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The Conversation

Talking Between Columns

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Support for the Troops

By *DAVID BROOKS* AND *BOB HERBERT*

Annie Tritt for The New York Times At last year's Veterans Day parade in New York City, Vietnam veterans collected money for service members in need.

Bob Herbert: David, the president is deciding what we should be doing with regard to troop deployments in Afghanistan. It seems to me that however one feels about this war and the war in Iraq, the environment here on the home front is bizarre. This is as weird a wartime atmosphere as I can imagine. For most Americans, there is nothing in the way of shared wartime sacrifices. There is no draft. We have not raised taxes to pay for the wars. Except for the families of those in the military, most Americans are paying very little attention to these conflicts. I've brought this matter up a few times on college campuses and the response has been, in essence, a collective shrug.

David Brooks: I know what you mean. And what's more, over the past year I've had a number of conversations with members of the military who spontaneously mentioned that they're a little tired of people coming up and thanking them for their service. It's not that they are tired of being thanked, I imagine, it's just that this greeting has given civilians a false impression that they're doing something for the troops. It's too easy.

Bob Herbert: What do you think some of us in civilian life should be doing? I know there is no support for a draft, so that's not going to be a serious part of the national conversation. But it might be possible to get civilians to volunteer in greater numbers to help returning G.I.'s deal with some of the extremely serious challenges they face when they get back home. I was recently in San Francisco talking with doctors at the V.A. medical center there who are doing extensive studies of the mental health difficulties returning veterans are facing. Hundreds of thousands have post-traumatic stress disorder or are suffering from major depression, or both. And there is a big problem with vets who have sustained traumatic brain injuries. All of this makes the already difficult transition to civilian life even more problematic.

Many of the troops have been sent into war zones for multiple tours. In many instances, we are equipping them with anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication and putting them right back into the most harrowing, most dangerous situations. President Obama has said the war in Afghanistan is a war of

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During World War II, there was very much a sense that 'we're in this together'; that's not the case now.

necessity, essential to the security of Americans here at home. If that's the case, then I think an awful lot of us should be doing an awful lot more.

In the Second World War, those who did not serve in uniform nevertheless endured shortages of fuel, certain types of food and material goods. The nation took great collective pride in the fight against the Nazis and the Japanese. Major industries were converted to war production. Bonds were sold. Taxes were raised. There was very much a sense that "we're in this together."

David Brooks: I'm not sure it's necessary to have national mobilizations a la World War II, but I can think of a few things that might spread the sacrifice around. First, we need a civilian nation-building academy. The military dominates nation-building efforts in part because the State Department contributions are pathetic. In Afghanistan the so-called civilian surge has been practically non-existent. We need to train people to do this kind of work — to provide legal aid, police aid, agricultural aid and so on. We don't have to call it a colonial office, but we do need civilians who are willing to go to places like Afghanistan and do civil society building work.

When I was in Afghanistan earlier this year, a former student of mine named Elyse Jordan was over there doing this sort of stuff. Earlier she had been working in Iraq. She's incredibly heroic, but there should be institutions to support cadres of Elyses.

We also need to beef up the benefit packages for the families of those killed and wounded. The benefit levels for widows are sad. There are also tons of worthy groups like [Wounded Warriors](#) that we could all be giving to today with the click of a mouse.

Finally, we could treat the soldiers and Marines for what they are — warriors. Sometimes I feel we treat them as victims, long suffering souls who go to places like Iraq and Afghanistan to mainly just endure. They're trained not to be victims but warriors. Sometimes I don't feel we respect them for the fighting prowess they possess. As a culture we are a lot more comfortable with victims than warriors.

We need institutions with cadres of civilians to go to war zones to do civil society building.

Since President Obama has said he will definitely not draw down troops, we're going to be in Afghanistan in force for a long time, with either 60,000 to 80,000 troops or 100,000 to 120,000 troops. Those men and women have been trained to fight. We should also send civilians who are trained to offer civil and community service, to make the soldier's stay easier and shorter.

Bob Herbert: It's very difficult to sustain public support for wars in which the public does not feel it has a real stake. The members of the military have behaved heroically and conducted themselves with great dignity. Their sacrifices (and those of their families) have been enormous. I haven't even talked about the thousands who have given their lives and the tens of thousands who have suffered terrible physical injuries.

But one of my great concerns, apart from the unfairness of having a very small sliver of the population shoulder the entire wartime burden, is that the absence of shared sacrifice makes it all too easy to be in favor of engaging in warfare — at least at the beginning. And then the public's interest fades, and if the wars don't go well, support wanes.

I think we all need to take this stuff a lot more seriously.