

New Op Ed from Teresa Fazio: This Memorial Day, Let's Honor Essential Workers

In the first weeks of lockdown, I paced my two-room Harlem apartment, feeling trapped while an unpredictable threat loomed. After a few days, it clicked— the collective need for vigilance and protective gear had stoked memories of my deployment to Iraq as a Marine Corps officer. There, rocket and mortar attacks had punctuated long periods of boring routine for my communications company colleagues and I. In the early evenings, our company's evening brief provided solace and companionship.

In the midst of the pandemic, that version of nightly comfort became the Twitter feed of Columbia's Department of Surgery—a daily summary of pragmatic encouragement, written by its eloquent chair, Dr. Craig Smith. He used familiar military jargon of staff [“redeployments”](#) and [“battlefield promotions”](#) for emerging medical leaders. He wrote about colleagues [infected with COVID](#), and [one who committed suicide](#).

This Memorial Day, as Dr. Smith and other first responders lose colleagues on a scale not seen since 9/11, and supply chain personnel from meatpackers to grocery clerks risk infection to keep America fed, we should extend honors to all of the essential workers who've given their lives. Doing so would help unify the nation and bridge the military-civilian divide.



Healthcare workers watch U.S. Air Force C-130s from Little Rock Air Force Base fly over Arkansas, May 8, 2020.

Only about 1% of US workers currently serve in the military, but according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), an equal number serve as firefighters and law enforcement. A whopping ten times that number— more than ten million people— work in healthcare professions as doctors, nurses, EMTs, and hospital personnel. Transportation and delivery workers— warehousemen and truckers who transport everything from asparagus to zucchini— make up another 10% of American workforce. And that's not even counting agricultural, food, and maintenance workers. A mid-April CDC report listed at least [27 US healthcare workers dead](#) of COVID, a number that has undoubtedly grown, and the Washington Post reported [over 40 grocery store worker fatalities](#) in the same time frame. As of early May, [about 30 firefighters nationwide](#) have died of the virus, too. The NYPD alone lost over 30 personnel to the pandemic, and national police casualties count [dozens more](#). Like troops in a war zone, those essential healthcare, public

safety, and logistics workers now face a wily, invisible enemy every day. Paying respects to their fallen just as we veterans honor our own would mean acknowledging that it takes **everyone's** service to help us get through this crisis.

Coronavirus is forcing businesses and governments to acknowledge the dignity of the blue-collar and service-industry workers who make our vast supply chain possible, similar to the physical work we honor in common servicemembers. In April, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) issued a [joint statement](#) with Stop and Shop calling on the government to classify grocery workers as “extended first responders” or “emergency personnel.” Moreover, in Passaic, New Jersey, a [firefighter's coronavirus death](#) prompted a mayor to ask for state legislation to classify it as a death in the line of duty, which would entitle his family to additional benefits. We can't bring these workers back, but we can honor them by helping their families recover, and funding their children's educations—just as we do for fallen service members. If, as Fed chair Jerome Powell said, we are facing an economic downturn “[without modern precedent](#),” one piece of recovery will be financial remuneration for those who have sacrificed in the name of keeping the country running.

Emotional support is necessary, as well. Medical professionals who triage an avalanche of patients decide who lives and who dies. We don't yet know how many of them will suffer PTSD or moral injury from scenes like overflowing emergency rooms. In the past month, New York Presbyterian emergency room physician [Dr. Lorna Breen](#) and FDNY EMT [John Mondello](#) committed suicide in the wake of treating an overwhelming number of coronavirus patients. Military veterans who have rendered first aid at the scene of IED blasts, rocket attacks, and similar catastrophic mass casualties know these emotional scenarios all too well. Losing colleagues with whom one has served side by side— and perhaps blaming oneself for failing to protect the sick and

wounded, even in an impossible situation—are experiences many troops know intimately.

Whenever well-meaning civilians called me or former comrades heroes, we often told them, “The heroes are the ones who didn’t come back.” I suspect some of the medical professionals I now call heroes would say the same thing. Which is why we must honor the fallen without putting all those who serve on a holy pedestal. Veneration of the dead without practical follow-up care for the living only alienates trauma survivors; it doesn’t help them reintegrate into society. Military veterans have learned this the hard way; recent Memorial Days have included remembrances for troops who have died by suicide. So in addition to honoring essential workers who have died from coronavirus, we must treat the burnout and PTSD from those who survive, especially in the medical professions, so we are not remembering them as tragic statistics in future years.

Columbia’s Dr. Smith wrote a total of 59 nightly missives, each offering comfort and guidance to my anxious-veteran mind. In the meantime, the United States has lost over 83,000 people to coronavirus. In memory of them— 83,000 parents, first responders, warehouse workers, delivery persons, doctors, nurses and counting— let’s expand this Memorial Day to honor essential personnel, with the aim of creating a more united America.

Editor’s note: Teresa Fazio’s memoir, [FIDELIS](#), is forthcoming in September 2020 from Potomac Books.