

Sorry, but it doesn't bother me.

by Adam Walker

As Afghanistan fell to the Taliban following the fiasco of the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021, there was an understandable outrage from the veteran community. A moral injury had occurred. As a retired Marine, friends, and family reluctantly asked me "Did hearing the news upset you?"

No. Sorry, but it doesn't bother me.

This response may elicit surprise, shock, or disgust. Allow me to explain.

I served three tours in Iraq as an infantryman and was wounded on the second tour. I lost Marines and friends. I've stood by flag-draped coffins and fought back tears at the sound of taps. Years later I watched news of ISIS flooding in from Syria, through the same town where I bled in Husaybah, Iraq. It didn't bother me.

I'm not callous to the pain and suffering of the people in those war-torn countries. They are fellow human beings who want to live in peace and raise their families. They desire a quality of life characterized by a relative measure of prosperity and freedom from violence. It is a blessing for us to live in our country instead of theirs. I cannot, however, measurably affect their circumstances.

Why does the brokenness of Iraq and Afghanistan not bother me? Simple: I wasn't fighting for them. They were broken long before we got there, and they will continue to be so for a long time afterward. Not

one person I know fought "to make Iraq/Afghanistan a better place." Even the most fervent among us fought to "get back at them" after the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. "Them" was ill-defined. We did not fight to make someone else's country a better place. Those few who thought so were idealistic but not realistic.

Rudyard Kipling wrote "The Young British Soldier" in 1895 including the line "When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains." The Russians fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and again in Rambo III. Nothing changed. I held no illusions Afghanistan would become a bastion of freedom and democracy. Veterans who fought Nazis returned to walk the beaches of Normandy with their families. Veterans of Iraq cannot imagine walking the streets of Fallujah to get some falafel.

Like many, I was eager to be tested in combat. This is not a psychopathic desire; it is inherent in the character of a warrior. Further proof is found in the regrets of veterans who did not see combat and see themselves as lesser, or as having "missed their chance." Those veterans are no less a warrior, no less significant than those who have seen combat. They simply were not tested by the confrontation of flesh and steel on their watch. They were ready but just did not get the call. I encourage them to hold their heads high. We know you had our six.

Many young people on their first enlistment state adamantly that they are "getting out" because of unfulfilled desires to see combat. It is a short-sighted and professionally immature perspective.

The one compelled to serve in combat must commit themselves to the profession of arms, train for years, and wait for the call.

Remind veterans to recall Article 1 of the Code of Conduct. "I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense." The culture of the Marine Corps teaches when there is a fight, we go.

After the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983, a reporter asked a Marine if he thought we should be there. The immediate and matter-of-fact response is profound, "Well, the Marines are here so I should be here."

There it is. We fight for one another.

We go wherever the fight is. The politicians decide where "over there" will be. We don't have the luxury of picking which fight to sit out because we disagree with the reasons for being there. War is an extension of

politics. The military is but one instrument of national power leveraged when diplomacy, information, and economics fail to produce the desired results. Before going to war politicians should clearly identify a few things. Number one why are we going? Number two what defines success? Finally, what is our exit strategy? Our country's leaders failed in this respect.

The blame lies with the politicians and civilian leaders. The generals and admirals did not decide when we would go to war or come home. They advised our national leadership, but once the decision was made, they promulgated warfare within the rules of armed conflict and the political restraints established.

Sadly, we lost the wars. For many of us, the cost has been very personal and we now move forward with this moral injury. If we do not adjust our perspective anger, bitterness, and disillusionment, it will overtake us.

I attended a reunion last year with the veterans of our rifle company, including men from all walks of life and ethnicities. We hiked to the grave of one of our brothers, Medal of Honor Recipient Corporal Jason Dunham.

We shared our grief and our love for one another. We reflected on what transpired and how we are to live now in its wake. We did not discuss the current state of Iraq. We know our brothers did not die in vain. They were not fighting for Iraq; they were fighting for each other and us. We counted the cost knowing some of us would not return. At times we wish we could take their place. Tragically, some have taken their own lives as they assume unwarranted guilt.

If the fallen could speak, they would wish us to live good lives, to laugh hard, and to love deeply. We may cry but we need not despair. It is noble to fight for the well-being of people in another country, but that was not our cause.

We must recalibrate our perspective so that we can respond "No, it doesn't really bother me."

Adam Walker served as a Marine infantryman for twenty-five years, retiring as a Master Gunnery Sergeant with three tours in Iraq and a Purple Heart. You can read more of his work on his blog: takeitontheleftfoot.com

