

Rolfe High School Alumni Essay
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The late night May 24 headlines on Google say, "Congress passes deadline-free war funding bill" and "Divided Congress approves Iraq war funds." That will be 120 billion dollars. The war is unpopular to many Americans—some who have been against it from the very first utterances of President George Bush that our nation might attack Iraq. And there are those Americans who have gradually grown to realize the war is wrong.

The Democratic majority and some Republicans in Congress wanted to pass legislation to begin the end of the war. Bush and his administration did not budge but rigidly hung onto their strategies, spinning some of their same old, but questionable reasoning. A campaign letter arrived on May 23 from Democratic presidential candidate Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico. The bold print across the face of the envelope says, "Being stubborn is not a foreign policy."

On May 19, former President Jimmy Carter said in his criticism of the current President Bush, "We now have endorsed the concept of pre-emptive war where we go to war with another nation militarily, even though our own security is not directly threatened, if we want to change the regime there or if we fear that some time in the future our security might be endangered." Curiously, Bush's father, when president, declined to begin a war with Iraq, saying that do so was too risky and would be futile.

This spring, the truth has surfaced about what happened to Pat Tillman, the professional football star who gave the game up to become a soldier, then was killed in Afghanistan and became one of the Pentagon's poster boys. Later the public was informed that he had been killed in friendly fire. The truth also has been surfacing about poster girl Private Jessica Lynch and the story of her rescue after being captured by insurgents in Iraq. Indeed, much truth has been surfacing in the past few years about misinformation served up by the administration about why it forged ahead with its war plans.

A person can't help but think of the Vietnam War and what is known now (through documentary footage, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's book, and other sources) about White House conversations and how President Johnson and his cronies simply did not know how to admit the war was a mistake and, at the same time, be able to save face. A person also can't help think of the song lyrics, "Where have all the flowers gone" and "Where have all the soldiers gone."

On May 19, Army Spc. David Behrle, age 20, died in a bomb explosion near Bagdad. He had been the president of the Tipton High School class of 2005 and its commencement speaker. Many other Iowans have also died in the war, including Army Sgt. Gregory Tull, age 20 of Pocahontas, who died from a IED explosion in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq in 2005. His funeral was at the Faith Lutheran Church south of Rolfe.

According to the web site *www.antiwar.com*, the death toll for Americans in Iraq since the war began on March 19, 2003, is 3,441. The toll since President Bush claimed "Mission accomplished" on May 1, 2003, is 3,302. The official number of American wounded is 25,378. However, the unofficial estimated number of wounded is between 23,000 and 100,000. There have also been deaths of Iraq civilians, military and insurgency personnel.

The web site *www.iraqbodycount.org* estimates that between 64,333 and 70,471 Iraqi civilian deaths have been caused by Coalition military action as well as military or paramilitary responses to the Coalition presence (e.g. insurgent and terrorist attacks.)

Billions of dollars were allocated for the war simply in this latest legislation. But what is the total cost in dollars? What is the cost in terms of death and other tragedies related to the war in Iraq? What is the cost in terms of long-term rehabilitation of wounded soldiers and civilians? What is the cost in terms of long-term mental health support? And what is the cost in terms of the impact on the psyche of our nation—or Iraq, other nations, and the world as a whole?

Chuck Sernett served in the Vietnam War. He grew up on a farm in my rural neighborhood between Rolfe and Pocahontas. If alive today, he would be about 55 years old. He survived the war, came back home, married, had at least one child, and farmed. But then he shot himself. His death was related to his experiences in Vietnam, and the government eventually listed Chuck as a casualty of the war. How many other Vietnam War veterans have been or currently are scarred physically from wounds or exposure to the likes of Agent Orange? How many Vietnam veterans have been or are scarred emotionally from the trauma of the war with repercussions to themselves, their families, communities, and society?

Already, concerns are surfacing about the length of the tours of duty that military personnel are serving in Iraq and the lack of sufficient time between tours. Already, concerns are surfacing about the inadequacies of medical, including mental health, support that military personnel are receiving.

On this Memorial Day weekend, yes, take time to remember what you need or wish to remember in relation to your heritage. Take time to grieve the loss of loved ones whether they were civilians or soldiers, their deaths were current or decades ago. Take time to appreciate the efforts of the people in the Rolfe community (or for that matter, people in other communities where you live) for maintaining the cemeteries, providing a ceremony, and/or serving a meal where you can roam, ponder, and connect with others in this big world with all its complexities and difficulties.

Also, take time to grieve that our nation is involved in a pre-emptive war and that the cost is huge in terms of dollars and lives but also in terms of international esteem. In the end, the stubborn nature of our administration may be making our nation less safe from terrorism.

Take time to be thankful because there were those who served, sacrificed, and/or died in order that we could have some of the freedoms that exist in our country. But don't swallow the President and his administration's spin hook-line-and-sinker. Don't simply look at the green grass, beautiful tombstones, colorful flowers, and waving flags and feel the glow of a sunshiny day (if there are no storm clouds) and listen to the high school band play patriotic music and the students recite the Gettysburg Address and the Flanders Field poem and hear the color guard fire a 21-gun-salute followed by the bugler playing Taps then have a fine Maid-Rite meal with homemade apple pie and ice cream and think that all is OK. All is not OK.

May we seek wisdom and discern how to act upon the truth of that wisdom. One way to begin is heart-to-heart conversations with other people and not rely on the corporately-owned media for information. Another step is that of recognizing the tremendous influence that the military-industrial complex has over our government and the benefits that some sectors of that complex derive from our nation being at war. However, acknowledging the latter factors can be overwhelming. Perhaps grieving is the most important thing a concerned person can do on Memorial Day. Light and resourcefulness do come in the midst of darkness—by encountering and not by denying our fears, disappointments, and anger—and by being united with other people in small clusters of community.