We Are All Heroes
The meaning — and non-meaning — of "hero" in our culture now

FIG. 1: "They don't see themselves or each other as Democrats or Republicans first," Obama scolded Congress. "They see themselves as Americans first." Bullshit is bipartisan.
2012: the year of homecoming. More than a million and a half American men and women served in the Iraq War, and if you believe the press and the politicians, every last one of them is a hero. It is an election year, too, when the sanctifying iconography that has encrusted the figure of the soldier will rise again to the foreground of public life in a series of political set pieces both Democratic and Republican [fig. 1].

What the soldiers won’t say at these events is what deep inside they know about themselves: They aren’t heroes at all. To be a hero is to do the heroic, to reach above the call of duty. The men and women returning this year are just less selfish and privileged than everybody else. They have done their job. In a previous era we would call them something else — normal Americans.

Not that long ago, serving your country used to be something everybody did — part of the deal, a requirement for acceptance as a member of the species. Now anyone who acts upon a sense of duty to others is exceptional, freakish, to be singled out. The participation culture we all grew up with to boost our fragile self-esteem — everyone gets a ribbon for showing up — has entered adult life. Have a job? You’re a hero. Look after your kids? Hero. Occasionally think about people other than yourself? Truly, you are a hero.

The decline in our heroism standards has been sharp and swift. The classical sagas about the nature of heroes focused on how nearly impossible it is to be the real deal. The Arthurian legends are stories of knights who fail even though they all are powerful warriors who possess saintlike attributes. Only Galahad, the chaste and perfect warrior — holy in his self-control, pure in his violence — emerges as the paragon. In the twentieth century, the great meditations on the nature of heroism were westerns in which the hero has to stride into conflict alone because, in one way or another, society has failed. Now merely being a functional member of society is heroic. The reversal of the Galahad narrative is complete: Every soldier is, by virtue of being a soldier, a paragon.
American popular culture has more or less stopped production of the simple American hero — the man or woman of extraordinary courage who achieves the exceptional for the benefit of the country or the world. So instead we have the could-be-a-terrorist war hero (Homeland); the I’m-doing-it-for-my-family criminal hero (Contraband); the sympathetic schlub hero (any comedy from the past five years); the hipster-self-consciously-aware-that-heroes-are-ridiculous hero (Rainn Wilson’s Super); the child-in-danger hero (Hugo); and the superhero. We are so obsessed with superheroes that Disney can justify purchasing the Marvel catalog for $4 billion, and yet every contemporary treatment of the original stories re-defines the heroism of its characters by moving away from their extraordinary natures and toward their ordinary existences. It’s the great cliché of today’s blockbusters: Being Spider-Man is easy, being Peter Parker is hard. Thor has to prove that he can be a man, not just a god. Batman is really a rich kid dealing with his traumatic childhood. And so on. Everyday life has, in itself, become a journey of great courage, or so we like to be told. When Stephen Colbert calls his audience "heroes," he’s making fun of the degradation of the term, but he’s also giving the crowd what it secretly wants and will take even in ironic form: to be called a hero just for showing up.

Truly selfless people are increasingly becoming subjects of fascination, rare specimens, like endangered butterflies that we trap under glass so that we can stare and gawk [fig. 2].

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Images of President Obama bestowing upon Sal Giunta [fig. 3] the first Congressional Medal of Honor awarded to a living serviceman since Vietnam ricocheted around the Internet. Pat Tillman, who gave up $3.6 million and the NFL to join the army
in 2002, has now been deified in book, film, and sculptural form. We know we should honor these men — and we do — but we’ve lost our ability to understand their choices because most of us would never have the guts to make the same choices.

This is the principal legacy of the Iraq War, which asked nothing of its citizens. While the war spiraled out of control, taxpayers received checks in the mail. There were no war bonds. There were no scrap-metal drives. Instead there were bumper stickers. The irony of all the fanfare was that the more Americans hallelujahed their servicemen and -women, the less like them they became. The lengthy process, begun at the end of the Second World War, of hollowing out responsibility to society — even war leads to tax cuts — is now reaching its natural conclusion. To the question "What are our obligations?" the answer has been "Buy things." It's a miserable answer.

It's not just soldiers who are aware of the hollow nature of "thank you for your service" and "you're all heroes"; it's also the people saying the thank-yous [fig. 4]. Strangers tell servicemen and -women that they're heroes because it's something they can do. The overpraise is not all alibi; it's not merely camouflage to disguise a general abdication of duty. It's a clandestine plea: Use me. Make me part of something larger than the sum of my consumptions. Give me duties. No politician in the country has the guts to ask for sacrifice — no Republican, and not Obama, either, though he said he would. Their cynicism is weak. It may be politically accurate, but socially it's tone-deaf: There is a craving for obligation that is as profound as the craving for freedom. On some level everybody understands that you can't have freedom and prosperity without sacrifice. Ordinary citizens know better than the political opportunists who play with tin soldiers: If people living up to their basic obligations are heroes, then we're all failing disastrously.
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