

Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner
Shabbat Naso

Temple Beth Or
May 25, 2018

Memorial Day, Our Veterans,
and the Poor People's Campaign of Our Day

Fifty years ago, The Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. galvanized thousands of Americans alarmed by the government's blindness to the poor, launched the idea of the Poor People's Campaign. Shortly thereafter, while advocating for impoverished garbage workers in Memphis, TN, James Earl Ray assassinated King. The Poor People's Campaign rose from King's death, as thousands marched on DC to demand that the government take up the challenges of the poor.

The original Poor People's Campaign took place in the midst of one of America's most devastating wars—the Vietnam offensive. Eventually the country heard the voices of descent and the Vietnam War ended. Tragically, after Vietnam, America's soldiers, physically and emotionally devastated, found themselves as America's pariahs – treated like the perpetrators of a war no one wanted to defend, instead of the heroes of the United States of America. Families quietly buried their dead soldiers. Many of the wounded veterans, left with little support emotionally or physically, became the center of the impoverished class of their

day. While the soldiers were abandoned the war economy, and its resulting corporatizing of the military, sky-rocketed.

Today we inherit that legacy, fifty years later, where the corporate war economy dominates the US military and controls the largest portion of the United States' governmental budget.

Today on this Memorial Day Weekend, fifty years from the first Poor People's Campaign, we stand in the midst of The Poor People's Campaign of our day. "A National Call for Moral Revival, uniting tens of thousands of people across the country to challenge the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation."

Each week from Mother's Day until Father's Day focuses on a particular aspect of poverty. This week's focus is on the distorted war economy and the lack of support of our military members. This is not in opposition to defending our country; rather, it is to raise questions about how the billions of dollars spent on defense is feeding a world dependent on war and leaving those who fight those wars hungry and impoverished.

II. Toll of Military Economy

The "Souls of Poor Folk" poverty audit concludes that: "the wars of the last 50 years have had little to do with protecting Americans, while the profit motive has increased significantly.

With private contractors now performing many traditional military roles, there have been almost 10 times as many military contractors per soldier in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as there were during the Vietnam War, many of them making far more money than underpaid U.S. soldiers. Army privates in combat earned less than \$30,000 in 2016. At the top of the pay scale, the disparities are even more extreme. In 2016, the CEOs of the top five military contractors earned on an average \$19.2 million – more than 90 times the salary earned by a U.S. military general with 20 years of experience, and ... over 600 times the amount earned by Army privates in combat.” (The Soul of Poor Folk, executive sum, p. 11).

When huge profits for military contractors support a significant portion of the American economy, the fate of the country’s defense bows to the motive of lobbyists supporting the federal funding of private military spending. The current annual military budget, at \$668 billion, dwarfs the \$190 billion allocated for education, jobs, housing and other basic services for the country’s infrastructure. (Ibid).

In this last decade America has cut the careers of military recruits and privately employed companies to hire workers to do many of the tasks once assigned to lower-ranked troops. Jobs like construction, cooking, IT/communications, social services, and

transportation and armed security, have been stripped of the military and contracted out to corporations that take plenty of profit for themselves before hiring and paying their own workers to do those jobs. “There are roughly three contractor personnel for every member of the U.S. military in Afghanistan.” (The Soul of Poor Folk, p. 75) These contract workers receive no military benefits and are not subject to the training and rules of moral war that American soldiers follow.

While the military corporations are getting rich, 45% of children in Pentagon run U.S. schools qualified for free or reduced priced meals in 2015. We are not even paying a living wage to almost half of our active duty military.

III. Repercussions of War Economy

The perpetual state of war that the war economy pushes takes a heavy toll on our military personnel. An average of 20 veterans die of suicide each day. In 2012 suicide deaths claimed more military lives than military action. This Memorial Day we mourn as many soldiers who died from suicide as we do those who died at the war fronts. (Ibid). Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome leaves countless veterans unable to reintegrate into civilian life, incapable of returning to stable families, and unable to hold jobs. Woefully inadequate support for the psychological tolls

of combat leaves our country's war heroes homeless, drifting, and alone.

Our Jewish heritage demands both strong defense of citizens and support for those who protect our country. How ironic that our soldiers who pledge to protect the vulnerabilities of this country have become among the most vulnerable themselves.

In this week's Torah portion the Nazarites takes vows to serve the Tabernacle. They are cordoned off into particular roles and must abstain from regular activities for the period of their service. The Torah then commands a very intricate re-entry process, accompanied by sacrifices to mark the Nazarites return to normal life. The Nazarite is respected for their service and the community is involved in their reintegration and obligated to them for their service.

The service of the Nazarite guides us for ethical treatment of today's military servants.

We have an obligation to stand up for those who protect our country. This Memorial Day Weekend offers us the opportunity to honor the memories of those who died in service. The Reform Movement's partnership with the Poor People's Campaign of our day offers the path to bringing blessing to those memories. On Tuesday in Washington DC, at our Capitol downtown in Raleigh, and at State Capitols across the US the Poor People's Campaign

will hold rallies at starting at 1:00 PM to highlight the dangers of our military economy and to call for support for our US Armed Forces. You can march on Tuesday, and you can call your Senators and Representatives on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, to let them know that the memories of our soldiers matter. And the lives of our current soldiers who do not make a living wage, who do not receive adequate mental health care, who leave the army and join the ranks of America's poor, they cannot be forgotten, they cannot be left behind.

The souls of our soldiers matter. Their fate lies in the hands of our government and in our hands as well. Let us stand up for those who died by advocating for those who protect us today and tomorrow.