

Be Careful Who You call Heroes

“Heroes” is what the New York press has taken to calling them. They also go by the name of “New York’s finest.” They are the men and women in uniform who serve our city, our state, our nation. These uniformed heroes include police officers and firemen on the local level along with members of the US military. All of them deserve the highest honor their fellow citizens can bestow on them, we are told, since they put their lives on the line to provide the security and comfort that we enjoy.

It wasn’t always this way. Take, for instance, firefighters. We always knew that they had a work routine that set them apart from just about everyone else: hours of waiting and card-playing and maintenance of equipment punctuated by times of intense activity after the sirens sounded and the trucks flew off to take care of a fire. But 9/11 may have changed all that with the tragic tales of the losses suffered by the first responders and those photos of exhausted men, their helmets in their hands or at their side, contemplating the tragedy they could not control. As the losses were tallied and the photos and stories circulated, public perception changed. If uniformed firefighters hadn’t been heroes before, they certainly were after that day.

Policemen, too, may have benefitted from the status being conferred on their cousins in uniform. After all, they too were “putting themselves in harm’s way” on a regular basis, and many of their number had “fallen in the line of duty”—taken down while making an arrest or ambushed in an alley somewhere.

Soldiers, too, are more high profile than ever these days. In many airports the military has its own lounge, and anyone in uniform or on assignment is invited to board the plane before all other passengers except those in wheelchairs. Television ads now offer their obligatory praise for the sacrifice of all who are defending our country. Soldiers have been admitted into that select company of what the press calls “heroes”—not because they have made a personal sacrifice but because they belong to a profession whose members have been now elevated en bloc to the status of the heroic.

Let’s not deny police officers, firefighters and military men and women their due. Every week we read of some of these men and women being seriously hurt or killed on the job, often in circumstances that merit the highest praise. But let’s turn the volume down a bit, and let’s be a tad more critical in deciding who we term heroes.

People in the military deserve credit for the job they are doing and for the risks they take (including the PTSD that has only recently received the attention it deserved). Let’s remember, however, they were not drafted or conscripted—they applied for a job. This is not World War II, or even Vietnam, where the mail might bring a notice that a young man was to appear at such a place and date to begin obligatory military service. These are little wars today, not the big ones that the US once fought. And, like the Vietnam War, these little wars are fought not to defend our freedom, but for a host of other reasons, many of them disputed. Soldiers go wherever they are ordered and do what they are told to do. The wars they fight might be just or unjust. Their actions might be truly heroic (we have plenty of examples of people taking bullets to save their buddies),

or they might be disgraceful (as with the well-publicized depravities worked on some of those detained in Guantanamo).

Likewise, we may say that policemen do a job that contributes to the general public—it's not for nothing that they are called “public safety officers,” after all. At times they do this in mundane ways—by directing traffic or giving out tickets for speeding or guarding the scene of an accident. At other times, their activity is much more highly charged and perilous—as when they’re collaring suspects on the streets or breaking into the house of a crime suspect. Like the military, their services can be vital to their countrymen. But at times the police can behave badly, either because they have received poor instructions or because they themselves have been blinded by passion, as can all of us.

A badge might entitle the one who wears it to respect, but it should not absolve the wearer of all responsibility, praise or blame, for personal decisions. When we automatically apply a label like “heroes” to those with badges, we are coming uncomfortably close to blessing all their actions, noble or not. It’s hard to designate the profession as “heroic” without scattering this stardust over all the individuals who are part of it. A noble profession ennobles those who belong to it, and by extension it ennobles all they do. But here’s the rub: when they fail to perform up to standard, they can bring down their whole uniformed profession with them.

All this ought to remind us of another profession that was once blessed the same way: clergy. In the past people might not have described priests as heroes exactly, but they did use terms like holy, noble and blessed. There was no badge, but certainly a distinctive uniform—the black suit and roman collar. Priests might not have boarded planes first, but they often enough went to the head of other lines and were served first. People tipped their hat to them, asked for their prayers, and generally acknowledged them as superior beings.

All that came to a crashing halt some years ago when the sexual abuse scandal came out. Priests—those distant demiurges who had once received the reverence of all—were outed as sexual predators, according to those who embraced the simplistic “all or none” view. Some of the clergy took advantage of young people under their charge, we learned. Not really a greater percentage of them than, say, doctors or lawyers or other professionals—but the priests became tagged as child molesters. The label stuck to them (or should I say “us”) in a way it would never stick to teachers or athletic coaches or even camp counselors.

That’s the trouble. When a profession is tagged as noble and its members are called “holy” or “heroic,” the bar is set unrealistically high. This in itself might not be so bad, but the consequences can be disastrous. First, the actions of the individuals or the policy of the group can be immunized from criticism and the judgment that holds all of us accountable for what we do. Second, failures of individuals to live up to these Olympian standards might take down the entire profession.

Call your policemen heroes if you want, but you’re running some serious risks. When some of them disappoint you, the stardust that once transformed these public servants into an untouchable caste may mutate into toxic powder that poisons the entire force. When Olympus crashes, it takes the whole occupation with it. Such is the danger of reverencing uniformed people as heroes.

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