hoped for a large voter turnout, I could not recall that anyone we may have been fighting in Iraq had ever interfered or attempted to interfere with our exercise of the right to vote in New Hampshire.

"Yeah, all right," the emcee said, grudgingly.

It is a great American myth and an enormous conceit that we may defend our freedom and independence by crossing an ocean and traveling thousands of miles to attack other people's freedom and independence. And then we wonder why they are not thankful to us for their liberation and appreciative of our efforts to spread democracy by landing our troops, declaring martial law, and "disappearing" people for interrogation.

"America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," John Quincy Adams said. That was then, in a sober, sane America. This is a nuthouse now in a neo-conned America.

I believe in the first principle of the Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no harm." I support and appreciate the troops this Veterans Day. I thank them for their faithful service and the tremendous sacrifices they have made. I rejoice for each one who returns from Iraq or Afghanistan alive and whole, and I pray for those who don't. I believe the best way to support the troops is to end unnecessary wars that are increasing our national peril, not our national security. Let us stop abusing the troops by creating needless wars for them to fight, die, and be maimed in.

Security, like charity, begins at home.





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