

Is it worth one more soldier?

By James Reston Jr.

When, a couple of months ago, President Obama announced his plans for the end of the Afghanistan war by 2014, and more intensely, earlier this month, when that Chinook helicopter was shot down with 30 Americans on board, my thoughts went yet again to the soldiers who are fighting this seemingly endless war and to those who are asked to risk their lives still for a slow, protracted drawdown. As a soldier myself long ago during the height of the Vietnam War, I have always seen the conflicts of the past 10 years through the eyes of the soldier.

During the Vietnam War, horrible and wrong and ultimately humiliating as it was, there was an honorable compact between the soldier and the nation: If you deployed to Vietnam, you were obligated to serve only one year in the combat zone. If you were lucky enough to get into the National Guard, the refuge of so many of our best and brightest, you could not be sent to the combat zone. There was then an implicit recognition that the Vietnam war was a dirty business and questionable in its origin, conception and execution.

Now we hear about the stop losses and the multiple deployments, men and women going back three and four times to Iraq and Afghanistan. We do not hear them complain. They would get in trouble if they did so publicly. Nor does the nation at large complain. Those volunteer soldiers asked for it, didn't they?

Only the dead

But I know how most of them feel, and it makes me profoundly uneasy. When I hear them honored and cheered at baseball games and concerts, I feel something in the pit of my stomach. The soldiers know who the cheers are for, and they are not for them. It reminds me of the phrase that was used by my buddies who were training to be jungle interrogators: "We learn Vietnamese, so you don't have to." Even more, I think of the once-famous question a youthful John Kerry asked Congress in 1971: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"



By David Goldman, AP

In Afghanistan: Marines Sgt. Jason Gagliano, left, and Sgt. Kenneth Schaal.

In Afghanistan and elsewhere in history, troops pay for the people's passivity.

well address at West Point in 1962, when he talked of the three hallowed words of duty, honor and country. "The soldier, above all other people prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war," MacArthur told the cadets before the messiness of the Vietnam War really got underway. "But always in our ears ring the ominous words of Plato, that wisest of all philosophers, 'Only the dead have seen the end of war.'"

In fact, the good general was misinformed. It was not Plato at all who wrote those chiseled words, but another wise philosopher, George Santayana. In an essay called "Tipperary," which he wrote at the end of World War I, Santayana, too, was pondering the death of soldiers lost, and soldiers who survived. Of those who survived, he said, "they are hardly out of the fog of war when they are lost in the fog of peace."

He was remembering the young men who marched off to war in high spirits singing, "It's a long, long way to Tipperary." He wondered why, toward the end, they were no longer humming the jaunty air that trumpeted the dreamy Irish refuge of sweethearts, peace and safety. "I have seen in some of you the smile that makes light of pain, the sturdy humility that accepts mutilation and faces disability without repining or shame. Armless and legless men are

of my adult life America has been at war. The number is 25 out of 52, nearly half the time. This is, Santayana suggests, the natural condition of mankind. Peace requires discipline at home and invulnerability abroad, he argued, and this might just be too much to ask for most of the time. "This war," he wrote of World War I, "has given you your first glimpse of the ancient, fundamental, normal state of the world, your first taste of reality."

Is he right about that? Should future American generations expect that nearly half of their adult years will be war years?

Dying for a lost cause

There is a fundamental danger to allowing the policymaker to have an ample supply of uncomplaining soldiers from the small towns and inner cities of America. When there is no political resistance at home to their endless deployment, the war planners are free to execute their grand designs, no matter how long it might take. Such a situation makes these protracted conflicts more palatable and likely. But there is a moral point here: How do you ask the last soldier to die for a slow drawdown?

Santayana's dictum has taken on a life of its own in annals of war. But the wider context of the epigram is never quoted.

"The poor fellows think they are safe! They think that the war — perhaps the last of all wars — is over! Only the dead are safe; only the dead have seen the end of war."

James Reston Jr. served in the Army from 1965 to 1968. His forthcoming