

# Disrespecting the Troops

Sitting in front of my computer one evening, scrolling idly through Facebook items, a long post catches my eye. As a novelist, I'm sympathetic to fellow writers who can't fit their thoughts into tidy soundbites, who need space to express their concerns. So I click "read more," hoping someone will give me valuable food for thought in a simplified world.

Alas, I have made a mistake:

*Hey, real quick. For all y'all big ole football players who want to take a knee during the national anthem I just want to say "go ahead." That's right biggun', take that knee. The 1% got it. They will continue to embrace the suck for minimum wage in a country where you can't even begin to understand the various civil liberties that are violated. ...When the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends blood and brains that covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.*

I feel myself thinking, for the billionth time since last year's election: What the hell is this?



Why is protest seen by some sectors of US society as disrespectful to the troops? Photo by Britta Hansen

Right off, there are some things I can recognize: the Fox News sneer, oddly colloquial hostility, and chummy racism. Why do these conservative op-eds always feel like being advanced upon by an irate stranger in a grocery-store parking lot?

Instead of slamming my computer shut, for some reason, I want to understand this. I want to get to the bottom of why this person is so very, very angry, and what it is about men kneeling at football games that makes him so, and what on earth that has to do with the poor guy sleeping on the cot in some unnamed country.

So I read the post again. And I can start to see it: that familiar bitterness, rage even, toward any non-white person who's ruffling the status quo. Somehow, this anger is "justified" through the righteous defense of veterans.

Wait, hold up, what? What have veterans got to do with it?

The answer, I believe, is very little. But an *idea* of veterans, and of the American military as a whole, is being cultivated by American conservatives, with striking confidence and vehemence, to justify the right-wing platform—one that now more than ever imagines the US as white, masculine, and authoritarian.

My Facebook rhetorician's name is "Todd", but I don't know Todd personally. The post was shared by a female acquaintance of mine, whom I happen to know is neither a military spouse nor a veteran. What could appeal to her in this message?

*The 1% got it. They will continue to embrace the suck for minimum wage in a country where you can't even begin to understand the various civil liberties that are violated.*

"Embrace the suck" – interesting. Is "Todd" a veteran? Vietnam, maybe? An impersonator? Or, more generously, someone who's simply channeling a pro-military self-righteousness that utilizes whatever slang he's picked up?

Now I want to know: What are the various civil liberties I can't even begin to imagine are being violated? Aren't "I," in the alternate universe of this folksy polemic, somehow partly the big guy kneeling to protest violated civil liberties which I have not only imagined but to which I have likely borne witness?

*Now, when the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends blood and brains that covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.*

This is ramping things up significantly. There's not only a

cultural-disgust element to this wee jeremiad, but a high emotional pitch, too. And emotion is why the post is being shared among the conservative underbelly of my friends-set, and agreed upon with such relief and gratitude (“THANK YOU!” “I’m so glad someone said it!” “I knew this would speak to YOUR family, X.”).

Because here we are: this is about loving the veterans. This homegrown Pericles is offering his support to the veteran, defending what he imagines is his life of harsh privation – interestingly, not something to be protested against but something in which to encourage pride, around which to rally.

Other than the offensive casual racism of the author’s viewpoint to begin with, that pride is what worries me most. The conception of modern soldiers as thralls on an endless treadmill of violence and sacrifice. The author’s hypothetical soldier seems to have had the worst day of his entire military career, and yet it’s described as almost run-of-the-mill. Certainly, days like that, or worse, have taken place for countless soldiers since the wars on terror began: days when they lost limbs, or friends; were lonely or depressed or at the least very physically uncomfortable. But, thirteen years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Fallujah, is this really what civilians think a full “one percent” of the American population continues to do daily—to literally wipe their best friend’s blood and brains off their faces every night before sleeping in a “ragged cot?” To live the same sort of horrific, numbing day over and over again into infinity, for “minimum wage,” in a country that apparently can’t respect them?

And if so, why the hell would they be okay with that?

\*

Much of what happens on social media today is the equivalent of watching someone throw a flaming dog turd into a swimming pool, then sitting back to see who paddles delightedly toward

it and who thrashes away. But it can be a useful vehicle for recognizing patterns in human thought and behavior, and like many members of military families I can't help notice the constant contrast that's being drawn between veterans and, most immediately, the NFL protestors, who've undertaken the very American act of regular, meaningful, and visible protest. From the conservative corners of the newsmedia, in conversation, and across the lightning-fast interwebs, I've seen veterans contrasted with virtually anyone conservatives don't like: all those spoiled, whiny millennials, for example, or immigrants, who apparently should be grateful to get through the day without seeing the inside of a holding cell. It's like constantly being lectured at the dinner table by a crabby, work-exhausted dad in khakis who (although he didn't serve, but his father did) answers your every complaint by telling you to shut up, because men died for this country and you've had everything handed to you on a silver platter.

Less than 0.5 percent of Americans currently serve in the military. This is the "military-civilian" divide we've all heard about, though exactly what can be done is still up in the air. Overwhelmingly, the divide is referenced by veterans and their family members, because (and this is part of the problem) they are the ones most concerned with it. The veteran-artists who bravely write, talk, act, or make art and music about their experiences do so for a wide range of reasons, but for many, stripping away a romanticized notion of war and military service is part of what they hope to accomplish through their work.

Meanwhile, the American public bears witness to a bizarre lovefest for the American military, predominantly (but not exclusively) from conservatives. This is more than just supporting the troops. This is the first time your ex-boyfriend got suddenly, really weird. It's as if conservatives are channeling some kind of political and cultural fantasy into the notion of military service, using it to justify their

beliefs, their prejudices, their vision for an America that not only does not now exist but maybe never has.

This is what I think of as “the American military in the modern conservative imagination.” Or, the way my friend [Peter Molin](#) put it in an e-mail, conservatives have mentally constructed a military that is white, masculine, and “safe” in the sense that it defends all that the right holds dear. Conservatives seem to hope this vision will reflect back onto the nation as a whole, giving them the whiter, manlier, safer America they desire. But you make the military out of the people who live in America; you don’t somehow make America out of your idea of the military.

And the only way to craft a fantasy out of a differing or even opposite reality is through force.

\*

I’m watching a series of old GOP attack ads made during the Obama-McCain election in 2008.

Here’s one narrated by a disapproving-sounding woman; she’s the worst secretary you ever had to wait with in the principal’s office. As she addresses her conservative demographic, I can tell this woman would like to spit in my little liberal whore face. The ad scans over a filmstrip of images (alarming explosions, fighter jets, a waving flag, a smiling and very young male soldier with all of innocent Caucasiamerica in his blue eyes) and she warns of alleged liberal attempts to “cut off funding for our active troops, endangering their lives,” as if liberals would like to rip the weapons from their hands, leaving them encircled by slathering Taliban. The camera zeroes in on a triumphant-looking picture of Obama flanked by that estrogen devil herself, Nancy Pelosi on one side, and on the other an almost absurdly-thrilled-looking black politician I don’t recognize who has his hands flung upward, fingers pointed in a double V-for-Victory, as

if, at last, the domination of white America by minorities is finally complete.

The camera goes back to that young white soldier, his life, paradoxically, in our very hands. "Obama and Congressional liberals," says the angry-sounding woman. "Too risky for America."

Alright, so this is par for the course when it comes to political ads. They're the equivalent of those Facebook posts I mentioned earlier, except the flaming dog turd has been traded for an actual human shit with sparklers sticking out the top. Anyway. While I find them irritating, it's neither the existence, nor the tenor, of these ads that particularly troubles me.

It's the fact that Obama's skin has been deliberately darkened in almost every single one of them.

A [Stanford University study](#) analyzed more than 100 of the videos and found the difference in his skin tone between the ad images, and the same images in their original forms or publications. Furthermore, "[Obama] appeared especially dark-skinned in Republican attack ads that aired closer to election day. Meanwhile, McCain's skin appeared gradually lighter over time in the same ads."

While you're wondering how America possibly possesses the technology to make McCain's skin even whiter than it already was (was he translucent?), consider this: the article's conclusion, put forth in an understated way: "The study... suggests that the images could have been intended to tap into possible racial biases of some viewers."

I've just watched a visual implication that the very fact of a black President might be harmful to American troops.

\*

No matter what the political far-right would like to believe, the American military has never upheld its regressive dreams. Forty percent of active-duty service members are people of color, with African-Americans and Native Americans represented in higher proportion than their actual population percentage in the United States. According to a Pew study, racial intermarriage is also “typically more common among people in the military than among civilians.”

The desegregation of the U.S. military took place in 1948, sixteen years before *Brown v. Board of Education* made segregation illegal here at home in 1964. Even so, desegregation was seen as particularly dangerous for the troops. The Army was not an “experiment,” claimed Army Secretary Kenneth Royall to Harry Truman, adding, “It is a well-known fact that close personal association with Negroes is distasteful to a large percentage of Southern whites.” Secretary Royall’s warning has been echoed with strange fidelity by conservatives in the many years since, over everything from women in combat to the presence of LGBTQ+ troops. “The U.S. Armed forces aren’t some social experiment,” said Sen. Chuck Hagel in 1999 when asked about the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”; and over a decade later, former Marine Corps Lt. Col. Oliver North said the same thing, with a little of the righteous indignation we now expect to accompany political statements: soldiers “deserve better than to be treated like lab rats in Mr. Obama’s radical social experiment.”

In all seriousness, as a military wife, I have to ask these affronted and obstinate politicians: When do we *not* treat our military like some kind of giant experiment? Any time we send men and women overseas, every time we commit them to action in Vietnam or Korea or Somalia or Iraq or Afghanistan, every time they’re sent to meet with tribal leaders or walk through the streets, or to (in the case of female service members) form FET teams and enter Afghan womens’ homes, it is all part of

[some big experiment or another](#), all of which are far less predictable, with more immediate and potentially dangerous outcomes, than the possibility (or, “threat” as North & Co. call it) of compassionate social progress.

Maybe we should take greater care with the lives of our fellow citizens than to hazard them trying to prove that people in the Middle East prefer our form of representative democracy, or the notion that given enough money thrown at them, feudalists or tribalists will suddenly become responsible middle class citizens.

And if we really want to stop “experimenting” on our troops, maybe we should stop doing things like sending them out on caravans in under-armored Humvees, or deliberately exposing them to chemical weapons and psychoactive agents the way the U.S. Army Chemical Corps did at Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland for twenty years, or making them tend burn pits in the toxic fumes of everything from scorching rubber and plastic to unexploded ordnance to human and medical waste.

Or would the political right like to think of this, too, as a strange mark of pride? Does military service mean that anything can be done to you, to your body? Is that what you signed up for? As a female service member, if you are raped or assaulted during your service, should we all, like Trump, simply wonder, “Well, what did they expect to happen?” If you spend, as in that original Facebook post, every single day in discomfort and loneliness, away from your family, wiping brains off your cheeks, is that just what you signed up for?

I can't help but feel that part this fantasy about the American military that it's both the seat of rule and order, but also a lawless place where anything can happen. It's HBO in a sitcom world, where men are sheriffs or cocksuckers and women are angels or hookers. In this masculine dream, let men do what they are gonna do; just don't try to improve them, or make them think. Save that for the lab rats.

\*

I'm attending the memorial service of a veteran here in town. He was a Vietnam vet, twenty-year career. He and his wife had no children, and she feared she'd be alone at the memorial, so the local VFW has put out a call for people to attend the service and show their support.

I've dressed the kids in their best; they've made cards with rainbows and hearts for the red-eyed, exhausted widow, who seems genuinely touched by them. My husband, like the other active-duty service members present, is in uniform. We marvel at the hundreds of people who've shown up: whole legions of bikers in bandannas and black leather, smoking and chatting and already sipping beer at the bar; a serious and highly-decorated African-American Marine who waits in line behind us; cars full of Air Force cadets, so bright and shiny in their blue uniforms that the mom in me wants to remind them to wear their seatbelts.

Standing in front of us in the long line, which winds through the VFW with its many coffee pots and posters and plaques and ancient dark-green carpeting, is a young man in a burgundy leather jacket, holding his toddler son. "I brought him 'cause I want him to grow up to have respect," the young man says. "Kids don't have respect these days." I tell him I think it's nice that he's there. He keeps talking about respect. He's so earnest about this, he's almost excited. His face shines with nervous sweat. His son, far too young to understand what's going on or certainly remember it, plays with the lapel of his dad's jacket.





ann)

As we walk back to the car, my high heels clicking, my kids trailing behind me, my husband in uniform, we spot the young man again, buckling his toddler into his car seat. The child babbles something and the dad says, "That's 'yes, *sir!*' You gotta have respect. You say, 'yes, *sir.*'"

We pass bumper sticker after bumper sticker: "Hillary for Prison 2016." "Hillary Lied, People Died." "Proud to Be Everything a Liberal HATES." "The Lefties Are Coming! LOCK AND LOAD." I peer at who's climbing into these trucks. Overwhelmingly, they are not the service members in uniform, but civilians who've been drawn to the service out of a sense of patriotism and a desire to support the troops. Minutes before, they were, quite warmly, shaking my husband's hand.

\*

It's a very gray November morning, and I'm drifting through a Facebook page called "FuckColinKaepernick," maintained by a man who makes the not-so-comforting claim of being in law enforcement. I don't really want to be here, and I feel anxious that my surfing, however research-motivated, is being catalogued by some demon algorithm and will come back to publicly haunt me. But I suck it up in the interest of trying to understand why Kaepernick's protest in particular has instigated so much conservative ire, and whoever devotes himself to the cultural abscess known as "FuckColinKaepernick" is giving me some clues.

The page features the sort of intellectual gems you'd expect: photo after photo of—who else— soldiers and Marines and policemen honoring their flag; images of Kaepernick paired with captions like, "I Only Take a Knee When I'm Blowing Someone for a Job"; "ISIS Signs Free-Agent Kaepernick to 1-Year Deal." One commenter, "ColinKaeperdick," mentions enthusiastically that he'd like to see the football player dead.

Through this disgust for the First Amendment-as-expressed-by-nonwhite-people runs a familiar vein of support for authority, for force, for the smackdown. Don't put up with that SHIT, is what every post seems to yell. You are the authority. You are strong. The defiance of other races, the simpering of women—you are above that shit. The conservative loathing of crybabies seems to extend even to actual babies, I learn a few minutes later, as I come across an unexpected image on the "FuckColin Kaepernick" Facebook page: a stock photo of a mother cradling a crying child. The mother appears sympathetic and tender, but a bigger issue is resonating with FuckColinKaepernick as he posts the meme:

"When you touched a hot stove, what was your parents' reaction, A or B?"

1. A) [illustrated by the picture of the mom comforting the child.]
2. B) "Bet you won't do that shit again huh?"

This meme gives me pause. It's been given some "likes" and a few laughing-face emoji in response. And, sure, while the thought of this mom snapping something so harsh at her cute child is a little off-putting, it's hardly shocking after the garbage I've been scanning for the last fifteen minutes. I've seen similar on the Facebook pages of conservative friends.

Still, it seems part and parcel of what's troubling me. I remember, from our time stationed in Virginia, an approach touted by many of my friends: the "Biblical Approach to Spanking." A little while later I'm looking for the official word from Focus on the Family, a conservative, evangelical organization that puts out 4 million pieces of mail a week and is so prominent it has its own zip code. On its web site, a man named Chip gives step-by-step pointers on [how exactly to spank your child](#):

*Have the child lean over his bed and make sure you apply the*

*discipline with a quick flick of the wrist to the fatty tissue of the buttocks, where a sting can occur without doing any damage to the body. You want to be calm, in control, and focused as you firmly spank your child, being very careful to respect his body.*

I won't get into the merits or demerits of corporal punishment here, and I am very familiar with the myriad frustrations of parenting, but I do find it telling a few paragraphs later when Chip writes, "For my part, some of the most intimate, touching moments I ever had with my kids were right after exercising discipline."

\*

Perhaps one of the most startling revelations of the 2016 Presidential Election was the almost-surreal enthusiasm of conservatives for the modern Russian state and especially its bullish head honcho, Vladimir Putin. It shouldn't have been so surprising. The conservative love affair with Putin, cultivated steadily through Obama's presidency, has spawned fawning articles by the likes of Pat Buchanan and Matt Drudge of The Drudge Report. In ["What Trump's Putin Love Reveals About Conservatives,"](#) Neal Gabler points out that, quite simply, "authoritarians love authoritarianism," and that "the Russian state does appear to be the conservative paradigm: white, highly nationalistic, militaristic...nostalgic for a lost past."

American conservatives share something even more specific with Putin, and that's his almost monomaniacal hatred of homosexuals. "They should be banned from donating blood, sperm," he has said, "And their hearts, in case of the automobile accident, should be buried in the ground or burned as unsuitable for the continuation of life."

No wonder that the military is where conservatives try to police homosexuality first, where they hope they'll have the

most success. Again, I can only comfort myself with the certainty that they can't make the America of their dreams simply by tweaking the military to their specifications; it simply won't happen.

But still, these are the people in power, in America, in 2017. And they love the troops so much that they aim for its conservative perfection, for it to give them—when America itself sometimes can't—that perfect dream of a white, white, masculine world – a world where, if people do dare to step outside the lines, we simply will not put up with that shit.

\*

Despite my aversion to being lumped in with the authoritarians of the world simply because of my husband's military service, I can't ignore the fact that many conservatives do genuinely wish our veterans well. When people thank my husband for his service, which always embarrasses him somewhat, I don't think they are being insincere. And if the greatest gift you can give someone is paying attention to them, well, conservatives are. They may be paying a myopic attention, but it's there.



The troops sacrifice physically and emotionally during training and operations, so that citizens can express different opinions without fighting. Kneel away!

The military is a complicated beast, and I feel it every time I'm at a social gathering: at a little girl's birthday party, for instance, where, amidst a cheerful Pinterest explosion of tissue-paper flowers and tea-party hats, the parents' discussion somehow veers into a brief Colin Kaepernick Disgust, making both my husband and I squirm (and I'm sure I see in his eyes the pleading, *Woman, please do not announce you are writing an essay on this!*). Everyone there is white. At that moment, can I say that the conservative idea of the military is false?

Or: While watching a friend's children this weekend so she can run some errands, she returns with the report that she's gotten a phone call: her husband's battalion has had their first K.I.A., just weeks into a 7-month deployment. "Oh, shit," I say. "No, no." The deaths of these men are our nightmares. Her husband is Special Forces, and his experience may be as close to that Facebook poster's imagined lifestyle as any active-duty service member's can get. Just because it is, at this moment, rare doesn't make it less real; conservatives do understand this.

Downstairs, my own husband's heavy uniform is tumbling around in the dryer. My friend and I are squinting to talk in the fall sun. Funeral arrangements, childcare, meal trains: the brisk, terrible, simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these things. The sun is bright and beautiful over the mountains. There's a new widow somewhere here in our temporary town, and our nation is still, still, still at war.

\*

As a woman, I'm used to watching the way men imagine us. The

male imagination, with its prominence in film, art, sports, politics—everything— has obvious and obsessive ideas of what women are, so intense at times that you can't tell what part of you even came first, what part of you was naturally feminine, or what part developed that way as a coping mechanism or simply so you wouldn't rock the boat.

Now, I see veterans put in a similar situation, a similar discomfort. They didn't, perhaps, enjoy the violence of war, but they're coming home to an increasingly violent and divided country. They are a diverse group, quite often thoughtful, often (if this is still the minority) liberal, but they're supposed to pretend that they're not.

They are black service members who see, time and again, as people of color are beaten or shot by police who get off nearly scot-free. They are women who've served their country and come home to a president who jokes about grabbing 'em by the pussy. They are the many, deeply caring parents of children with disabilities, using the Exceptional Family Member Program to get the best care for their kids while they watch their president boggle his eyes and jerk spastically on the TV screen, mocking a disabled reporter. They are soldiers from Puerto Rico watching their president leave their American islands nearly for dead and complain about providing even basic aid. They are combat veterans who watch as a civilian with more weaponry than they maybe ever handled in-country guns down 500 people at a country music concert, of all things, and how do they not feel like, what the fuck is this, what the fuck were they fighting for?

It may take force to make a fantasy out of a reality, but somehow, in America in 2017, the far-right pulled this off. It still feels like a sleight of hand, a magic trick. A joke. Sometimes I wonder if, for Donald Trump, those moments of conquest were when he felt closest to America, to his people. If the authoritarian pleasure is in domination, then we've all been royally had.

*This essay is solely the work of the author and is not intended to represent the Department of Defense. All opinions are the author's own.*

Andria Williams is the author of the novel [\*The Longest Night\*](#) (Random House, 2016) and editor of the [Military Spouse Book Review](#).