

## "Whatever Happened to Serving God AND Country?"

Confession is good for the soul (1 John 1:8,9). That said I have a confession to make. I seem to be incapable of sitting through excellent movies like *The Tuskegee Airmen* or *Saving Private Ryan* without bawling like a newborn baby, then trying to hide it like some unspeakable sin. Yes, I know, when we visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., we're expected to get a little teary-eyed. But I'm talking about shedding tears at a movie playing on my own TV! That doesn't seem right.

I feel silly when it happens, too, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, notwithstanding. Certainly over the years I've come to expect those of my parents' generation – the Greatest Generation – particularly the veterans, to become emotional when they view historically accurate World War II movies. But I'm a *Baby Boomer*. Having been born between January 1, 1946 and December 31, 1964, I'm a member of the biggest baby boom in American history. Why should *I* be touched by heroic deeds performed by American service men and women before I was even a topic of conversation between my parents?

This emotional thing is an enigma to me. Principally, Boomers aren't suppose to care about patriotic issues, we're *post-war* babies. Indeed, isn't our country's first Boomer president on record as having said he loathed the military? Perhaps this lack of commitment, perceived or otherwise, explains why so many Boomers didn't bother to go fight "our" war. It's beyond cavil that a significant number of politicians, past and present, gained considerable fame by opposing our efforts in Southeast Asia.

Please don't misunderstand me about those who protested. As American citizens, if we truly believe our government is embarking on an immoral course of action, we have the right – and as Christians, the duty – to peaceably assemble and protest. Isn't it ironic, though, that the Boomers who *did* answer the call to serve helped to guarantee the freedoms demanded by the anti-war activists? Few of the activists would admit that fact then, or now, for that matter. Apparently it was more important for them to heap scorn and derision on our warriors as they returned to a seemingly ungrateful nation, sometimes in one piece, sometimes not, but always emotionally scarred. Even so, those who protested the Vietnam War simply because military service was “inconvenient” for them probably forfeited the higher moral ground to those who answered the call to duty.

There is one thing we all need to understand, and it's every bit as true today as it was in 1812, 1861, or 1941: our freedoms don't mean spit if we can't protect them. Moreover, contrary to what civil libertarians would have us believe, the ultimate protection of our liberties does not take place in tidy federal courtrooms or on the front pages of newspapers. When neo-Nazis march in Skokie, Illinois, can we be assured our freedoms are being ultimately protected? Heavens no! The ultimate protection comes from thousands of young people in the service of our country, willing to sacrifice their lives, if necessary, to ensure that the traditions of American democracy pass intact from this generation to the next.

Ostensibly, America has once again arrived at one of those terrible times. It appears ultimate sacrifices by American warriors are again necessary. So what about Lutherans in general and Missouri Synod Lutherans in particular? What does our

distinctive “Two Kingdoms” view of church and state dictate about this military campaign? Is the so-called War on Terrorism – wisely no longer referred to as a Crusade – something we can get behind? Will our notions of how church and state should interact be offended? Will we confuse our duties of citizenship with the righteousness of faith?

Detailed answers to the questions raised are the grist of another essay. Moreover, there appears to be considerable confusion and offense already generated from within our denomination based upon a district president’s participation in an interfaith service at Yankee Stadium following the 9/11 attacks. Suffice it to say, there seem to be solid reasons for undertaking this military campaign. First, radicalized religious extremists who hate the West slaughtered over 2800 people in New York as well as several hundred more by the attack on the Pentagon and the thwarted attack that ended in a Pennsylvania field. The terrorists apparently believed they would win favor with their god by committing these heinous deeds. Second, Osama bin Laden, a kind of CEO of a loose-knit organization known as al-Qaida, and the principal agent behind the 9/11 attacks, along with his followers, have vowed to continue to attack America until we are destroyed. Third, our government gave the Taliban in Afghanistan, the former ruling party and protectors of bin Laden, ample warning and a clear opportunity to do the right thing: turn over bin Laden and his lieutenants to the United States for trial. They failed to comply with this demand; thus, they paid a high price for their recalcitrance. Consequently, our leaders made a political decision to go to war against terrorism. Within days of the attack on America, the administration announced that any country harboring terrorists or supporting terrorism – as they define it – is a target for the most

efficient, effective, and energetic war-making machine in the history of the world, the military forces of the United States and its allies.

Yet, what should the Lutheran response be to all of this? We know that Luther viewed God as the Lord of not only spiritual authorities but secular authorities as well. Unlike current civil libertarians, Luther would have had no difficulty with the recitation of “One nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance or “IN GOD WE TRUST” on money. But Luther also understood that Christians live in a kind of dual kingdom: they are subject to civil government and church government simultaneously. Moreover, he recognized that two kinds of human “righteousness” evolve from this. Spiritual righteousness is grounded in our faith, having been brought there by the Holy Spirit, while so-called “civil righteousness” is grounded in our moral conduct, as dictated by the civil authorities.

Article XVI of The Augsburg Confession holds that Christians “may without sin” serve as soldiers. Indeed, the very genesis of The Augsburg Confession is grounded in Emperor Charles V summoning an imperial diet in January of 1530. The emperor wanted a united front in his military campaign against the Turks; thus, he desired an end to the strife and disunity caused by the Reformation. Using King David as the model, Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession encourages the emperor to prosecute the war against the Muslim Turks, calling it “salutary” and “godly” to do so. It’s amazing to see how little things change on this planet. And it’s easy to see how Luther got to the position he did about “just wars.”

If God establishes civil governments, among other things, to protect their citizens, and if large bodies of Christians are endangered by the desperate and deadly acts of a desperate people, doesn't it make sense for any government whose people are so threatened to respond in such a way so as to provide the maximum protection it can for its people? Of course it does. Accordingly, under our current warfighting doctrine, that means we take it to the enemy. Put another way, experience and much spilt blood have taught us to assume the offense, not the defense.

When it comes to assuming an offense, I think about our Lord virtually every day. I think about His service to all the peoples of Earth. I sometimes wonder what kind of a world this would be if He had elected not to answer His call. Where would we be if He had gone to Canada instead of Calvary? Jesus, Himself, said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13 NIV). From our nation's Revolutionary War over two centuries ago to the current campaign against worldwide terrorism, including the concurrent humanitarian missions being conducted by our armed forces on this Easter Sunday, 2002, our Savior's words provide a very real and sobering potential for those who have answered our nation's calls to duty.

Have you noticed all the flags flying on motor vehicles these days, usually inappropriately? Somehow, that act satisfies the need to be patriotic for so many. I have a good friend who recruits for one of the reserve component services. Beginning the afternoon of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and for several days following, the majority of his phone calls were not about how to sign up, but whether there would be school deferments should the draft be reinstated. Needless to say, he was at a loss to understand how so

many precious Americans can be willing to die “for their friends,” and far too many are simply willing to let them.

The World War II generation weathered an awful depression then obediently answered duty’s call to fight for our traditions far from home. That generation did so without whining or crying about it. On a cold January day in 1961, one of their own, a young and boyishly handsome John Kennedy, admonished us all to not ask what our country could do for us, but rather, to ask what we could do for our country. We don’t hear that kind of talk much nowadays. Likewise, we don’t see much of a rush to national service, our current circumstances notwithstanding. Between our campaign against terrorism and the trouble now brewing in the Middle East, a pampered generation may find out the hard way just how irrelevant the Nasdaq can become when a whole world goes crazy.

So I ask all young Americans in their late teens and early twenties: what would the Lord have you do? Have you thought about it? Have you prayed about it? Jesus provides the model for how to conduct our lives; He came as a servant. How can we do anything less? If you have what it takes – and it takes a lot – you might want to consider serving our country in a direct way. Flying a flag on a car or pickup truck says one thing, putting on a uniform of an active or reserve military component says something quite different. Peace.