

C O M M E N T A R Y B Y K A T E Y S C H U L T Z

On Patriotism & the Language of GWOT

I remember walking the flag-lined streets of that tiny town in the Berkshire Mountains. I remember the empty grocery store shelves—duct tape, diapers, double A's, and Quaker oats on backorder. I remember sitting on the roof of the old orchard house to gaze at a night sky uncut by domestic flights for the first time in my life. I remember watching VHS-recorded news coverage of those two towers nearly a week after the fact (we didn't have television; I didn't own a car). And because I was volunteering for my country as an AmeriCorps trail crewmember, I also remember feeling an acute and immediate sense that Americans come to understand patriotism in very different ways.

I was twenty-two years old and my country was going to war. It was the first war during my lifetime that contained a sense of cause and effect I could wrap my brain around, and it came at a time when I, too, served my country. Many previous wars, dictatorships, ideologies, and political decisions had led to 9/11, but even without this context the chain of events seemed fairly direct: Osama bin Laden kills Americans on American soil, ergo Americans kill Osama bin Laden. A maxim from Gandhi that I clung to during my undergrad years no longer felt simple: "An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind." I wanted the symmetry of that sentence to be enough to stop all wars. For so long, I hoped that it could. For so long since, I have understood that it never will, and while that realization seemed squarely set, I would spend the next decade of my life trying to figure out what a word like "patriotism" meant in a post 9/11 world.

At the time, all I could think to do was maintain those U.S. Forest Service and State Park trails I'd volunteered to work on. Enlisting never crossed my mind—I

had already signed on to serve my country with the firm belief that one year of mandatory service for all high school or college graduates would do the United States well. Serving stateside or abroad, behind a desk or an M16, my younger self and the writer I've become today still feels the same way. So it was, that in the aftermath of 9/11, my crewmembers and I huffed gear into the backcountry 10 days at a time, thrusting spades into the dirt in the name of keeping our public lands safe and accessible. Everyone around the world had an opinion about "American soil." As we dirtied our hands, our clothes, our packs, and our lives with the literal bedrock of this country, the irony was not lost on us. By month's end, U.S. troops were mobilized to Afghanistan, the official 9/11 death toll surpassed 2,000, and my AmeriCorps buddies and I had cleared another few miles of trail. Six months later, I met President George W. Bush when he came to honor our crew's service. The war continued, and while Bush looked toward Iraq, he simultaneously cut funding for AmeriCorps. My program would close down at the very hands of the man whose hand had been in mine just months before. What did it all mean?

If that experience didn't serve to make me feel small, the ever-reaching global war on terror most certainly did. What could one pesky trail crewmember possibly matter in the face of such wide-sweeping, multi-national military might? I still took my service seriously, but as far as I could tell, most of the rest of my country hadn't heard of AmeriCorps, President Clinton's version of a domestic PeaceCorps. I never stopped voting or paying taxes, but these grain-of-sand gestures in a country of 287 million people didn't feel tangible. I was twenty-three years old and my country was still at war. If I had done anything in my life that added up to "patriotic," I couldn't see it. The further we got into war, the less sure I felt I wanted to be patriotic. Time and time again, my inner optimist came up short. I moved on from trail crews to become a Montessori teacher, seeking refuge in the upcoming generation. In the quiet space of a consciously designed educational environment, I slowly found my way back toward something I could call belief—belief in my country, belief in the future, and belief in myself as a valuable contributor.

Teaching taught me I didn't have to picket or march or go to battle, none of which were in my nature, to make a difference as an American. Day in and day out, investment in a child's education proved itself a slow and steady form of peace activism. For a while, this seemed enough; then the United States invaded Iraq under what are now known to be false pretenses. WMD. *What Men Do? Willing Mothers for Defense? Woefully Manipulative Determination?* Weapons of Mass Destruction. I was twenty-four years old and my country was at war. Thirteen- and fourteen-year olds looked to me for answers. They could rattle off cliches

about the murder of “innocent men, women, and children” in the Middle East, experimenting with their newly formed abstract thinking skills, but for most, the hardships soldiers and civilians face at war was a far cry from their democratic, 1st world, teenage realities. By 2005, when my students started asking about peak oil, however, I sensed genuine fear. This, they could imagine. They had seen their own soil invaded once before. They had heard the language of GWOT on repeat via media outlets during their formative years. Unlike myself, the question of whether or not their country could keep them safe had been a bona fide consideration for these students almost half their memorable lives. What kind of nation would they be handed over in a few years—short on oil, hot on climate, and half the world pissed off at them?

I was twenty-five years old and my country was waging two wars. I left teaching and I left those teens. Others took my place and taught with fervor. The difference I thought I could make one child at a time certainly existed, but I exhausted myself with the hope and effort it took to see the process through to its fruitful end. The only way through this disappointment was around it. I hopped tracks completely, moving on to graduate school, where I borrowed fifty thousand dollars like a good American and earned my MFA in Creative Writing.

I had no idea at the time that it was language itself—words like “patriotism” included—that would see me through the next phase of my life and my understanding of American identity. While September 11, 2001 left me speechless and teaching left me tired, it turned out that in fact I did have something to say. Furthermore, what I wanted to say was about war, peace, and the people on all sides. I finished graduate school in June 2008 during the Great Recession. Seven months later, I was laid off from my job at a local coffee shop, losing 10 complimentary meals per week, health insurance, and wages. Student loans bills loomed. I was thirty years old and unemployed. My country was still at war. Had I failed my country, or had my country failed me? It’s not as if I assumed steady employment came on the heels of every graduate degree, but I did find it shocking to graduate into a market over-saturated with qualified writers and simultaneously be told that, while the United States government didn’t have enough money to extend unemployment wages, it could certainly spend \$2600 per soldier per day waging two wars...wars that, in some locations, American men and women still fought with insufficient body armor, ammo, and vehicles. Something didn’t add up and it wasn’t just my checkbook register.

Flash forward five years and my first book of short stories, *Flashes of War*, has been published by Loyola University Maryland. I’m in New York City as a guest

author on a Words After War panel with NPR correspondent Quil Lawrence and war lit memoir writers Matt Gallagher (*Kaboom*) and Brian Castner (*The Long Walk*). My hands are shaking and to small-town-me this is it; *the big city, the big moment*. I am thirty-four years old and my country is withdrawing from war. When a veteran asks why I, a civilian, write about war, something in me clicks. The AmeriCorps member in me stands tall, proud to have met her civic duty. The teacher in me feels pretty good, too, remembering that those teens are old enough to vote now, old enough to start living their lives in pursuit of the answers I never had for them. The unemployed writer in me feels ok, too—after all, she's here now, isn't she? In New York City. With a room full of veterans waiting for her answer...

I told the audience that my interest in writing about war stems from a curiosity about language. After 9/11, I paid particular attention to the way words like freedom, pride, terrorist, and patriotism changed meaning. By some lethal mix of fear, media infiltration, propaganda, and a little sprinkling of truth, these words have been co-opted, and that's just the short list. In fact, the language of GWOT looms larger than ever before, with your average 5th grader talking about iPods and IEDs in the same breath. Jihadist? Isn't that what the kid down the block dressed up as last Halloween? If we change what words mean, I said, we change how we think...and if we change how we think, we change how we act. Pretty soon, society itself is a different organism and it all started with something as small as, say, a bumper sticker on an old Ford truck that reads: THE POWER OF PRIDE.

As a writer, words are my medium. If society starts changing what words mean, it's akin to telling a painter that red is no longer red; red is purple. Change may be part of the natural evolution of etymology, but when it happens so pervasively and quickly, it's also downright scary. It is the duty of any artist to notice that change and bear witness to it, through whatever medium possible. The stories in *Flashes of War* all begin with an unanswered question rooted in the language of GWOT: What does it feel like to be bedded down inside a firm house in Fallujah, the first night of the first horrifying battle against the hajis? What does loyalty to mean to a young girl who watches her brother go off to war and her parents slip further from reality? How does one person hold power over another, be that a superior officer in the military overshadowing a new recruit, or a private zip-tying his first POW? Story by story, my intention is to invite readers to consider the cumulative effect of these changes and get lost in a story at the same time. As the book has grown in readership, I, too, have grown in my understanding of patriotic engagement. It is enough to write stories people can believe in. It is enough to consider, word by

word, the ways in which being an American might also mean engaging in warfare, for better or worse.

Several months after I was in New York, I received an email from Dan McCready, former Marine and Harvard Business School graduate. He introduced himself as the founder of a start-up company based in Charlotte, North Carolina that was committed to pioneering the American spirit. My attention caught. If ever there were a buzz phrase coming out of the language of GWOT, it was exactly that: American spirit. Yet as I clicked through the images of work by THIS LAND artists on his company's website, I had to admit I could see it—our American spirit; that thing that makes us most essentially who we are. I talked to Dan about his inspiration to found the business and I knew I wanted to assist his business launch as a writer. In short, THIS LAND is an online company carrying a highly curated selection of handmade functional objects for everyday use and enjoyment. Plates, mugs scarves, bottle openers, earrings, belt buckles, and linens—yes—but with the kind of quality and craftsmanship that represents the best of our country he fought to protect. Dan founded the company because he believes handmade objects in America are key to preserving and expanding our cultural heritage. That's how a person can get from leading a platoon of 65 Marines in Ramadi, to promoting an artist who makes handblown glass flasks in the mountains of North Carolina. Regardless of politics, of wins and losses, or of achievements and regrets, after serving his country for four years, Dan somehow understood that the most meaningful way to “come home” would be to find something that represented the best of the country he stood up for and make it accessible to a wider audience.

The connection may sound subtle, but as a civilian war-lit author and a freelance arts writer, I've become intrigued by Dan's belief that our heritage, or the spirit of our country, is in part embodied by today's independent artists quietly making their traditional work in studios across the country. To my mind, it's a sort of “redefining” of patriotism; another chapter in the story of this ever-complicated word. This patriotism isn't the kind that shoves stars and stripes in someone's face. This patriotism elevates the gifted, ordinary makers of our generation by celebrating their work and turning traditional, American-made functional crafts into a patriotic endeavor. In essence, we can pioneer the American spirit one beautiful object at a time—investing in tradition and creativity and our economy at the same time. It may sound like a pitch, but I'd argue it also sounds like the best news I've heard in a long time. For my part, it was a way to use my skills as a writer to connect the hard work of my fellow neighbors and community members in the North Carolina mountains I call home, with the dream of a veteran who has

a background in business. We're both working "quieter" than we used to—I'm not in front of a classroom or serving on public lands and Dan's not in the front lines of a war—but we're also both still patriotic. The work is subtle and certainly slower, but undeniably genuine.

Today, I'm thirty-six years old and Iraq rumbles into civil war. Roughly 38,000 U.S. service members remain in Afghanistan, where violence is still an everyday threat. Self-harm is also an everyday threat and oft-ignored reality, as 22 veterans commit suicide each day. What words can we employ in this new reality? Can the language of GWOT answer post-war (or near-post-war) questions about winning? About losing? About the sacrifices made in between? I find myself frozen, as if looking at that night sky above the Berkshires once again—a sky that seemed so fragile it could have cracked right open if someone had just let out a scream. But something's different this time around. I understand where words can take me. I understand that patriotism is as broadly interpreted as our Constitution. What matters is not any singular interpretation, rather, what we do with our answer once we've arrived.

KATEY SCHULTZ grew up in Portland, Oregon and is most recently from Celo, North Carolina. Her debut collection of short stories, *Flashes of War* (Loyola University, 2013) was awarded Gold Medal in Literary Fiction by the Military Writers Society of America and IndieFab Book of the Year. Katey has received writing fellowships in 8 different states and often travels to teach memoir or fiction classes or speak at small colleges across the country. She blogs about the writing life at www.kateyschultz.com. She lives in a 1970 Airstream bordering the Pisgah National Forest.