

Glorifying War: Don't Put Killers on Cereal Boxes

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Online petition campaigns were launched this week to stop Wal-Mart from selling Israeli soldier Halloween costumes and to get Wheaties cereal to start putting U.S. soldiers on its cereal boxes — boxes known for featuring photos of outstanding athletes.

The two campaigns have no relation to each other. Wheaties has not, to my knowledge, indicated the slightest interest in doing what the petition asks it to do.

I'd like Wal-Mart and every other store to stop selling all (not just Israeli) military and every other sort of armed, killer costume, including science-fiction futuristic *Star Wars* and any other. Sure, it's a particular problem that the U.S. government gives Israel billions of dollars in free weapons every year with which to attack civilians, and that presidential candidates in the United States [behave](#) as if they're campaigning to represent Israel. But if you oppose celebrating murder, including organized state-sanctioned uniformed murder, then you oppose everything that normalizes and encourages it.



So, of course, I also oppose glorifying "our troops" on cereal boxes. For one thing, it conflates the idea of an athlete with the idea of a soldier (which I use here as shorthand for sailor, Marine, airman, drone pilot, mercenary, special force, etc., etc.). An athlete doesn't kill anyone, maim anyone, turn anyone's house to rubble, traumatize any children, overthrow anyone's government, throw any regions of the world into chaos, produce radical violent groups that hate my country, drain the public treasury of \$1,000,000,000,000 a year, justify the stripping away of civil liberties in the name of wars for freedom, devastate the natural environment, drop napalm or white phosphorus, use DU, imprison people without charge, torture, or send missiles into weddings and hospitals killing one vaguely-identified victim for every 10 people murdered. An athlete plays sports.

Note that I'm also not proposing that we put troops on cereal boxes with devil horns inked onto their heads, blaming them for the faults of the whole society into which they were born. Sure, I blame them. Sure, I'd rather celebrate conscientious objectors. But there is an almost universal delusion in our culture which holds that when you blame someone for something, you exonerate everyone else. So, although it makes not the slightest sense, people interpret blaming a soldier for participating in a war as un-blaming the presidents, Congress members, propagandists, profiteers, and everyone else who helped make that war happen. In reality, blame is a limitless quantity, and everyone gets some, including me. But in the fantasyland we live in, you can't go around blaming anyone for something done by many people, unless you are allowed a paragraph of explanation. And, besides, I'd start with all the presidents, Congress members, etc., as war criminals before reaching any rank-and-file in the list of candidates for cereal box condemnation.

Also, “our troops,” are simply not our troops, not collectively. Many of us vote against, petition against, demonstrate against, write against, and organize against the use and the expansion and the existence of the military. One wishes it were needless to say, but this does not suggest some sort of hatred for the individuals who are soldiers, the majority of whom say that economic option limitations was one big factor in their joining up, and many of whom believe what they are told about doing good for the places they invade. Nor of course does opposition to militarism imply some sort of twisted support for the militarism of some other nation or group. Imagine disliking soccer and consequently being denounced for supporting some *other* soccer team. Opposing war is the same way — it actually means opposing war, not routing for the “team” opposed by someone else.

“Team” is a horrible metaphor for a military. The military can involve lots of teamwork, but it has been a century now since a war involved two teams competing on a battlefield. In World War II and ever since, wars have been fought in people’s towns, and the majority of the victims have been civilians not signed up on any team. When groups like Veterans For Peace speak out against further participation in war, on the grounds that war is the unjustifiable, counter-productive slaughter of men, women, and children, they do so out of love for soldiers and potential future soldiers. Of course, many other veterans do not share that belief, or do not voice it aloud or publicly if they do. Perhaps not unrelated is the fact that the leading cause of death of U.S. soldiers sent into recent and current wars is suicide. What more profound statement that something is amiss could be made than that? What could I possibly say to even approach it?

Here’s the text of the petition in favor of putting troops on cereal boxes:

The Wheaties Box is an iconic image in America. It celebrates our best, our brightest, and those achieving high honors on the athletic field. Isn’t it time to honor another set of American heroes? Our troops who served their country and gave their all, deserve the same honor as our great athletes.

In fact our brightest and most creative intellects are not honored at all on Wheaties. Neither are our firemen and women, our emergency crews, our environmentalists, our teachers, our children, our poets, our diplomats, our farmers, our artists, our actors and actresses. No. It’s just athletes. If you think troops deserve an honor, clearly it is not, in fact, *the same* as athletes. And what of those of us who agree with President Kennedy (“War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today”) — Should we get our heroes on cereal boxes, too?

Imagine the national pride of seeing a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor on the Wheaties box. General Mills, proud maker of Wheaties, can make this a new tradition. Next to the sacrifice these heroes and their families have made, it’s a small honor. But in our celebrity-obsessed culture, it can be a new tradition we all can be proud to share.

It’s just not true that we would all be proud. Some of us would deem it fascistic. Of course, we could just choose not to buy that cereal, while Anderson Cooper and anyone else who despises conscientious objectors could just not buy any cereal box honoring that tradition. But this petition is not proposing to force Wheaties to honor soldiers, just recommending it. Well, I’m just recommending against it.

General Mills, we are asking you to please add servicemembers [sic] who have been honored for their distinct service and heroism, to your rotation of those recognized on the Wheaties Box. We don't do enough to honor those who served, especially those people who gave the ultimate sacrifice on the battlefield. And while an image on a box of cereal may not seem like much, it's a gesture that says so much about what we value. It's the type of gesture we need to see happen more often. We hope General Mills will show us that these men and women are worth recognizing on their iconic brand. Please sign and share the petition telling General Mills to place our honored heroes from the military on their Wheaties box.

The U.S. military spends a fortune in public tax dollars advertising itself on race cars and in ceremonies at football games, and so on. Were Wheaties to pick up on this idea and profit from it by making the military pay, that would be bad enough. Doing it for free would be worse. But I don't think the military would pay for it. The military advertises the generic faceless troop, not an actual specific soldier. Many veterans are essentially abandoned by the military, denied healthcare, left homeless, and — again — in many cases doomed to suicide.

During the war on Vietnam, recipients of medals of honor, angrily threw them back, rejecting what they had been part of. Any actual specific war hero could do that. And then where would Wheaties be?

Once in recent years the military tried to honor a particular flesh-and-blood soldier, and at the same time to merge its image with that of athletes. The soldier's name was Pat Tillman. He had been a football star and had famously given up a multi-million dollar football contract in order to join the military and do his patriotic duty to protect the country from evil terrorists. He was the most famous actual troop in the U.S. military, and television pundit Ann Coulter called him "an American original — virtuous, pure, and masculine like only an American male can be."

Except that he came to no longer believe the stories that had led him to enlist, and Ann Coulter stopped praising him. On September 25, 2005, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that Tillman had become critical of the Iraq war and had scheduled a meeting with the prominent war critic Noam Chomsky to take place when he returned from Afghanistan, all information that Tillman's mother and Chomsky later confirmed. Tillman couldn't confirm it because he had died in Afghanistan in 2004 from three bullets to the forehead at short range, bullets shot by an American.

The White House and the military knew Tillman had died from so-called friendly fire, but they falsely told the media he'd died in a hostile exchange. Senior Army commanders knew the facts and yet approved awarding Tillman a Silver Star, a Purple Heart, and a posthumous promotion, all based on his having died fighting the enemy. They would no doubt have also approved his photo for a Wheaties box.

And then where would the Wheaties thank-a-warrior campaign have been when the truth about Tillman's death and the truth about Tillman's views came out? I say: Wheaties, do not risk it. The Pentagon has not risked it since Tillman. Its generals (McChrystal, Petraeus) inevitably attract the spotlights and inevitably disgrace themselves. No rank-and-file troops are put forward as "icons." They're just used to justify massive spending "for the troops" that goes to weapons profiteers and not to one single troop.

The thought of blood just doesn't go with breakfast cereal, Wheaties, and even the thought that this proposal came from somewhere in this country is enough to make me slightly nauseated.

** Thanks to D Nunns for calling the Wheaties thing to my attention.*

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