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JUL 12 1993

July 7, 1993

Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt
1500 Wilson Blvd., Suite 641
Arlington, VA 22209

Dear Admiral Zumwalt:

I take this opportunity to enclose a small piece I have written in response to an article published last Sunday under President Clinton's name (and probably written by one of the youngsters on his staff). Of course Mr. Clinton (or his writers) wouldn't connect military sacrifice with the Fourth of July, but I just couldn't let it pass without taking a stab at it.

The university has sent a copy to *Parade* magazine, which published the President's article. I suspect this one has virtually no chance of publication there, but I felt that we should at least give them a try. Otherwise, I am at hopeful that it will show up in the good old *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, which is always so supportive of all things military.

Very respectfully,

James R. Reckner

F E A T U R E

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THE FOURTH OF JULY RECONSIDERED

James R. Reckner, Ph.D.

I was particularly interested to read President Clinton's interpretation of the significance of the Fourth of July ("What Today Means to Me," *Parade*, July 4, 1993). I was not surprised to discover a discourse very long on the rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson and very short on the sacrifices of the common men who fought to make the United States a reality.

The hard, cold truth of the matter is that the genius of Jefferson would have been lost, his remarkable declaration meaningless, had not a band of more practical men actually taken up arms, put their lives on the line, and militarily challenged the colonial power. If Jefferson and the other influential men in Philadelphia were our "Founding Fathers," they owed a very great deal to the minuscule Continental Army, who were the bloody midwives of our liberty. I know such sentiments are unpopular in Washington just now, but that should not obscure the fact.

Hardly had the ink dried on the great document in Philadelphia in 1776 when the army, the larger part of which was, to quote one historian, "raw, undisciplined, and inexperienced in warfare," assembled in Brooklyn to repulse a regular British army twice its size. Many died there. Throughout the summer and fall of 1776, the Americans suffered a series of disastrous defeats, at Brooklyn Heights, at Kip's Bay (now West 34th Street, Manhattan), at White Plains and Fort Washington. In the final weeks of 1776, the army, greatly depleted by casualties, desertions and expiration of enlistments, was in full retreat across New Jersey, finally reaching the relative safety of Pennsylvania.

Ill-equipped, poorly supplied and equally poorly supported by the same politicians in Philadelphia who during the summer months had declared America's independence with such ringing phrases, the Continental Army made a desperate late December attack against German mercenary troops, the Hessians, encamped for the winter at Trenton, New Jersey. One American company, delayed in crossing the Delaware, was able to trace the route of the advancing army by following the blood trail; many of the Continental Army soldiers, shoeless, had marched, barefoot, along the ice- and snow-covered trails to the field of battle.

Who were these men who made such sacrifice? What drove them? Was it Jefferson's high-sounding ideals? Or was it something much more basic? The American Revolutionary War experience has become so wrapped in mythology that such questions are rarely asked. We comfortably accept the image of the "Minuteman," the common citizen galvanized to action by British inequities, who sustained the Revolution through eight long years of fighting.

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As usual, the truth lies some distance from these near universally accepted myths. The minutemen, the militia, although accidental catalysts of revolution at Lexington in 1775, were for the most part landed men who were reluctant to leave their farms for extended periods. They might be available for operations near their homes, but they could not be depended upon for the extended campaigns necessary for victory. Therefore, if the new nation was to have an army that would go wherever it was needed to exploit the fortunes of the war, it would have to have a regular army, a professional army.

Except as officers, the more affluent Americans proved very reluctant to join the Continental Army. In the end, through promises of land and a grant of money upon the successful conclusion of the war, a certain class of men were attracted to serve: those who were then landless, or lacked a trade, or were indentured servants -- in modern terminology, the people at the bottom of the socio-economic order.

It was this class of men, then, and not the social elite, who actually risked their lives, took up the challenge, and faced the enemy on the field of battle. No starry-eyed idealist seeking to define a new world order were these men. Rather, they saw in service a path of upward social mobility. Yes, of course they fought for America's freedom, but as any combat veteran will tell you, such theoretical considerations go out the window when you are cold and hungry, and the bullets begin to fly. The promise of future social advancement and economic security is what sustained the men of the Continental Army through the long years of service and privation.

Washington's diminutive army suffered many defeats during the war, and a few notable victories: at Trenton in 1776, Saratoga in 1777 and Yorktown in 1781. And when the threat of British victory receded, discontent grew within the ranks, for the army had long gone without pay, and Congress, with their collective neck now considerably more distant from a British noose thanks to the Continental Army's sacrifices, sought to renege on the promises made to the servicemen during the time of greatest danger. I can appreciate that President Clinton, as he seeks to reshape our armed forces, and orders today's servicemen and women to make additional sacrifices to carry out his agenda, doesn't reflect on this when he thinks about the Fourth of July. Shabby treatment of our servicemen and women is an American post-war tradition; the end of the Cold War is no exception.

Young Americans have been called to defend America and American interests at regular intervals ever since the Revolutionary War. One of the most divisive of America's many conflicts since then was the War of 1812. Modern Americans remember little about this conflict. The New England states strongly opposed the war, refused to contribute militia for the initial campaigns, and even continued to provide the enemy army in Canada with food and other supplies. New England went so far as to consider, at a convention in Hartford in 1814, the possibility of seceding from the Union.

Shortly after that war, and certainly reflecting on the war's many divisive and unpopular aspects, a navy officer, called to make a toast to the United States, offered this: "My country: may she ever be right. But my country, right or wrong!" In so saying, Captain Stephen Decatur succinctly outlined the ethic which has guided the Armed Forces of the United States for over two centuries, and continues to guide them today. For that ethic we may all be thankful.

It was the same ethic, by the way, that motivated many of the young men and women who served in Vietnam. I still unabashedly subscribe to it. I can't imagine substituting, "My country: may she ever be right. But I'll be the judge of that on a case-by-case basis." It's not popular to air these sentiments in Washington just now, although it should be. I well understand, too, that as our commander-in-chief, President Clinton probably would not wish to spend much time reflecting on Decatur's toast on the Fourth of July either.

James R. Reckner, Ph.D., is a retired naval officer who served two years with the riverine forces in Vietnam, teaches military history and currently serves as director of Texas Tech University's Center for the Study of the Vietnam Conflict.

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E. R. ZUMWALT, JR.
ADMIRAL, U. S. NAVY (RET.)

July 16, 1993

James R. Reckner, Ph.D.
Texas Tech University
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P. O. Box 4529
Lubbock, TX 79409-1013

Dear Jim:

Many thanks for your letter of July 7. I certainly agree with what you had to say.

All best wishes.

Sincerely,

Bud

E. R. Zumwalt, Jr.

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