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An Old Soldier's Denial on Afghanistan



B-52 Stratofortress, dropping bombs over Vietnam. Photo: US Air Force.

In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* regarding the Afghanistan debacle, Stephen Sloane, a retired captain in the U.S. Navy who served in the Vietnam War, is a perfect demonstration of how so many people, especially in the military, live lives of denial when it comes to foreign interventionism.

Addressing Marines who served in Afghanistan who are now frustrated and angry over the result in Afghanistan, Sloane tells them that there is no disgrace in defeat because U.S. soldiers “took an oath to the Constitution.” He says, “Loyalty to that oath has helped preserve the right of Americans and others to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for more than 200 years.” He points not only to “the failed effort to keep Afghanistan out of

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the hands of the Taliban” but also to “the failed effort to keep Vietnam free from communism.”

That’s just sheer nonsense.

Loyalty to the president

While U.S. soldiers technically take an oath to support and defend the Constitution, as a practical matter their oath is to serve the president and unconditionally obey his orders. Since the president is democratically elected, in their minds they are supporting and defending the Constitution when they dutifully and loyally obey the commands of their commander in chief.

The two examples that Sloane cites — Vietnam and Afghanistan — are perfect examples of this phenomenon.

The Constitution requires a declaration of war from Congress before the president can legally wage war. No declaration, no waging of war. Everyone agrees that that is what the Constitution says. The Framers did not want the president to be deciding whether the nation goes to war. They chose to have Congress make that decision.

It is undisputed that there was never a congressional declaration of war against North Vietnam or Afghanistan. Given such, no president had the legal authority to order U.S. troops to invade and occupy either country.

Nonetheless, such orders were issued. At that point, U.S. soldiers had a choice: either support and defend the Constitution by disobeying those illegal orders to invade and occupy or faithfully and loyally obey the president and, in the process, violate the Constitution.

U.S. soldiers chose to obey the president. They always do. They just rationalize their decision by convincing themselves that by obeying the president, they are supporting and defending the Constitution.

Interventionism destroys freedom

Second, the interventions in Vietnam and Afghanistan did nothing to preserve “the right of Americans and others to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” They did the exact opposite. Sloane is living in la la land.

For one thing, the war in Vietnam involved conscription of Americans. That means that the U.S. government seized 2.2 million American men and forced them to leave their families and their jobs to travel thousands of miles away from American shores to kill or be killed in the name of “freedom.” Those who refused to “serve” were severely punished,

including with incarceration. I would love to know how Sloane reconciles that with his concept of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Moreover, countless Vietnamese people died or were injured or maimed as a result of the illegal U.S. invasion of their country. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, they didn’t get to exercise their rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” given that they were dead, injured, or maimed.

Moreover, think of the destruction of civil liberties and privacy here at home at the hands of the FBI and the CIA. COINTELPRO, the infamous federal program to spy on and destroy opponents of the war, comes to mind. So does the killing of antiwar protestors at Kent State University at the hands of U.S. soldiers. Where do those things fit into Sloane’s concept of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?

Accompanying the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan were the USA PATRIOT Act, the infamous telecom scandals, and the NSA spying on Americans.

And let’s certainly not forget the Pentagon’s and the CIA’s infamous torture and prison camp in Cuba, which is based on indefinite detention, denial of due process, denial of speedy trial, denial of effective assistance of counsel, denial of the right to confront adverse witnesses, and the use of evidence and confessions acquired by torture.

Correct me if I’m wrong but aren’t all those rights part of the Bill of Rights? And isn’t the Bill of Rights part of the Constitution? How does Sloane reconcile those violations of the Constitution with the soldier’s oath to support and defend the Constitution?

Our founding principles

Our American ancestors were steadfastly opposed to what they called “standing armies.” The main reason for their opposition was that they were convinced that a large military establishment consisting of soldiers who loyally and faithfully obeyed the orders of the ruler constituted the greatest threat to their freedom and well-being.

In his Fourth of July address in 1821, John Quincy Adams described America’s founding foreign policy. He said that America does not go abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.” He said that if America were ever to abandon this foreign policy of non-intervention, America would acquire the traits of dictatorship, which, of course, can pose a grave threat to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

President Eisenhower, who had served as commander of Allied Forces in World War II, emphasized in his Farewell Address In 1961 the grave threat that the “military-industrial complex” poses to America’s freedom and democratic processes.

Sloane has it all wrong. The U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam and Afghanistan didn't die for the Constitution or so that Americans and others could exercise their rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Instead, the sad truth is that they died for nothing, as they loyally followed orders to kill or be killed. The same holds true for those who came back maimed and traumatized, which has led many of them to take their own lives after returning home.

The sooner Americans come to accept what the abandonment of America's founding principles has done to our nation, the sooner we will be able to get America back on the right track.

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