

Suicide or military self-immolation?

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Perhaps U.S. soldiers who commit military self-immolation are only trying to rehumanize themselves by refusing to dehumanize and kill others.

By Dallas Darling

Many of us who lived through the Cold War can still recall the images of political self-immolation. Political self-immolation is when an individual sets himself/herself on fire and burns to death. It is a vivid way to symbolically protest human rights abuses or bring attention to a cause.

In 1963, the Venerable Thich Quang Duc committed political self-immolation in protest against South Vietnam's President Diem's refusal to hold national elections and for brutally crushing demonstrations. Other

Buddhist monks did the same when Diem, backed by the U.S., forced villagers into fortified strategic hamlets and banned the religious flags for Buddha's birthday.

In 1969, Jan Palach burned himself to death to oppose the Soviet invasion of Prague. Thousands of mourners later marched to Wenceslas Square carrying black flags and the Czechoslovak flag where the political self-immolation occurred.

In the same ways are some U.S. troops who take their lives, in order to avoid killing others, actually committing military self-immolation? Military self-immolation, much like political self-immolation, is an emblematic protest in which a soldier takes his/her life instead of being forced to kill an enemy combatant or murdering innocent civilians.

During war time or military service, soldiers may convert and embrace the ideas of nonviolence and that all of life is sacred. They may also believe it is wrong to destroy another human being. When soldiers express such thoughts and feelings, they are either obligated to change or severely persecuted, shamed with a court martial, imprisoned, and disowned by their military peers and society.

Because of this, thoughts of military self-immolation become common and some troops may think it is their only recourse. If accomplished, it is a way to protest a culture of violence and the evils of war.

Suicide rates among returning U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan have skyrocketed. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims almost 1,000 troops attempt suicide each month. Over 40,000 veterans have been diagnosed with war-related stress known as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). (A Rand Study has placed the number at 300,000!) The cause for veteran suicide is usually attributed to soldiers being unable to function in society or suffering from depression, drug overdose, and broken marriages, all caused by PTSD.

In some cases, though, soldiers have taken their lives to avoid redeployments back to Iraq and Afghanistan. They have left behind notes and websites expressing a desire to either find "peace" or evade killing innocent women and children. In their attempt to escape the horrors of war, have we confused military self-immolation for suicide? Have we misdiagnosed human empathy and pacifism for depression and combat stress?

It was recently reported that 21 U.S. troops inside a military base in Iraq made a pact to commit suicide (military self-immolation), with only 5 surviving. They belonged to a unit that had killed and massacred several Iraqi families, mostly women and children.

In recent years, five Army recruiters from the same Houston-based battalion have committed suicide (military self-immolation). Was this due to their deployment to Iraq? Studies have shown that other nations engaged in offensive wars and lengthy occupations also suffer from low troop morale. Over 40 percent of British troops claim they are demoralized and will not reenlist.

When French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, an Israeli soldier stationed only 100 meters away committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. The Israeli soldier had worked at checkpoints and road blocks in the West Bank and had witnessed beatings, shootings and numerous human rights abuses. Was it another case of military self-immolation?

Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, just acknowledged many returning U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan are suffering from psychological and physical injuries. He is calling for all returning combat troops to undergo screening for PTSD.

As needful and helpful as this is, it may also be prudent to screen wars that are preventable and unnecessary while also screening deceitful war-minded presidents and politicians. Supporting our troops may too entail reevaluating a society that willingly supports and enables its leaders and institutions to pursue perpetual war and pre-emptive invasions, which often lead to long occupations and the deaths of millions.

Years ago after the Israeli army took extensive archives on Palestinian culture and history from the PLO's Palestine Research Center in West Beirut, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Meron Benvenisti, said, "This was not only to destroy them as a political or military power, but to take from them their history, to erase that because it is troublesome."

He continued, "The process of dehumanization is a product of all such conflicts...when you are at war, you must dehumanize your enemy, because if not, then you are a murderer."
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Perhaps soldiers who commit military self-immolation are only trying to rehumanize themselves by refusing to dehumanize and kill others. It may also serve as a symbolic indictment towards militaristic societies and offensive wars of nationalism and genocide.

In recognizing their protest unto death and learning from their refusal to kill others, maybe we too can try and re-humanize our ourselves and forge a more just and peaceful world. In the end, rehumanization and societal reconstruction is much better than dehumanization and societal destruction. Is it not?

(1) Stone, Ronald H., and Dana Wilbanks. The Peacemaking Struggle: Militarism And Resistance. New York, New York: University Press of America, 1985. p. 69.

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