

BONE SPURS & BUM KNEES

Veterans Day, 11/11/19

I wonder how many veterans are alive today. The number will lessen each year of course because of our volunteer military. I'm a strong advocate of compulsory public, not necessarily military, service of a least one, preferably two years after high school. It will never happen because most parents want their kid on the fast track to success, straight to college, then grad school, then a sweet job, marriage and grandkids. No deviation from that path even for the good of the country, not to mention the good of the kid. Think about it: kids sit behind a desk for 13 straight years and then are shuffled into another 4 or more years of the same. They need a break. They also can use a year or two of maturing out from under the eye and jurisdiction of mom & pop.

Public service wouldn't be hard to implement. We're closing military bases all over the country, bases which have given a major economic boost to the sometimes relatively poor communities in which they're located. Keeping them open to house 18-19 year olds of every stripe, rich and poor, bright and dimmer, not just the 18 year olds now volunteering for the military, mainly those without the means, desire or aptitude for college, would be a boon for those communities. And think of our military veterans who are returning from sometimes multiple deployments overseas with few good job prospects. They can be the DI's who roust the 18 year olds who have never been out of bed before 7 up at dawn for calisthenics and a 2 mile run to start their day.

Their service can be military, aiding teachers, changing bed pans in VA hospitals or just picking up trash beside the road. And if they haven't graduated from high school, after work they can be required to get their GED. Rather than furnishing tuition free public college education as advocated by some presidential candidates, give them a year of tuition free college for each year they serve and if they don't want to go to college, give them the cost of tuition in cash so they can buy a car or house or start a business or family.

If nothing else, it will give a kid time to mature. What's the rush? I think many parents are wasting their \$ sending junior straight to college for the first year or two. Think about it: how much studying did you do your freshman year? And from what little you did do, what do you remember from it and how has it served you? I know I would have been a much better college student at 20 than I was at 18. I think a lot of parents see college as a rite of passage; the frat parties, the late nite dorm bull sessions with like or only slightly varied minds, personalities and backgrounds. The same discussions can happen in the "barracks", this time at least under a little supervision, a la Sgt Carter for Gomer Pyle, USMC. But unlike college where most of your classmates are pretty much like yourself, your servicemates will be a cross section of America. Our 18 year olds will become democratized, just like our ancestors were when they were plucked off the farms and out of the small towns to train and fight alongside other 18 year olds from NY's slums and Chicago's Polish neighborhoods and LA's barrios. Think Sgt Alvin York and Pusher. I would submit that the two World Wars did more for American democracy than most anything else. And mandatory public service can do the same, while, at the same time, maturing, broadening, training and opening our youth up to meaningful experiences they may never get any other way.

Of course this idea is not new with me. It has been touted by Gens Colin Powell and Stanley McChrystal. Several years ago I saw where Carol Quillen, Davidson College's president, was going to attend a conference in some cool place like Aspen about this very subject. Thereafter, I tried to contact her about it and received a response from one of her assistants who attended with her and was told there would be follow up. I asked her to keep me posted on their efforts. I never heard another word and found nothing googling. If my alma mater would like to step out as an innovator in higher education, it could be by doing two things: 1) abolishing football and 2) requiring that any applicant have completed at least 1, preferably 2 years of public service. Those two simple steps could help revolutionize college education and strengthen America and wouldn't cost the college a nickel.

Well, this isn't how I intended to start this Veterans Day tale but I felt like I needed to say it. Now, to my story.

In 1964 when I enrolled, Davidson College required that all able bodied freshmen and sophomores take a semester of Army ROTC, which included 3, or maybe it was just 2, hours/week in the classroom and drill one afternoon/week, preceded by cleaning our M-1's, shining our shoes and polishing our brass. Just prior to our first drill an upperclassman told me I'd better get my haircut so I went over to the barbershop frequented by the students owned and operated by African-American Ralph Johnson. All the barbers were black but all their customers were white. The barber asked me how I wanted my haircut and I didn't know what to say since I'd never been asked that before by the only barber who'd ever cut my hair till that day, my Dad, whose occupation was owning and operating Imperial Mfg & Sales, a small wholesale household goods business. One of his customers was the Levine family who owned a small department store in Rockingham where son Al learned the shoe business and founded Pic-n-Pay Shoes and his brother Leon learned the general merchandise business and started Family Dollar, now found in every community I've ever driven thru. I guess I told the barber to give me "the regular". It passed drill inspection.

Of course Vietnam was heating up and all of us were facing the draft. Most of us decided that if we were going to have to serve in the military that we'd rather be giving rather than taking orders so we signed up for advanced ROTC, which meant that we were joining the Army. I guess we signed something. We were fitted for and given uniforms, semi-dress and fatigues, a field jacket, hats, gloves, and combat boots and immediately received a check for \$50/month pay. Big money, seriously. It's what Janet and I dated on. As advanced ROTC, we became the junior officers over the underclassmen. I may have made it to platoon leader, probably just squad leader. I wasn't bucking to become top brass. We were scheduled to attend summer camp at Ft Bragg between our junior and senior years so that we could be senior officers like battalion or brigade commanders or their adjutants (I don't even know what that means-flunky?), all the while hoping to gain the Phi Beta Kappa of ROTC, a Distinguished Military Student. That was BIG s__t!

Unlike Berkeley and many other schools, Davidson wasn't exactly a hotbed of liberalism, particularly political. In 1964, a straw vote for president was taken. The faculty elected Johnson; the students Goldwater. In looking thru my annuals, the Republican club and the Conservative club were brimming over with members. The Democrat club had a few scruffy looking stalwarts. There wasn't a Liberal or

even a Progressive club. But, voices were raised as to whether the college should sponsor, much less require participation in ROTC. The best argument I remember for keeping it was that it would be better to have officers trained in the liberal arts than not. Still a good argument.

Janet agreed to be my wife in April, 1967, my junior and her sophomore year. I tore up my knee the 3rd football game of my senior season, tackling an East Carolina Pirate who was looting our treasure, thus ending, I thought and which became fact, my football career. I had talked Colonel Outlaw, the ROTC director and a big sports, particularly football, fan (some of his subordinate officers helped coach freshman football and basketball) into letting me postpone summer camp till after I'd graduated.

Dad bought me a plane ticket to fly down to Jacksonville, Fla one Sunday in the spring to try out as a punter with the Dallas Cowboys. I signed a contract become a Cowboy. I think it was for \$12K the first year, \$13.5 the next. There was no negotiation. I just asked "where do I sign?". But I had a problem. Uncle Sam. So, I went down to see Col Outlaw and he advised me on how to get out of the Army so I could play football in the NFL. He told me to get a letter from Dr Richard Wrenn, an orthopedic surgeon with the Miller Clinic, now OrthoCarolina, who was the team doc and who had treated me for my knee injury in the fall. Apparently I had just stretched and strained my tendons and cartilage, didn't tear anything. It hurt like heck but he hadn't recommended surgery, thank goodness. That was before arthroscopies- he would have had to make a long incision for knee surgery.

Doc wrote a letter that made it sound like I'd be lucky to ever walk again. I took it with me to my induction physical. The Col also recommended that when I was instructed to do a deep knee bend to only go down a few inches and tell them that was as far as I could go. The young army enlisted man conducting my physical had a slight lisp and when I did as the Col had advised, he asked "whet's wong wid yu" and I told him I had a bum knee and gave him Doc Wrenn's letter. He looked askance at me and the letter. But it did the job. I was released from the Army and didn't even have to return the \$ I'd received (thank goodness-of course it was all spent) or the boots (which I wore for 20 years-only boots I had or needed), uniforms or field jacket. Brother Bill and I think Bill Carr and I ventured up to Beech Mtn for our first attempt at skiing, all wearing our army field jackets and gloves-only skiers so attired. Actually, we didn't become skiers that day-we got rained out. I've crossed country skied since but never down hilled to this day. Always wanted to but too old to try now.

The 2nd day I was at the Cowboys preseason camp in Thousand Oaks (probably just One or TwoOaks now after the fires) just outside LA, the team doc twisted my left foot and heard a little crackling and asked if I'd ever had knee trouble. Why I didn't lie I'll never understand. I told him my knee history. That nite Tom Landry came to my room and told me they would have to let me go because if I got hurt and couldn't play they would still have to pay me till I recovered. I wish I'd have pleaded, bargained, cried or something but I didn't. After I had signed with the Cowboys, I notified UNC law school I wasn't coming and even got an admission form to SMU. Just think, I could now be sitting in a Dallas skyscraper advising multi-millionaire real estate mogul Roger Staubach as his general counsel while a sumptuous lunch is being served, rather than in a one br apt in Louisville writing this while boiling a couple of eggs for a chef salad for lunch. Would that have meant that I would have had to become a Republican and Busher? If so, glad I'm here! BTW, just bought a 2 br, 2.5 bath, 2 car garage condo in great area for \$147K. Sweet!

Before I even called Janet, who was staying with 6 month old Tom Jr at her folks in Va Beach awaiting news of our future, I went to see Doc Wrenn and told him what had happened. He twisted my foot and said the Cowboys doc didn't hear my knee, that was just normal ankle bones popping. He then wrote me a letter saying I could not only walk but run, jump, punt, tackle, completely unhindered by my previous knee injury. I asked for the letter because I was going to contact the NY Giants, Atlanta Falcons and another team or two that I'd gotten letters from while playing. But when I finally called Janet, she urged, strongly urged, maybe insisted is more appropriate, that I get back in UNC. And by then, the NFL preseason was already starting, so I gave up on punting and decided on pontificating. I've kept all Janet's letters, including the one where she said she didn't care about football, she just wanted the three of us to be together as a family. I love her more today than ever.

I drove up to Chapel Hill and stayed a nite or two with brother Harry who was in summer school. It was late July or early August. The 1968 Democratic convention was taking place in Chicago and William Buckley and Gore Vidal were providing color commentary. On national tv Vidal called Buckley a jack-booted Nazi and Buckley called him a pinko, Commie queer. Thus, this naïve country boy, who'd spent 4 years in the cloister in the woods of north Mecklenburg Co with 999 other horny Presbyterian novitiates got introduced to the real world. I walked down Franklin St mesmerized by so many braless bouncing boobs, it's a wonder I didn't walk right into a telephone pole. I talked my way back into law school and a little scholarship to boot and into married student housing within 2 hours, the most productive two hours of my life.

My knee did bother me some. Dave Mescham, a third year law student from Greensboro who I'd roomed near my soph and his sr year in college, asked me to play on the law school flag football team but I declined because of my knee, so he asked me to at least punt for them and I agreed. The first game, I was told there was no rushing the punter so I took the snap and was in mid kick when some yahoo plowed into me trying to block my punt. I don't remember whether he got his hand on the ball or not but I went down in a heap and spent the nite in the infirmary. It's the only one of hundreds of punts in practice and games from 8th grade jv's thru the college East-West game I punted in on Thanksgiving 1967 in the inaugural year of State's Carter-Findley stadium that I ever had blocked. I should have sued that yahoo.

Well, bone spurs didn't keep me out of Nam but a questionable knee did. Tupper Morehead, a defensive lineman teammate from Nashville, now a retired gynecologist turned Episcopalian lay minister, when first hearing my knee/army story, showed me his knee which had 6-8" surgery scars on I think both sides while telling me with an undisguised sense of injustice of his two years of Army service. I'm in the process of trying to get Mac Blankenship, a high school classmate, to tell me about his decision to volunteer for the infantry in 1968 between UVa and UNC law and his 13 fire fights in Nam. If brother Bill, OCS, jump school, year in Cam Ranh Bay and Bill Carr, Jimmy Poole and others of you who served, some in harm's way, have ever held my failure to serve against me, I've never detected it. Thanks, and thanks for your service to our country.

But if anyone should have gotten his dander up, it should have been my father-in-law, Mac Tweed who was a Marine aviator for 33 years and who, while Janet and I were dating, was personally flying over 600

medical evacuation helicopter missions as a squadron commander in Vietnam and who, when he got home as a bird colonel, found that some skinny red headed whippersnapper had married his only daughter. But nobody, including me, was as disappointed that I didn't make the Cowboys as Mac was. He was the best Veteran and, next to my Dad and sons, the best man I've ever known.

Happy Veterans Day to you veterans, and to us others, let's think about what we can do to honor them and support those who have sacrificed for the good old US of A.

Thanks for reading, Tom