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Memorial Day 2004: Reflections By Kenneth A. Sprang

Every gun that is made . . . every rocket fired signifies . . . a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is . . . spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Memorial Day is one of those holidays that has never held particular meaning for me. Fortunately, no one in my circle of family and friends ever died or was injured in war time. But this year as images of Abu Ghraib bring back memories of My Lai, and the Iraq war reminds one more and more of the Viet Nam conflict that so shaped my generation, I have found myself musing.

This year for the first time men and women will gather here at the new World War II memorial here in Washington. If my father were still living, he would want to come. Dad, barely 19 or 20 at the time, went over the Alps with General Patton. I will always wonder whether it was war that robbed me of my father's emotional presence.

As one who works with relationships, the contrast between my Dad and his parents has always seemed strange to me. My grandmother was one of the warmest, most endearing human beings I have ever known. My grandfather was quiet and reserved, but a good and kindly man. Those traits are reflected in my aunts and uncles as well. But my father was more aloof and simply not emotionally or spiritually present for us.

Maybe all of this would have happened with or without the war. Maybe it was just the result of factors which will ever remain a mystery. Yet I will always wonder whether World War II robbed my Dad of some emotional vitality. My grandmother said when Dad came home from the war he just lay around for days staring at the ceiling. She said he was simply never the same after the war—never!

Many of those we send to war are still children—adolescents (recent human development theory suggests that adolescence now extends into the late twenties). I look at my 32 year old son and remember him as a 19 year old—the former a maturing, responsible man, the latter a rebellious teenager.

The horrors of war don't change much from generation to generation. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* recounted the story of a World War II veteran in Germany. It was late in the war. Fourteen German soldiers unexpectedly ran into the American camp. Surrounded—these young boys—ages 14 to 16 (Hitler's last draftees)—begged for their lives, frantically showing photos of their mothers. Moments later a U.S. corporal slammed the butt of his rifle into the chest of one of the boys. The image of this wanton violence is one the veteran cannot escape. Similarly, from the Civil War comes the story of a father who watched a newly freed slave murder his master.

In my father's era we did not know about post-traumatic stress disorder. Even now many vets are not diagnosed. In the civilian world those who suffer from PTSD include persons subject to continual, often horrific, unimaginable physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. My wife has worked with such patients. That is the kind of trauma that causes PTSD. That is the depth of pain some of our vets have experienced.

Ironically, we seem to focus on the war dead—those now released from the haunting memories of war, but we neglect justice for the living. We fail to provide economically--the number of homeless Viet Nam vets is a national travesty; the financial burdens experienced by reservists called up to Iraq from well-paying jobs to much lower military pay are often overwhelming.

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We also do not provide sufficiently for the emotional cost of war among the living. Not only do we provide inadequate help for those scarred directly by war, but we also overlook the losses of their family and friends. How many other children have been robbed of a father's emotional presence as my siblings and I were? How many wives have dealt with substance abuse, physical abuse, and the like as their husbands sought to deal with the demonic nightmares of the battlefield.

I recognize that there are times like the Civil War and World War II, where conflict is unavoidable. And maybe the unspeakable barbarism of that encampment in Germany or Abu Ghraib is as well.

Yet I would wish for us this Memorial Day to really *think* about the *human* cost of war—the injury to the men and women serving, the emotional losses to family and friends, the contributions that the fallen might have made to our society. I would invite us to remember the living—men and women in uniform, their spouses, children, parents, family, and friends—and commit ourselves and our resources to their healing and reclamation of full lives. And maybe, just maybe, as we hear the tales of those who have journeyed the road of warfare, our leaders will understand more fully the human cost of war, and perhaps, just perhaps, work harder to avoid it.

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