

The Forgotten 1%

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One month before the 2012 election we are marking an important calendar milestone: On October 7 we will have been engaged in the war in Afghanistan for eleven years. The 2,000th American was killed in Afghanistan this past weekend. We fought this war while we also carried on a costly seven-year war in Iraq. As of late September, 6474 Americans have died in these wars and 49,871 have been officially designated as wounded.

It is long past time for us to consider these matters in a substantive manner in our election campaigns.

In mid-September many noted the first anniversary of the "Occupy" movement. These protestors raised the 1% argument, insisting that the top 1% of the U.S population has a disproportionate share of the nation's wealth.

The current campaign reflects this issue of economic fairness. Candidates for offices ranging from state assembly to the presidency will sharply dispute whether the wealthiest Americans should pay more in taxes. This was underlined in the first presidential debate.

Less noticed, this same ratio of privilege also describes, although reversed, those who fight our wars. Ninety-nine percent of us, the privileged 99%, have been untouched by these wars. Historically an election during wartime has debated the issues of that war. There is little political debate in 2012 over the war in Afghanistan. Candidates will chest-thump about new engagements in Iran or even Syria more than they will discuss the status and remaining objectives of the war in Afghanistan. They will not acknowledge the disproportionate burden of this war and that in Iraq.

Fewer than 1% of our sons and daughters have served during these wars. About one half of one percent have actually been deployed. While the Obamas and the Bidens have reached out to the newest veterans and their families, this needs to become part of the broader culture. We cannot continue to ignore the real medical and other support needs of this generation of veterans. We cannot continue to ignore the embarrassing fact that veterans of the current wars have higher levels of unemployment and homelessness than do others in our society.

Assuredly political candidates from both parties for all offices will "support the troops." Many will illustrate their support by opposing Department of Defense sequestration cuts on defense contractors. Even those who supported the legislation that provided for these reductions will now oppose them. They will describe defense contracts as jobs bills -- with little sense of the irony of the Congress recently killing a jobs bill for unemployed veterans.

Americans applaud the "troops" but few really know them. These men and women come disproportionately from rural areas and small towns, most commonly from the south and the midwest and the plains and mountain states. They are both more white and more black than the population as a whole. More of them have high school diplomas than their peers and fewer of them have any college education. They are older than those who served in previous wars. Some 56% of them are married, most with families. Many have served multiple deployments in the combat zones with all of the tension this creates for them and their families.

Few Americans encounter the casualties of these wars -- the terrible wounds veterans courageously bear with missing limbs, disfigured and scarred bodies. Even fewer know the hidden wounds that individuals and their loved ones bear silently.

Well over 99% of us have not experienced the fear of a knock on our door and the sorrow of escorting a flag-draped coffin. Few even know the names of those who have made the sacrifice that is forever. We abstract them as "heroes" without knowing how they lived, how they died, or what dreams died with them.

These wars have been the first sustained wars in American history not to be at least partially funded by designated taxes.. No political candidate this fall will propose that we actually tax ourselves to pay for these wars. We will continue to issue debt to do that. No candidate will ask for any sacrifice. The 1% who have sacrificed can come home and then spend twenty years paying for our wars.

Over the next month we will continue to debate whether to renew tax cuts for the top 1% of the economic pyramid. And we will neglect to acknowledge, except in the most stereotyped slogans, the heavy, heavy taxes we have imposed on that 1% who have volunteered and who fight our wars. George Washington, who insisted that wars must demand sacrifice from all, would be ashamed. The most shameful thing today is the absence of any sense of shame about the forgotten 1%. Caring for them is a cost of war.

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