

Class warfare: AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of America's Upper Classes from Military Service--and How It Hurts Our Country, by Kathy Roth-Douquet and Frank Schaeffer

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

Recently Senator John Kerry suffered yet another self-inflicted wound with a clumsy joke. Regardless of his several subsequent explanations, he gave the impression that he believes that the military is for losers who can't make it in mainstream society. Although *AWOL* was written before that remarkable senatorial goof and the authors do not mention Kerry, they address exactly the attitude that produces jokes like that—an attitude that is pervasive in “advanced” U.S. society.

AWOL presents a one-idea argument which in itself is not likely to be very important in the larger discussion of the military. But I was haunted by the argument.

The book's special poignancy comes from the personal narrative of the two authors. Frank Schaeffer is a novelist, and Kathy Roth-Douquet is a lawyer and newspaper journalist who once did advance work for Bill Clinton. They describe themselves as “educated, urban, in careers where you make good money, and interested in the good life, good food, travel.”

They observe that they and “entire extended communities of people like us” knew nothing about the military and were not concerned to find out. The money-power class's indifference to the military—which amounts to an antimilitary culture that keeps clear of the military, dismisses it and does not want to know about it—was an indifference that they originally shared.

The authors experienced an abrupt conversion regarding the military when Schaeffer's son signed on with the marines—they “borrowed my son and returned him a man”—and Roth-Douquet's husband became a marine. They gave up their “previous life” and became intimate with the military. They write about the fine quality of people who populate the military and the fine system of military discipline and purpose, which warrants respect and support. These personal self-announcements are powerful and moving and, like much narrative attestation, beyond criticism.

After their accounts of their personal experiences the book becomes a polemic against urban elites who, in the authors' eyes, only criticize and dismiss the military. The writers contend that such a high-handed posture—in which the beneficiaries of a safe society set themselves in opposition to those who make that safety possible—is disastrous for the future of U.S. society.

While the authors state the matter as a class issue, the book develops as a more or less conservative polemic against liberals who fail to support the military. Among their arguments:

- A negative attitude toward the military was formed in the reading public by literary critiques of World War I, such as that by the poet Wilfred Owen;

- Liberal, “modernist” theology has done its part in shaping this attitude (though the only name the authors mention is that of Harry Emerson Fosdick; apparently they are unaware of the ongoing theological conversation and the powerful voice of the Niebuhrian tradition);
- The emergence of postmodernism, multiculturalism and the therapeutic society, wherein individual rights have been able to trump the common good, is also responsible for the antimilitary presumption. The authors see this view inherent in new models of child development and parenting that protect children from the realities of a dangerous world.

The transposition from a class to a cultural critique permits the authors to reduce *elite* to *liberal*, without any reflection on the fact that there are many conservative elitists who shun the military and that many of the neocons never seriously entertained the notion of participating in the military themselves.

When the authors begin to extrapolate from poignant personal experience and personal conviction, their argument becomes remarkably myopic. They show no recognition that the Vietnam War shattered the kind of idealism about the military that “the greatest generation” had after “the good war,” that the elite managers of wars of empire cannot readily appeal to citizen loyalty, or that the current policy management—or mismanagement—that substitutes force for diplomacy cannot evoke the support of educated urban elites.

As a member of the so-called antimilitary elite, I found the authors’ extrapolation from personal experience less than compelling. So after I finished the book, I was ready to put it down and not bother to review it.

But then it occurred to me that the writers have put on the table a core issue that we need to ponder with urgency—namely, how is responsible citizenship to be practiced in an empire that is beyond the reach of citizen opinion? Or rather, how is citizenship with citizen obligations like military participation to be recovered when the government refuses citizen policies and would just as soon outsource state violence so that policies need never be critiqued?

The broad question, beyond the horizon of these authors, is how it is possible to affirm a military culture of discipline, purpose and certain facets of noble loyalty while engaging in resistance against the oil-based empire? Almost every reader of the Century is situated in a theological tradition—Catholic, Anglican, Calvinist, Lutheran or Anabaptist—that on questions of government and the military goes back at least to the complexity of Augustine. And yet, for the most part, the church remains silent or sends forth only prophetic rants about current issues. The crisis to which *AWOL* points requires discriminating thought that draws on both republican and covenantal traditions. And sometimes the church is the last place in town for such critical thought.

Thus I judge that the writers are probably correct in their sweeping indictment, even though that indictment lacks nuance. But I dissent from a reading that urges eager support for the military without critical thought. We need to counter both the knee-jerk antimilitary culture and the easy enlistment of soldiers for imperial purposes that require more cannon fodder.

The writers are also likely correct that the issue is a class issue; but it is the oil class that keeps us in a perpetual state of war that is justified by amorphous anxiety. The combination of violence and anxiety requires a critical, thoughtful response, a word that reaches out both to “the fighting men and women” and to those who, like Vice President Dick Cheney, “had other things to do” than serve in the military.