

My Stint in the Wehrmacht

One day back in the late 1950's, when I was 8 or 9, we neighborhood kids decided to play War, a variation of hide-and-go-seek based on WWII. We chose sides, German or American, and with the flip of a coin I found myself in the Wehrmacht. A buddy passed me one of his dad's war mementoes- every house on the block seemed to have at least one- a German helmet he had brought home after the War. I was ignorant of Nazi atrocities and the politics justifying them back then, and the few German-Americans I knew were fine people. So, imagining that it was all good, we put on our helmets, grabbed our cap guns and rubber bayonets, and went to war.

In those days, we feral kids played in the streets, in neighbors' yards and empty lots, on the sidewalks, behind parked cars- our playground was far broader than it is for the highly monitored children of today. On this occasion, we were having a grand time shooting our caps at each other, falling wounded in agony or dying in dramatic glory, doing all those wonderful manly things we believed happen in combat.

Our enthusiastic play attracted the attention of a passing motorist who stopped his car to address us. We called a truce to hear him out. He introduced himself as a WWII veteran- so many of us had at least one in the family- and explained how saddened he was that we didn't understand the seriousness of the War, that we had made a silly game, almost a mockery of it, despite the cruel suffering it had brought to so many.

This veteran spoke of the sacrifices American soldiers made for the greater good of their fellow citizens and the protection of democracy. Fighting for a just cause is no flippant matter he reminded us. Sure, we were too young to know any better, and kids, like puppies, naturally play all sorts of dizzy games. But if we really wanted to do something manly, he encouraged us to study history before making entertainment out of it. We would learn, he told us, that there is no honor in defending fascism and the horrors that are born of it, and that those who fight for despotism are not decent people worthy of respect. He was especially disappointed in me for wearing that Nazi helmet. He said I wouldn't have put it on if I had known better. I remember this episode as my first lesson in false equivalence, that fighting for democracy is not the same as fighting for tyranny, that the two systems and their adherents are not morally equal. His words made me ashamed of myself, my ignorance and my involvement.

The other day, a friend surprised me by saying that he might not vote in November because both parties, so he claimed, are unresponsive to America's problems.

It was shocking to hear him conflate the Democrats with the MAGA Republicans this way, as if he couldn't see much difference between the two. I fear that too many of us do not grasp the impact this bogus parity can have on our democracy and traditional values if the wrong side wins. Yes, Harris is not perfect. But equating her to Trump is like equating FDR to you-know-who.

By refusing to vote, my friend is abetting one of the greatest threats we have ever faced in our history. I hope he thinks about citizens living under totalitarian regimes whose dream of democratic freedom will never come true until they possess the right to vote. Perhaps he will understand the responsibility each of us has to exercise this power to preserve American idealism both for ourselves and future generations. We can very well lose our Constitutional entitlements by

not voting if we take them for granted and not study the candidates critically. I hope my friend reconsiders.

That WWII veteran who stopped one day to teach a few neighborhood kids a lesson in moral clarity would be in his hundreds today, long-gone, nameless, respectfully remembered. I thank him for that lesson. I hope we all think more clearly when someone passes us the Nazi helmet or the red cap.

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