**Heroism and the language of fascism**

Civil service is commendable, but worshiping soldiers and police for doing their duty has gotten out of control.

By Rosa Brooks

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'Everyone's a hero, everyone's a star," sings Jon Bon Jovi on his 2005 album, "Have a Nice Day." It's an insipid song, but a fitting anthem for what has become a thoroughly insipid age.

Once upon a time, you had to do something truly exceptional to qualify as a full-fledged hero: single-handedly hold off a battalion of enemy soldiers to allow your platoon to escape, or rescue 100 children from a Nazi concentration camp. But today, just showing up at your Army recruiting station makes you an instant hero -- and getting yourself hurt or killed doubles your heroism, even if you were sound asleep when your supply convoy went over an IED.

The empty rhetoric of heroism is everywhere these days. You know what I mean. [Pat Tillman](http://www.latimes.com/topic/sports/football/pat-tillman-PESPT007370.topic) -- the former [NFL](http://www.latimes.com/topic/sports/football/national-football-league-ORSPT000007.topic) star -- is "an American hero," apparently because he volunteered for duty along with several hundred thousand other people, then had the misfortune to be accidentally shot by his own side. Every wounded service member is a "hero" too: [Sen. Hillary Clinton](http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics/government/hillary-clinton-PEPLT007433.topic) proudly sponsored the "Heroes at Home Act of 2007," intended to improve medical care for wounded military personnel, and the Defense Department recently sponsored the "Hiring Heroes Career Fair" to encourage companies to hire wounded veterans. No soldier left behind!

Bah, humbug.

Before you run me out of town on a rail, let me be clear: I respect the service and sacrifice of the troops. It takes guts to volunteer for the military. Injured service members deserve top-quality care, and the families of those killed deserve our deepest compassion. Soldiers, firefighters, police and many others accept risk and privation to serve the public, and we should be grateful.

But it's a big mistake to mix up the idea of service -- or the idea of sacrifice and suffering -- with the idea of heroism.

As most dictionaries explain, true heroism involves "extraordinary courage, fortitude or greatness of soul." So firefighters who take unusual risks to save others can legitimately be called heroes -- but just showing up for work and turning on a fire hose when required isn't quite enough. Similarly, suffering doesn't magically turn an ordinary person, however beloved, into a hero. Some of the office workers who died on [9/11](http://www.latimes.com/topic/unrest-conflicts-war/terrorism/september-11-2001-attacks-EVHST000001.topic) were truly heroic, sacrificing their own chance of escape to help others. But many of those who died never even got a chance to be heroic.

Distinguishing heroism from service and suffering is important for two reasons. First, it's always worth fighting the Lake Wobegon effect because, in a world where "all the children are above average," the truly special child gets no recognition, and genuine acts of exceptional courage are trivialized.

Take Jason Dunham, a 22-year-old Marine corporal who, in 2004, threw his helmet and then his body on top of an Iraqi insurgent's grenade, saving the lives of the Marines around him. Dunham died of his wounds and became one of only two soldiers in the Iraq war to be awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest military decoration in the United States. But in a world where every service member is a "hero," how many Americans have heard of Dunham's fatal courage?

There are plenty of other genuine heroes whose names will never be recorded, like the utility workers described by a [Cornell University](http://www.latimes.com/topic/education/colleges-universities/cornell-university-OREDU000066.topic) research team: On 9/11, "they went into the flooded [Verizon](http://www.latimes.com/topic/economy-business-finance/computing-information-technology-industry/telecommunication-service/verizon-communications-ORCRP016243.topic) building just north of World Trade Center 6, risking electrocution in chest-deep water and kerosene to shut off the building's massive circuit-breakers by hand." But when each of the thousands of stockbrokers and secretaries in the World Trade Center qualifies for the "everyone's a hero" award, why bother to identify those whose actions were unusually selfless?

But there's a deeper reason to be wary of the "everyone's a hero" rhetoric. Simply put, it fits neatly alongside other terms beloved of the powers that be, such as "warrior" and "the Homeland": It's part of the language of fascism.

For a chilling account of another society in which "the devaluation of the concept of heroism" was "proportional to the frequency of its use and abuse," check out Ilya Zemtsov's "The Encyclopedia of Soviet Life." In 1938, Zemtsov notes, the Soviet Union instituted "the title 'Hero of Socialist Labor'. . . . Thousands of those heroes emerged. . . . The hero was supposed to die in the name of Stalin during wartime [and] give his or her all in labor on communist constructions. . . . [But] a person upon whom the title 'hero' is bestowed has often performed no heroic deed whatsoever, but may receive the title . . . merely in return for displaying loyalty and/or diligence. . . . With time, the awarding of the title came to be used as a token to be disbursed or withheld according to political considerations. . . . "

In other words, comrades, whenever it seems as if they're handing out "hero" medals for free, look out: There's usually a hidden price.

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