

War Heroes

A little historical perspective

I'm of terrorist-American descent. A patriot can be a terrorist to the colonizer or slaveowner. My ancestors actively fought slavery when it was the law of the land and engaged in the terrorist activities of attempting to secure voting rights, increasing literacy, numeracy, cultural fluency and if necessary theft of property, i.e. helping slaves run away. So consider my following comments in that light.



I would consider John McCain a war hero in the same sense that George Armstrong Custer, Gen. Joseph Lane or Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest are war heroes. If one gives blanket respect for putting your life on the line in service to a higher ideal, that's one thing. Custer, Lane and Forrest are not heroes to Native Americans and African-Americans, of which I am both. Native Americans were defending their ancestral homelands against invasion by illegal immigrants.

Forrest, later a founder of the Ku Klux Klan, oversaw the massacre at Fort Pillow where a Union contingent of black soldiers and civilian women and children were shot, burned and buried alive after they surrendered to the Confederate forces. Forrest is considered a war hero to the Confederacy, and this is what I think of whenever I see a Confederate flag here in Oregon. The Confederacy is not a country based on granting and defending the principles of liberty and equal justice for all human beings present (which is something we're still fighting for in America).

The Vietnamese had been fighting to liberate their homeland for close to a thousand years from, in turn, the Chinese, the French and the Japanese. Ho Chi Minh, leading Vietnam during World War II, was our ally in that conflict against the Japanese. Our post-World War II involvement in Vietnam was a betrayal of that alliance.

I spoke about history with one of my five all-time favorite Republicans, a war hero, as it turns out. Sen. Mark Hatfield was at Iwo Jima, walked through Hiroshima and besides his famous anti-war stance, welcomed Paul Robeson to Oregon. Hatfield credited Robeson as the inspiration for crafting public accommodations legislation after Robeson, an internationally renowned singer/civil rights activist, was refused lodging in the finest hotel in Salem after the concert that the young Hatfield had helped organize.

I spoke with the senator early during Bush's second term on the subject of his relationship to Robeson and civil rights issues in Oregon in the 1940s and 1950s. Naturally John McCain was not a topic of conversation. I had to confess to the senator that I was sorry HE wasn't in the White House and that I could understand why his party probably would not have supported him to be president. I considered him to be of the ilk of the radical Republicans Sumner and Stevens. They were considered radical because unlike other Republicans and Democrats and the majority of whites at the time, they considered African-Americans to be human beings worthy of full and equal citizenship and equal rights within all of the U.S. That was considered radical at the time. As my daughter Iana once remarked, "It's a thin line between radical and common sense."

It's still a stretch for some people to even consider an articulate, computer-literate, Harvard-trained, quasi-genius African-American to be president over an alleged war hero who may have visited many lands but still has problems keeping geography, history and culture straight.

Hatfield reminded me that Vietnam had been a World War II ally of the U.S. against Japan. While Ho Chi Minh was a communist, he was "our communist," like Tito of Yugoslavia. After all, Ho Chi Minh had visited the U.S., kicking it with Marcus Garvey during the Harlem Renaissance – a period when he wrote an article decrying the practice of lynching. Black American soldiers fighting for American freedom would come home and be lynched by white mobs in the streets of New York City as well as in the South. No U.S. president/commander in chief was suggesting to white America that lynching black soldiers was unpatriotic and should stop immediately. In fact, when Robeson and Einstein brought President Truman a petition against lynching, he refused to see them.

The Vietnamese, our former allies, had been fighting for possession of their homeland for several hundred years and were well within their rights to shoot down McCain, as the Lakota were well within their rights to give Custer an arrow shirt. Pakistan and Afghanistan have similarly resisted conquest, a fact the next president better take into account – or ignore at our peril.

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