



The Problem with “Support the Troops”

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Editors’ Note: In this latest *DifferenTakes* anti-war activist Sarah Hunter raises critical questions about the slogan, “Support the troops; bring them home!” This issue is particularly pressing as the Obama administration considers expanding troop deployments in Afghanistan.

— Co-editors Elizabeth Barajas-Román & Betsy Hartmann

“Support the troops; bring them home!”

Occasionally appearing on anti-war bumper stickers or t-shirts, this slogan is meant to serve as a counter-hegemonic response to the militaristic “support the troops,” a phrase deployed by pro-war forces as a way of showing that those who are against the war are not patriotic. But how counter-hegemonic is the phrase “support the troops; bring them home?” Can the use of this slogan unwittingly strengthen, rather than challenge, militarism and nationalism? I believe the answer is yes.

To begin with, who are “the troops?” And what does “support” look like? Does the category “troops” encompass those serving in active duty as well as veterans and future enlistees? What about those who died in service — does the need to “support” them extend to their survivors? Is support fiscal, emotional, or moral — and what do each of these things look like?

When US anti-war activists display the yellow ribbon or discuss “supporting the troops,” they must consider the implications of their language and whom and what they are discussing.

One of the dangers of focusing on “the troops” is that it takes the focus off the war as a whole, and especially off the civilians

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whose lives are destroyed by the actions of those very same troops. As of the writing of this article, 4,328 Americans had died during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Civilian casualties are estimated by iCasualties.org to be as high as 45,638.¹ If Americans, especially those opposed to the war, think about it only in terms of support to the troops, the fact that ten times as many Iraqis have died in the war becomes unimportant.

On May 2, 2003, former President George W. Bush declared “mission accomplished” in Iraq. Since then, similar to the first Gulf War, the Iraq war has been about supporting the troops, not accomplishing the mission.² Those opposed to the war who use “support the troops” language help reinforce the notion that the mission, for better or worse, is not about US oil interests, ousting Saddam Hussein, or neo-colonialism, but is instead about giving support to the American troops stationed there. Critical questions about how they became troops and what that designation means are pushed aside so as not to lower the morale of the very troops that everyone is trying to support.

One of the most disturbing implications of this reasoning is the effect that it has on future troops. It is clear that US forces are stretched too thin, suffering from a lack of up-to-date armor and weapons, the agony of multiple deployments even in light of diagnosed trauma and injury, and inadequate health-care and structural support once at home. In Iraq the Brookings Institute estimates combined active and reserve troop strength at 130,000.³ This includes all branches of the US military and members of the Iraqi Security Forces. Additionally, another 500 are serving from other countries. CNN reported on August 21, 2009, that 62,000 US military personnel were serving in Afghanistan as of that date, with an estimated 6,000 more to be added in the next year, and that figure may be higher if the Obama administration moves to expand the war effort.⁴ What “the troops” need is the “support” of more troops — and where will they come from, if not from recruitment programs in public schools? When the war becomes a fight to “support our troops” rather than an act of global imperialism, the act of running counter-recruitment

programs in high school to help students apply for college, obtain financial aid, and discover career paths that do not involve the military is an act against those troops.

It is important to remember that soldiers do not serve in war simply to do the bidding of their commanding officers, and they are not just there for themselves. The mission is ultimately more important than the troops; if it weren't, then the fact that troops were dying would be reason to exit the war. Tyler Boudreau, an ex-Marine who has written a book about his experience in Iraq and why he chose to leave the Marines, dealt with that difficulty intimately. He writes of his decision to leave the military,

“ Suddenly, I looked into the eyes of my Marines, the men I'd served with in Iraq, the men I'd truly come to admire, and I realized my reverence for them had overwhelmed my reverence for the mission. By definition then, I was ineligible to command. So I resigned my commission... love of the mission is not merely a good quality, it is an imperative. Love for the troops is secondary.”⁵

What can the well-meaning anti-war activist do to protest the wars without alienating those who, for whatever reasons, have chosen to fight them? First, there must be a serious evaluation of what “supporting the troops” actually entails. If it seems that this language is not appropriate or advances agendas that are counterproductive to the cause of ending the war and the structures that lead to war, then activists need to find new language. One of the other ways to engage with issues facing the troops is to provide safe spaces for spouses and families who often bear most of the burden of the result, sometimes violent, of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Focusing time on those trying to leave the forces by manning GI Rights hotlines, providing time or funding to homeless shelters for veterans, and supporting counter-recruitment efforts in schools

are all ways to demonstrate a real commitment to separating outrage against US imperialism and its wars from any feelings against individuals who serve in them. Rather than devising slick slogans

fit for bumper stickers, activists ought to be putting their energy into really challenging militarism, questioning imperialism, and connecting as humans to those most directly touched by those policies.

About the Author

Sarah Hunter is a recent graduate of Hampshire College. Her Division III project, "War and Peace in the Pioneer Valley", is a series of ethnographic essays about the anti-war movement in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts. This essay is excerpted from one of these chapters.

Notes

- 1 icasualties.org, "Iraq Coalition Casualty Counts," <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/IraqiDeaths.aspx> (July 29, 2009).
- 2 Lotte Larson, "The Yellow Ribboning of America: A Gulf War Phenomenon," in *Journal of American Culture*, vol .17, no. 1, (June 2004), pp 11-22.
- 3 Brookings Institute, "Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq," <http://www.brookings.edu/saban/iraq-index.aspx>.
- 4 CNN, "Despite Election, US Troops in Afghanistan for Long Haul" <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/08/21/afghanistan.us.role/> (August 21, 2009)
- 5 Tyler Boudreau, *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine*, (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2008).

Want to get involved?

Here are some national resources to check out. Each of these organizations has local chapters dedicated to ending the war and challenging US imperialism, while also engaging directly with those who have served or are currently serving in the armed forces:

Iraq Veterans Against the War

Modeled on Vietnam Veterans Against the War, IVAW is an organization founded by and for veterans of the Iraq War who are working to end it. They host Winter Soldier speak-out panels around the country where they testify to the horrors of war, provide safe spaces for veterans to work through their feelings, and build coalitions with other groups to pressure both local and national governments to speak out against the war. They also publish a quarterly zine called *Sit-Rep* that is distributed on US bases around the world. To find a group near you, or to learn about the date of an upcoming Winter Soldiers panel in your area, visit <http://www.ivaw.org>.

The American Friends Service Committee

A national Quaker organization, AFSC is comprised of local offices which serve the needs of their communities as well as working on national campaigns to end war and militarism. Among AFSC's activities are counter-recruitment efforts in high schools, conscientious objector workshops for those trying to leave the military, and starting dialogues with community members about the impact of war in their homes. To find your local office, visit <http://www.afsc.org>.

Veterans for Peace

Veterans for Peace is an NGO made up of US veterans of many wars. They conduct vigils, demonstrations, protests, and speak-outs all over the country to bring awareness to the impact of US military power in Iraq, Afghanistan, Central America, Puerto Rico, and Korea. They also oppose the School of the Americas and organize a protest there every year. Additionally, they are very concerned with veterans' healthcare, education, and integration back into civilian life, and work on counter-recruitment in high school. Their website is <http://www.veteransforpeace.org>.