

Fort Hood, Veterans Day And Defending America

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On November 10 President Barack Obama delivered a speech at Fort Hood where five days before 13 soldiers were killed and 29 wounded in a shooting rampage by a U.S. army psychiatrist.

The attack resulted in the largest number of U.S. servicemen killed in one day anywhere in the world in almost four and a half year years: 14 Americans were killed in a helicopter crash and a collision in Afghanistan on October 26 of this year but three were Drug Enforcement Agency officials, 11 soldiers. The last day preceding November 5 when military deaths were higher than those at Fort Hood was on June 28, 2005 when 19 troops were killed in Afghanistan.

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the sentiments expressed by Obama or to believe that whoever had won the U.S. presidential election last year would not have said something similar.

While mentioning of the dead that "Some had known intense combat in Iraq and Afghanistan," Obama's emphasis, as that of the government and the country's media as whole, was on honoring those who defend America. Especially those who die defending America.

In fact he said "We are a nation that endures because of the courage of those who defend it" and "Their life's work is our security, and the freedom that we too often take for granted. Every evening that the sun sets on a tranquil town; every dawn that a flag is unfurled; every moment that an American enjoys life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness - that is their legacy."

He also bemoaned the fact that "This is a time of war. And yet these Americans did not die on a foreign field of battle. They were killed here, on American soil, in the heart of this great American community. It is this fact that makes the tragedy even more painful and even more incomprehensible."

In a previous era, indeed in all eras before the modern one, it was understood that soldiers defending their country died on their own land. Or at least near its borders. That was axiomatic.

A soldier who died abroad wasn't defending his country but conquering someone else's. During the past century defending a third party's security or peace was added, that nation generally being an ally or one portrayed as the victim of an adversary's attack. Or threat of attack. The word defend has since taken on such elasticity that it has become almost limitless in its application and is frequently used in the opposite sense of its traditional

meaning.

It is a transitive verb and requires an object. And a preposition, against. A soldier doesn't simply defend, he defends against something. An attack. An attack by an adversary. And if his action is truly defensive, that adversary must be an aggressor.

An invading army can defend its positions, its flanks or its supply lines, but is not defending its country.

American soldiers deployed to war and occupation zones from Fort Hood and other military bases in their own land or that of others are not defending their country. Not their nation, nor its borders, nor its coasts. Not their communities, their homes or their families.

They may be securing their government's and the nation's business interests' objectives – economic, energy, political and geopolitical – but they are not defending their country. Not even by extension.

For example, like all countries Russia, China and India are alert to their national interests and take what measures they can to protect and advance them, but they have no troops stationed overseas or bases abroad. Much less in six continents like the U.S., which has a base in Africa and three in Australia as well as in its own continent, Europe, Asia and seven new ones in South America, in Colombia.

In a culture of perpetual warfare, in a warrior society, violence is done to language and logic just as it is employed against people.

Defending one's country is sometimes extended to include protecting one's citizens. No matter where they are in the broad world.

But America's last three wars – Yugoslavia ten years ago, Afghanistan starting in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 – were waged against countries whose governments in no manner threatened Americans either at home or abroad.

Wars throughout history have as often been waged to avenge a previous defeat as to expand the aggressor's territory or install a compliant regime.

And the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were in large part motivated by vengeance for the attacks inside the U.S. on September 11, 2001.

Yet neither the ruling authorities nor any citizen of either country were involved in those attacks. American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan – and those based indefinitely in (to cite only deployments over the last ten years) Kosovo, Djibouti, Colombia, the Philippines, Kyrgyzstan, Bulgaria, Romania and Israel, with Poland and others to follow – are not defending their homeland or avenging attacks on Americans at home or anywhere else.

Obama's somber address at Fort Hood occurred the day before what is commemorated in the country as Veterans Day, in other nations known as Armistice Day or Remembrance Day, marking the formal end of World War I, "the war to end all wars," on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918.

The American president used the words killed and died but never the one that should be

used to describe the intentional taking of a human life when the victim was not threatening anyone else's: Murder. A person can die of natural causes and be killed in an accident or by a wild beast. He can only be murdered by a fellow human being.

To violently end a human existence in any other context than to protect other lives is just that, whether committed in uniform or not. The perpetrator of last week's massacre, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, was a uniformed member of the U.S. armed forces, an officer.

Just as shocking to the American president and nation that U.S. soldiers were killed on their own soil is that they were killed by a fellow serviceman.

If an American soldier drops a bomb on a wedding party in a village in Afghanistan, fires a missile into the Chinese embassy or a passenger train in Serbia or shoots to death a family at a checkpoint in Iraq, it is considered - by the Pentagon and the White House - as regrettable, as collateral damage. Only worthy of a perfunctory investigation certain to exonerate the party responsible.

No American official will swear, as Obama did on November 10, "And for what he has done, we know that the killer will be met with justice - in this world, and the next."

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