

**Thank You for Your Valor, Thank You for Your Service,  
Thank You, Thank You, Thank You... ?**

**By Rory Fanning**

Last week, in a quiet indie bookstore on the north side of Chicago, I saw the latest issue of Rolling Stone resting on a chrome-colored plastic table a few feet from a barista brewing a vanilla latte. A cold October rain fell outside. A friend of mine grabbed the issue and began flipping through it. Knowing that I was a veteran, he said, "Hey, did you see this?" pointing to a news story that seemed more like an ad. It read in part:

"This Veterans Day, Bruce Springsteen, Eminem, Rihanna, Dave Grohl, and Metallica will be among numerous artists who will head to the National Mall in Washington D.C. on November 11th for 'The Concert For Valor,' an all-star event that will pay tribute to armed services."

"Concert For Valor? That sounds like something the North Korean government would organize," I said as I typed Concertforvalor.com into my MacBook Pro looking for more information.

The sucking sound from the espresso maker was drowning out a 10-year-old Shins song.

As I read, my heart sank, my shoulders slumped.

Special guests at the Concert for Valor were to include: Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, and Steven Spielberg. The mission of the concert, according to a press release, was to "raise awareness" of veterans issues and "provide a national stage for ensuring that veterans and their families know that their fellow Americans' gratitude is genuine."

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs

Admiral Michael Mullen were to serve in an advisory capacity, and Starbucks, HBO, and JPMorgan Chase were to pay for it all. "We are honored to play a small role to help raise awareness and support for our service men and women," said HBO chairman Richard Plepler. Though I couldn't quite say why, that Concert for Valor ad felt tired and sad, despite the images of Rihanna singing full-throated into a gold microphone and James Hetfield and Kirk Hammett of Metallica wailing away on their guitars. I had gotten my own share of "thanks" from civilians when I was still a U.S. Army Ranger. Who hadn't? It had been the endless theme of the post-9/11 era, how thankful other Americans were that we would do... well, what exactly, for them? And here it was again. I couldn't help wondering: Would veterans somewhere actually feel the gratitude that Starbucks and HBO hoped to convey?

I went home and cooked dinner for my wife and little girl in a semi-depressed state, thinking about that word "valor" which was to be at the heart of the event and wondering about the Hall of Fame line-up of twenty-first century liberalism that was promoting it or planning to turn out to hail it: Rolling Stone, the magazine of Hunter S. Thompson and all things rock and roll; Bruce Springsteen, the billion-dollar working-class hero; Eminem, the white rapper who has sold more records than Elvis; Metallica, the crew who sued Napster and the metal band of choice for so many long-haired, disenfranchised youth of the 1980s and 1990s. They were all going to say "thank you" -- again.

### **Raising (Whose?) Awareness**

Later that night, I sat down and Googled "vets honored." Dozens and dozens of stories promptly queued up on my screen. (Try it yourself.) One of the first items I clicked on was the 50th anniversary celebration in Bangor, Maine, of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the alleged Pearl

Harbor of the Vietnam War. Governor Paul LePage had spoken ringingly of the veterans of that war: “These men were just asked to go to a foreign land and protect our freedoms. And they weren’t treated with respect when they returned home. Now it’s time to acknowledge it.”

Vietnam, he insisted, was all about protecting freedom -- such a simple and innocent explanation for such a long and horrific war. Lest you forget, the governor and those gathered in Bangor that day were celebrating a still-murky “incident” that touched off a massive American escalation of the war. It was claimed that North Vietnamese patrol boats had twice attacked an American destroyer, though President Lyndon Johnson later suggested that the incident might even have involved shooting at "flying fish" or "whales." As for protecting freedom in Vietnam, tell the dead Vietnamese in America’s “free fire zones” about that.

No one, however, cared about such details. The point was that eternal “thank you.” If only, I thought, some inquisitive and valorous local reporter had asked the governor, “Treated with disrespect by whom?” And pointed out the mythology behind the idea that American civilians had mistreated GIs returning from Vietnam. (Unfortunately, the same can’t be said for the Veterans Administration, which denied returning soldiers proper healthcare, or the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, organizations that weren’t eager to claim the country’s defeated veterans of a disastrous war as their own.)

When it came to thanks and “awareness raising,” no American war with a still living veteran seemed too distant to be ignored. Google told me, for example, that Upper Gwynedd, Pennsylvania, had recently celebrated its 12th annual “Multi-Cultural Day” by thanking its “forgotten Korean War Veterans.” According to a local newspaper report, included in the festivities were martial arts demonstrations and traditional Korean folk dancing.

The Korean War was the precursor to Vietnam, with similar results. As with the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the precipitating event of the war that North Korea ignited on June 25, 1950, remains open to question. Evidence suggests that, with U.S. approval, South Korea initiated a bombardment of North Korean villages in the days leading up to the invasion. As in Vietnam, there, too, the U.S. supported a corrupt autocrat and used napalm on a mass scale. Millions died, including staggering numbers of civilians, and North Korea was left in rubble by war's end. Folk dancing was surely in short supply. As for protecting our freedoms in Korea, enough said.

These two ceremonies seemed to catch a particular mood (reflected in so many similar, if more up-to-date versions of the same). They might have benefitted from a little "awareness raising" when it came to what the American military has actually been doing these last years, not to say decades, beyond our borders. They certainly summed up much of the frustration I was feeling with the Concert for Valor. Plenty of thank yous, for sure, but no history when it came to what the thanks were being offered for in, say, Iraq or Afghanistan, no statistics on taxpayer dollars spent or where they went, or on innocent lives lost and why.

Will the "Concert for Valor" mention the trillions of dollars rung up terrorizing Muslim countries for oil, the ratcheting up of the police and surveillance state in this country since 9/11, the hundreds of thousands of lives lost thanks to the wars of George W. Bush and Barack Obama? Is anyone going to dedicate a song to Chelsea Manning, or John Kiriakou, or Edward Snowden – two of them languishing in prison and one in exile -- for their service to the American people? Will the Concert for Valor raise anyone's awareness when it comes to the fact that, to this day, veterans lack proper medical attention, particularly for mental health issues, or that there is a veteran suicide every 80 minutes in this country? Let's hope they find time in between drum

solos, but myself, I'm not counting on it.

### **Thank You ?**

While Googling around, I noticed an allied story about President Obama christening a poetic sounding "American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial" on October 5th. There, he wisely noted that "the U.S. should never rush into war." As he spoke, however, the Air Force, the Navy, and Special Forces personnel (who wear boots that do touch the ground, even in Iraq), as well as the headquarters of "the Big Red One," the Army's 1st Infantry Division, were already involved in the latest war he had personally ordered in Iraq and Syria, while, of course, bypassing Congress.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you! Damn, I voted for Obama because he said he'd end our overseas wars. At least it's not Bush sending the planes, drones, missiles, and troops back there, because if it were, I'd be mad.

Then there were the numerous stories about "Honor Flights" sponsored by Southwest Airlines that offered all World War II veterans and the terminally ill veterans of more recent wars a free trip to Washington to "reflect at their memorials" before they died. Honor flights turn out to be a particularly popular way to honor veterans. Local papers in Richfield, Utah, Des Moines, Iowa, Elgin, Illinois, Austin, Texas, Miami, Florida, and so on place by place across significant swaths of the country have run stories about dying hometown "heroes" who have participated in these flights, a kind of nothing-but-the-best-in-corporate-sponsorship for the last of the "Greatest Generation."

"Welcome home" ceremonies, with flags, marching bands, heartfelt embraces, much weeping, and the usual babies and small children missed during tours of duty in our war zones

are also easy to find. In the first couple of screens Google offered in response to the phrase “welcome home ceremony,” I found the usual thank-you celebrations for veterans returning from Afghanistan in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, and Saint Albans, Vermont, among other places. “We don't do enough for our veterans, for what they do for us, we hear the news, but to be up there in a field, and be shot at, and sometimes coming home disabled, we don't realize how lucky we are sometimes to have the people who have served their country,” one of the Saint Albans attendees was typically quoted as saying.

**“Do enough...?” In America, isn't thank you plenty?**

Oddly, it's harder to find thank-you ceremonies for living vets involved in America's numerous smaller interventions in places like the Dominican Republic, Lebanon, Grenada, Kosovo, Somalia, Libya, and various CIA-organized coups and proxy wars around the world, but I won't be surprised if they, too, exist. I was wondering, though: What about all those foreign soldiers we've trained to fight our wars for us in places like South Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan? Shouldn't they be thanked as well? And how about members of the Afghan Mujahedeen that we armed and funded in the 1980s while they gave the Soviet Union its own “Vietnam” (and who are now fighting for al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or other extreme Islamist outfits)? Or what about the Indonesian troops we armed under the presidency of Gerald Ford, who committed possibly genocidal acts in East Timor in 1975? Or has our capacity for thanks been used up in the service of American vets?

Since 9/11, those thank yous have been aimed at veterans with the regularity of the machine gun fire that may still haunt their dreams. Veterans have also been offered special consideration when it comes to applications for mostly menial jobs so that they can “utilize the

skills” they learned in the military. While they continue to march in those welcome home parades and have concerts organized in their honor, the thank yous are in no short supply. The only question that never seems to come up is: What exactly are they being thanked for?

### **Heroes Who Afford Us Freedom**

Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz has said of the upcoming Concert for Valor: “The post-9/11 years have brought us the longest period of sustained warfare in our nation’s history. The less than one percent of Americans who volunteered to serve during this time have afforded the rest of us remarkable freedoms -- but that freedom comes with a responsibility to understand their sacrifice, to honor them, and to appreciate the skills and experience they offer when they return home.”

It was crafty of Schultz to redirect that famed 1% label from the ultra rich, represented by CEOs like him, onto our “heroes.” At the concert, I hope Schultz has a chance to get more specific about those “remarkable freedoms.” Will he mention that the U.S. has the highest per capita prison population on the planet? Does he include among those remarkable freedoms the guarantee that dogs, Tasers, tear gas, and riot police will be sent after you if you stay out past dark protesting the killing of an unarmed Black teenager by a representative of this country’s increasingly militarized police? Will the freedom to be too big to fail and so to have the right to melt down the economy and walk away without going to prison -- as Jamie Dimon, the CEO of Chase, did -- be mentioned? Do these remarkable freedoms include having every American phone call and email recorded and stored away by the NSA?

And what about that term “hero”? Many veterans reject it, and not just out of Gary Cooperesque modesty either. Most veterans who have seen combat, watched babies get torn

apart, or their comrades die in their arms, or the most powerful army on Earth spend trillions of dollars fighting some of the poorest people in the world for 13 years feel anything but heroic. But that certainly doesn't stop the use of the term. So why do we use it? As journalist Cara Hoffman points out at Salon:

“‘[H]ero’ refers to a character, a protagonist, something in fiction, not to a person, and using this word can hurt the very people it’s meant to laud. While meant to create a sense of honor, it can also buy silence, prevent discourse, and benefit those in power more than those navigating the new terrain of home after combat. If you are a hero, part of your character is stoic sacrifice, silence. This makes it difficult for others to see you as flawed, human, vulnerable, or exploited.”

We use the term hero in part because it makes us feel good and in part because it shuts soldiers up (which, believe me, makes the rest of us feel better). Labeled as a hero, it’s also hard to think twice about putting your weapons down. Thank yous to heroes discourage dissent, which is one reason military bureaucrats feed off the term.

There are American soldiers stationed around the globe who think about filing conscientious objector status (as I once did), and I sometimes hear from some of them. They often grasp the way in which the militarized acts of imperial America are helping to create the very enemies they are then being told to kill. They understand that the trillions of dollars being wasted on war will never be spent on education, health care, or the development of clean energy here at home. They know that they are fighting for American control over the flow of fossil fuels on this planet, the burning of which is warming our world and threatening human existence. Then you have Bruce Springsteen and Metallica telling them “thank you” for wearing that



uniform, that they are heroes, that whatever it is they're doing in distant lands while we go about our lives here isn't an issue. There is even the possibility that, one day, you, the veteran, might be ushered onto that stage during a concert or onto the field during a ball game for a very public thank you. The conflicted soldier thinks twice.

## **Valor**

I'm back at that indie bookstore sitting at the same chrome-colored table trying to hash all this out, including my own experiences in the Army Rangers, and end on a positive note. The latest issue of Rolling Stone appears to have sold out. Out the window, the sun is peeking through a thick web of clouds. They sell wine here, too. The sooner I finish this, the sooner I can start drinking.

There is no question that we should honor people who fight for justice and liberty. Many veterans enlisted in the military thinking that they were indeed serving a noble cause, and it's no lie to say that they fought with valor for their brothers and sisters to their left and right. Unfortunately, good intentions at this stage are no substitute for good politics. The war on terror is going into its 14th year. If you really want to talk about "awareness raising," it's years past the time when anyone here should be able to pretend that our 18-year-olds are going off to kill and die for good reason. How about a couple of concerts to make that point?

Until then, I'm going to drink wine and try to enjoy the music over the sound of the espresso machine.

*Rory Fanning walked across the United States for the Pat Tillman Foundation in 2008-2009, following two deployments to Afghanistan with the 2nd Army Ranger Battalion. Fanning became a conscientious objector after his second tour. He is the author of the new book *Worth Fighting For: An Army Ranger's Journey Out of the Military and Across America* (Haymarket, 2014).*