“Honoring Military Service”
In the Louisville Courier-Journal, February 2004

By Dr. John Roush, President, Centre College

The events of the last two-plus years have dramatically demonstrated that 9/11 changed everything. And though we haven’t experienced a major terrorist attack on American soil since, we are still struggling to come to terms with the implications of that horrific day. As our nation tries to chart a new post-9/11 course, I believe it is essential to consider an element often overlooked on our college campuses: What does it mean to render service to one’s country?

Service is big business in our nation’s colleges and universities. Faculty promote service learning in classes as varied as economics and Spanish. Students regularly join community organizations such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Habitat for Humanity, teach literacy classes, organize food drives, donate blood, and speak out for the homeless.

At Centre College we introduce our students during their first week on campus to the wealth of volunteer opportunities in our community. Most institutions now offer programs, replete with staff and budgets, that make volunteer work and community outreach a significant part of their student experience.

I am a proponent of such programs, and I believe that including service in the experience of students strengthens and enriches all aspects of collegiate life. Service is part of what it takes to be a good citizen.

Yet, sadly, too many in the academy define “service” to include everything but military service. I believe this is wrong. Like other forms of service, military service is an honorable and vital contribution to our community and our nation.

The men and women who today volunteer to serve their country in the military are essential to maintaining our free way of life. They should be honored for having fought and, too often, died for their country.

Part of the problem is that many of our senior faculty came of age during Vietnam and mandatory conscription; their experience of 30 or 40 years ago inevitably colors their view of military service today.

It is myopic, however—and simply wrong—for a key segment of our intelligentsia to believe the choice to serve in the military is somehow a “mistake” for the young men and women sitting in their classrooms.

Given America’s leadership role in a world no less dangerous than when this country was founded, it is crucial that our nation sustain its long-standing tradition of citizen-soldiers.

The sacrifice of American soldiers makes it possible for teachers and other intellectuals to enjoy the security and freedom this country provides. Those of us in America’s
colleges simply must work to change the negative attitudes—some approaching prejudice—that many hold toward the men and women who protect our nation.

In terms of military policy, the war in Afghanistan was a reasonable act for the United States of both self-preservation and humanitarianism.

Afghanistan was the primary training ground for Al-Qaida, and the harsh rule of the Taliban was oppressive to the general population and extraordinarily punishing in its denial of even the most basic human rights to women.

History will decide whether the war in Iraq was in America’s—and the world’s—best interest. I certainly am not arguing for blind acceptance of our government’s military policy. Part of the freedom we enjoy as Americans is the opportunity to criticize the choices of our political leaders.

But this much can be said: the U.S. military has gone to unprecedented lengths to minimize civilian casualties, and the people of Iraq, freed from a dictator of almost unimaginable brutality, now have at least the hope of a brighter future.

In a recent poll of Baghdad residents, more than 60 percent said ousting Saddam was worth the effort, and two-thirds expressed the belief that their country would be better off in five years than it was before the invasion.

It is childish for us in the academy to honor all forms of service except military service. It is childish in the sense of not looking at or understanding the complexity of the world.

This position has always been a flawed one, but the events of 9/11 have brought its incompleteness into dramatically sharper relief. We cannot be true to our mission of seeking out the truth—the whole truth—while we deny the sacrifices and contributions of those who make freedom of inquiry possible.

The service of our young people—in all its possible forms—helps ensure a better life for us all.

At the very least, we must acknowledge the contributions and sacrifices of military service and allow them fair consideration on the playing field of ideas.

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