

What We Talk About When We Talk About ‘Thank You for Your Service’

I was recently talking with a friend about the dialogue surrounding ‘thank you for your service’ in the military and veteran community. When I mentioned that it might not be the best thing to say based on what I’d read and heard, she was perplexed. She wondered how a seemingly harmless phrase like that could take on such negative connotations. After thinking about it for a while, I wondered myself. Given the pervasiveness of this phrase’s criticism, it’s important to take a closer look at what we’re really talking about when we talk about ‘thank you for your service.’

The spectrum of denigration of this saying within the military and veteran community is wide. Some have said it doesn’t go far enough, that society should do more than utter a phrase and offer a free meal on Veterans’ Day to welcome back its warriors. Some say it’s simply sycophantic and has more to do with making people feeling good about themselves than legitimately honoring a veteran’s service. And there’s a chorus of voices that claim such a platitude is a symptom of widespread disengagement, sort of a proxy for any meaningful conversation about war. Still others say there’s simply no need to be thanked for something we volunteered to do.

While there is a degree of validity to much of this criticism, perhaps the interpretations are indicative of something deeper, something that speaks more about the perspective and experiences of post- 9/11 veterans than of the meaning (or the lack of meaning) of the phrase itself.

It’s true that a tiny fragment of American society participated in Iraq and Afghanistan. While we were at war our peers were obtaining higher education or pursuing and building careers, something on which we got a late start because we chose to serve. Life went on for everyone. “America wasn’t at war,” so the saying goes, “America was at the mall. [Sebastian Junger](#) and [James Fallows](#) have correctly pointed out that the wars following 9/11 were something that fell on the shoulders of the participants in those wars rather than the society in whose name they were fought. Junger has discussed a situation in which the public simply doesn’t know what its military does, and Fallows

mentioned that the gap between cultures goes further, effectively stymieing realistic, constructive debate about military spending and policy. “Thank you for your service” can, in that light, be seen as something of a hollow gesture coming from across a wide chasm between the experiences of those who fought and those that didn’t.

The character of those experiences themselves can be part of the problem as well. Recently, the concept of ‘[moral injury](#)’ has garnered some attention. In summary, moral injury is the effects of taking part in an act that goes against basic human tenets of right or wrong, like killing. The ubiquity of civilians on modern, non-linear battlefields coupled with the guerilla tactics we encountered created situations in which innocent civilians were killed even while following the rules of war. In this context the expression of gratitude for morally ambiguous acts seems inappropriate.

War unleashes a complex set of conflicting emotions. As young men and women we were awed by incredible displays of firepower even while knowing the obscenity of its purpose. Sometimes we loved it. Sometimes we hated it. Sometimes we hated that the fact that we loved it. And in the back of our minds, we knew it was something we chose to do. We’re proud of that even if we’re appalled at the sights we saw. That the overall experience can leave a veteran grappling with significant questions is not hard to fathom.

Can the average civilian contemplate the depth of this internal conflict? Probably not. But it seems they are attempting to demonstrate respect for it by saying ‘thank you for your service.’ If the recent box office success of *American Sniper* is any indication, they’re willing to learn more about our experiences. Perhaps we shouldn’t spurn that. Perhaps we should meet them halfway across that gap.

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