

Chapitre/Chapter 26

I Am Not A Hero

Ehren Watada

(with an Introduction and Afterword by Dahr Jamail)

Introduction.

On Saturday night, August 12, 2006, I was lucky enough to be at the Veterans for Peace National Convention. For that night, Lt. Ehren Watada was able to give the following speech, which I've just received permission to post here. The speech was met with a powerful, standing ovation from the vets who've been there.

Lt. Ehren Watada, for those who don't already know, became the first commissioned officer to publicly refuse deployment to the unlawful war and occupation in Iraq. While doing this on June 22, 2006, Watada said, "As the order to take part in an illegal act is ultimately unlawful as well, I must refuse that order."

Just as Watada took the stage and began to speak, over 50 members of Iraq Veterans Against the War filed in behind him. Watada, surprised by this and obviously taken aback by the symbolic act, turned back to the audience, took some deep breaths, then gave this speech:

Thank you everyone. Thank you all for your tremendous support. How honored and delighted I am to be in the same room with you tonight. I am deeply humbled by being in the company of such wonderful speakers.

You are all true American patriots. Although long since out of uniform, you continue to fight for the very same principles you once swore to uphold and defend. No one knows the devastation and suffering of war more than veterans - which is why we should always be the first to prevent it.

I wasn't entirely sure what to say tonight. I thought as a leader in general I should speak to motivate. Now I know that this isn't the military and surely there are many out there who outranked me at one point or another - and yes, I'm just a Lieutenant. And yet, I feel as though we are all citizens of this great country and what I have to say is not a matter of authority - but from one citizen to another. We have all seen this war tear apart our country over the past three years. It seems as though nothing we've done, from vigils to protests to letters to Congress, have had any effect in persuading the powers that be. Tonight I will speak to you on my ideas for a change of strategy. I am here tonight because I took a leap of faith. My action is not the first and it certainly will not be the last. Yet, on behalf of those who follow, I require your help - your sacrifice - and that of countless other Americans. I may fail. We may fail. But nothing we have tried has worked so far. It is time for change and the change starts with all of us.

I stand before you today, not as an expert - not as one who pretends to have all the answers. I am simply an American and a servant of the American people. My humble opinions today are just that. I realize that you may not agree with everything I have to say. However, I did not

choose to be a leader for popularity. I did it to serve and make better the soldiers of this country. And I swore to carry out this charge honorably under the rule of law.

Today, I speak with you about a radical idea. It is one born from the very concept of the American soldier (or service member). It became instrumental in ending the Vietnam War - but it has been long since forgotten. The idea is this: that to stop an illegal and unjust war, the soldiers can choose to stop fighting it.

Now it is not an easy task for the soldier. For he or she must be aware that they are being used for ill-gain. They must hold themselves responsible for individual action. They must remember duty to the Constitution and the people supersedes the ideologies of their leadership. The soldier must be willing to face ostracism by their peers, worry over the survival of their families, and of course the loss of personal freedom. They must know that resisting an authoritarian government at home is equally important to fighting a foreign aggressor on the battlefield. Finally, those wearing the uniform must know beyond any shadow of a doubt that by refusing immoral and illegal orders they will be supported by the people not with mere words but by action.

The American soldier must rise above the socialization that tells them authority should always be obeyed without question. Rank should be respected but never blindly followed. Awareness of the history of atrocities and destruction committed in the name of America – either through direct military intervention or by proxy war - is crucial. They must realize that this is a war not out of self-defense but by choice, for profit and imperialistic domination. WMD, ties to Al Qaeda, and ties to 9/11 never existed and never will. The soldier must know that our narrowly and questionably elected officials intentionally manipulated the evidence presented to Congress, the public, and the world to make the case for war. They must know that neither Congress nor this administration has the authority to violate the prohibition against pre-emptive war - an American law that still stands today. This same administration uses us for rampant violations of time-tested laws banning torture and degradation of prisoners of war. Though the American soldier wants to do right, the illegitimacy of the occupation itself, the policies of this administration, and rules of engagement of desperate field commanders will ultimately force them to be party to war crimes. They must know some of these facts, if not all, in order to act.

Mark Twain once remarked, "Each man must for himself alone decide what is right and what is wrong, which course is patriotic and which isn't. You cannot shirk this and be a man. To decide against your conviction is to be an unqualified and inexcusable traitor, both to yourself and to your country ..." By this, each and every American soldier, marine, airman, and sailor is responsible for their choices and their actions. The freedom to choose is only one that we can deny ourselves.

The oath we take swears allegiance not to one man but to a document of principles and laws designed to protect the people. Enlisting in the military does not relinquish one's right to seek the truth – neither does it excuse one from rational thought nor the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. "I was only following orders" is never an excuse.

The Nuremberg Trials showed America and the world that citizenry as well as soldiers have the unrelinquishable obligation to refuse complicity in war crimes perpetrated by their government. Widespread torture and inhumane treatment of detainees is a war crime. A war of aggression born through an unofficial policy of prevention is a crime against the peace. An

occupation violating the very essence of international humanitarian law and sovereignty is a crime against humanity. These crimes are funded by our tax dollars. Should citizens choose to remain silent through self-imposed ignorance or choice, it makes them as culpable as the soldier in these crimes.

The Constitution is no mere document - neither is it old, out-dated, or irrelevant. It is the embodiment of all that Americans hold dear: truth, justice, and equality for all. It is the formula for a government of the people and by the people. It is a government that is transparent and accountable to whom they serve. It dictates a system of checks and balances and separation of powers to prevent the evil that is tyranny.

As strong as the Constitution is, it is not foolproof. It does not fully take into account the frailty of human nature. Profit, greed, and hunger for power can corrupt individuals as much as they can corrupt institutions. The founders of the Constitution could not have imagined how money would infect our political system. Neither could they believe a standing army would be used for profit and manifest destiny. Like any common dictatorship, soldiers would be ordered to commit acts of such heinous nature as to be deemed most ungentlemanly and unbecoming that of a free country.

The American soldier is not a mercenary. He or she does not simply fight wars for payment. Indeed, the state of the American soldier is worse than that of a mercenary. For a soldier-for-hire can walk away if they are disgusted by their employer's actions. Instead, especially when it comes to war, American soldiers become indentured servants whether they volunteer out of patriotism or are drafted through economic desperation. Does it matter what the soldier believes is morally right? If this is a war of necessity, why force men and women to fight? When it comes to a war of ideology, the lines between right and wrong are blurred. How tragic it is when the term Catch-22 defines the modern American military.

Aside from the reality of indentured servitude, the American soldier in theory is much nobler. Soldier or officer, when we swear our oath it is first and foremost to the Constitution and its protectorate, the people. If soldiers realized this war is contrary to what the Constitution extols - if they stood up and threw their weapons down - no President could ever initiate a war of choice again. When we say, "... Against all enemies foreign and domestic," what if elected leaders became the enemy? Whose orders do we follow? The answer is the conscience that lies in each soldier, each American, and each human being. Our duty to the Constitution is an obligation, not a choice.

The military, and especially the Army, is an institution of fraternity and close-knit camaraderie. Peer pressure exists to ensure cohesiveness but it stamps out individualism and individual thought. The idea of brotherhood is difficult to pull away from if the alternative is loneliness and isolation. If we want soldiers to choose the right but difficult path - they must know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they will be supported by Americans. To support the troops who resist, you must make your voices heard. If they see thousands supporting me, they will know. I have heard your support, as has Suzanne Swift, and Ricky Clousing - but many others have not. Increasingly, more soldiers are questioning what they are being asked to do. Yet, the majority lack awareness to the truth that is buried beneath the headlines. Many more see no alternative but to obey. We must show open-minded soldiers a choice and we must give them courage to act.

Three weeks ago, Sgt. Hernandez from the 172nd Stryker Brigade was killed, leaving behind a wife and two children. In an interview, his wife said he sacrificed his life so that his family would survive. I'm sure Sgt. Hernandez cherished the camaraderie of his brothers, but given a choice, I doubt he would put himself in a position to leave his family husbandless and fatherless. Yet that's the point, you see. People like Sgt. Hernandez don't have a choice. The choices are to fight in Iraq or let your family starve. Many soldiers don't refuse this war en masse because, like all of us,, they value their families over their own lives and perhaps their conscience. Who would willingly spend years in prison for principle and morality while denying their family sustenance?

I tell this to you because you must know that to stop this war, for the soldiers to stop fighting it, they must have the unconditional support of the people. I have seen this support with my own eyes. For me it was a leap of faith. For other soldiers, they do not have that luxury. They must know it and you must show it to them. Convince them that no matter how long they sit in prison, no matter how long this country takes to right itself, their families will have a roof over their heads, food in their stomachs, opportunities and education. This is a daunting task. It requires the sacrifice of all of us. Why must Canadians feed and house our fellow Americans who have chosen to do the right thing? We should be the ones taking care of our own. Are we that powerless - are we that unwilling to risk something for those who can truly end this war? How do you support the troops but not the war? By supporting those who can truly stop it; let them know that resistance to participate in an illegal war is not futile and not without a future.

I have broken no law but the code of silence and unquestioning loyalty. If I am guilty of any crime, it is that I learned too much and cared too deeply for the meaningless loss of my fellow soldiers and my fellow human beings. If I am to be punished it should be for following the rule of law over the immoral orders of one man. If I am to be punished it should be for not acting sooner. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period ... was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

Now, I'm not a hero. I am a leader of men who said enough is enough. Those who called for war prior to the invasion compared diplomacy with Saddam to the compromises made with Hitler. I say, we compromise now by allowing a government that uses war as the first option instead of the last to act with impunity. Many have said this about the World Trade Towers, "Never Again." I agree. Never again will we allow those who threaten our way of life to reign free - be they terrorists or elected officials. The time to fight back is now - the time to stand up and be counted is today.

I'll end with one more Martin Luther King Jr. quote: One who breaks an unjust law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Thank you and bless you all.

Afterword.

The only thing Watada said that I would disagree with is that he claimed that he is not a hero. He is a leader, yet again, by taking this stance. And he may never know how many lives he has already touched.

Today, it is up to the anti-war movement to make sure his leadership touches as many soldiers' lives in Iraq as possible. Watada is making his stand. He needs continued support.

As he said, if more American soldiers in Iraq know that they, along with their families, will be supported if they stand up against this illegal occupation, countless more will follow, and this repulsive war will end.