

Ladies and Gentlemen; *young* Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thanks fr having me here on Veterans' Day. I'm a veteran. Was a soldier. Guess that's my bona fides here. And, of course, I'm a teacher. Used to was, those were compatible conditions. Not so sure any more. One day I'm dozing through a meeting of the English Comp section at the little college where I've washed up. I'm nodding quietly in the corner while my colleagues vaporize about essays to foist off on the students for a timed writing exam. Idea is to give a common text, ask a couple of saccharine questions, extort from students some kinda expository prose. Couple of the more animated young teachers, whom the profession hasn't yet beaten in and who still cling to shreds of imagination, are reading aloud passages from the selections they want to

urge on the group. It's the catalogue of the times: Acid rain. Urban crisis. Nuclear winter. Violence in the movies. Campaign finance. Some kinda owl.

I feel my chin sagging to my chest. Lids settling. Breath coming... sloooooo-wer. May be drooling. I'm in a state of grace. Through the cotton I can hear a voice reading out the first lines of a specimen essay: "I am ashamed to be a man. Ashamed. Being a man means being vulgar, brutal, obedient, *soldierly*, *stupid*..."
Soldierly. Stupid.

No. Hey. Now it's a Faculty meeting and we're hammering out a new curriculum for our little college. Some guy is bloviating about a "problem-solving curriculum," where we put... I dunno: "problems" before the students and they come up with... whaddy a figure? "solutions." One prof gets up and says: "Problem-solving? That's what Kennedy and his advisors tried in

Viet Nam. Problem solving. And look at the *stupid* solutions *he* came up with... enclaves, carpet bombs, Green Berets..." Green Berets. Stupid.

No. Hey. I'm just outta the war. Trying to hide back on campus at a large New England University. Snoozing through graduate courses in French, schlurping beer, chasing girls. One afternoon, I lured a coed into a *yogurt* stand where I spring for a carob bean cone. "You got drafted?" she asks between flicks of her tongue... "No. I enlisted," I say without thinking. Pause. "That was *stupid*..." Enlisted. Stupid. Hunh...

So, now it's inauguration day for that Black Wall up in DC. Civilians all mooing about it. Some guy in fatigue blouse and scraggly beard comes up, says "Welcome home, brother. Gimme a dollar." Another one squats at the foot of the thing banging his head against it: "They're all dead, mannnnnnn. They're all dead." I'm thinking: "Whoa!" I wander along its length, look down

at the stuff laid along the Wall. Mementos: poems, six-pack of beer, flowers, combat boots. A popcycle stick jammed in the ground with little banner glued to it. Catches my eye. I stoop, pick it up. It reads: "Nomina stultorum parietibus haerent." What? Figure it's some kinda tribute for the dead? You know: "Dulce et decorum..." "Here lie in in honored repose..." Something like that? It's Quintus Horatius Flaccus... Horace, the Roman poet: "The names of *stupid* men appear on walls..." Dead. Stupid.

Well, I *was* a soldier. 25 years, peace and war. And I suppose that if I'm *not* all those things just this minute--vulgar, brutal, obedient, soldierly, *stupid*--I have been over time.

Long time.

I come from the fifties. Big screens. Big fins. Big mills. Big hips. Cheerleaders. French fries. Forty-five RPM records. Annnnnnd... *soldiers*. I come from a time when *everybody* was a soldier.

I was born in the New Hampshire mountains where my family has tried to grow corn on granite since 1690. I ate supper--that's *suppah*--in a clapboard farmhouse under portraits of a great-grandfather killed at Antietam Creek, a grandfather who fought in France, a father who served in the Pacific. It was pretty clear whose picture was going up next on that wall.

My teachers were all soldiers. Most had gotten over it. There were few professional veterans in those days when *everyone* had served. And few strangers, seems to me, from a time when every man had had to surrender his private identity and learn to live and cooperate with

strangers, learn to trust his bunkmate, like him or not, and to live up to the expectations of other men. And take risk. Or simply put up with nothing more serious than discomfort. Deprivation. Boredom. In the name of the Republic. And among her citizens. They hadn't all seen *war*, but they had all seen *duty*. And like it or not, they'd done it.

I loved those guys. Those men who, when they were violent and arrogant, had earned the right. And served us well that way. Who, when they were tolerant and patient, had learned that in common effort and common struggle. Who, when they became obsessed with accountability, detail, fact and number, had come by that obsession through knowledge of the consequences of carelessness and laxity. Who, when they spoke of fear, did so with the memory fresh of ordeal suffered with others and *for* others, for *us*. Who, when they spoke of victory, had

something to show. I loved those guys. I enjoyed their company. I swallowed their stories. I admired their scars. I envied their victory. Still do.

And I tell you without bitterness... I'm not so sure the word *citizen* carries the same weight now that it did then, in my mind or in theirs.

I see men on the street *now* who, when they are violent and arrogant, are that out of self-indulgence and contempt. Who, when they are tolerant and patient, are that largely out of indifference. Who, when they become obsessed with accountability, detail, fact and number, have come by that obsession through greed and ambition. Who, when they speak of fear, mean fear of growing old or fat, of losing privilege or property or hair. Who, when they speak of victory, mean someone else's... and they speak of it meanly. They had no national mandate to

answer, so they didn't. They went straight on to life. The *smart* thing to do. To do anything else would be... well, *stupid*. But somehow, I just can't love these guys. And I don't enjoy their company. They don't have stories. They don't have scars. I don't necessarily *blame* them for the life they've chosen. I just can't love them.

I dunno why soldiers seem *stupid*. Maybe because so many of them are so *young*. And *uncritical*. Maybe because so many of them lack education. Or because so many of them seem to embrace a service, a misery, a sacrifice which they could plausibly elude and from which they derive no gain. But somehow, the moniker has stuck. And I hafta tell you that sometimes it's a blessing to be *stupid*. So you can tell yourself that *this* kid died for something. So you don't see yourself like that, on the ground, in the widening pool of dark dust. So

maybe you don't really see the big terrors in the fight.
And maybe don't notice the little slights back home.

Of course, a lot of the soldier's life can seem *stupid*.
Soldiering is, after all, a traditional profession. And
tradition amounts to no more than continuing to do
certain things in the same way, for old times' sake, long
after any original purpose has faded away. And that's
stupid, I suppose. And trusting complete strangers, often
enough with your life? If that's not *stupid*, I dunno what
is. And a soldier's value system can seem upside down,
backwards, *stupid*.

We actually mistrust *courage*, as you may know it.
Our own, but particularly that of a leader. We value the
guy whose *bravery* takes the form of going out again after
a bad mission, a loss, a wound. Of making the mission
work, even when he doesn't believe in it. We take *valor*

to be stepping out into the open first, across the trail first, over the ridgeline first. Consistent yet small acts of knowing defiance of human weakness and inertia... *and* good sense. Moving out last, staying back till everyone has cleared an obstacle, covering from behind with fire. Those small demonstrations of disregard for self, for comfort, for safety are the ones I recall: the *nerve* to be *first*... or *last*, whichever no one else wanted to be. And that, of course, is *stupid*.

But there is, God save me, a sense in which soldiers *are stupid*, or at least subscribe to a code or ethos that is irrational, non-linear, unreasoned... *stupid* in the word an outsider might choose. The values of the soldier's world are necessarily limited but for that reason intense, and they are *revealed* values, not intellectual. They are, oddly enough, the values that education indicts or erodes because they aren't analytical: *loyalty, faith, honor,*

courage. And, I admit, they're dangerous... allthemore so back in the social circle from which us *stupid* soldiers got exiled *by* the multitude *in the name of* the multitude. It's order, tension, calculus, measure that holds this mess together.

Out there and very quickly, soldiers *bond*--you've heard the word--but to each other and not infrequently with profound disdain for the society that tossed them out... and tosed them *together*. And sure enough, you wind up dying not for the Free World Military Assistance Effort in Viet Nam, Republic of, but for some lemon from New Jersey, some jerk from Alabama, some butcher's son from Idaho, some surfer from California, some derelict from Iowa, some farmboy from New Hampshire. And that... that's *stupid*.

But back here, back in the circle, I suppose we can seem like a fly between the window panes: lopy, distracted, slow, awkward, clumsy... *stupid*.

I was feeling thataway one mangy January afternoon few weeks ago, stumbled outta my office to stretch my legs, wander around Post, air out my head for a minute. First thing happened I bumped into a man who won the Navy Cross on Iwo Jima and shook his hand, looked into those eyes. Not five minutes later I ran into another guy, shot the first day on Guadalcanal, and who gave me *his* hand. Crossing the street, I was hailed by a third who'd spent two years in a Korean prisoner of war camp. On the

way home, I bought ten pounds of roofing nails from a guy who'd spent six years in the Hanoi Hilton.

Simple communions. Everyday transactions. Guys on a little town street. Maybe. Maybe, though, such men are what James Joyce calls “secret messengers.”

Citizens among the rest, who look like the rest, yet who, *unlike the rest*, know prodigious secrets and a wisdom *other, apart*, but entirely *useless* here. Just seems to me that there might be other words for these guys'... what? *qualities*, if I may. *Uncritical* isn't necessarily *stupid*. *Uneducated* isn't necessarily *stupid*. *Stoic* isn't, either.

Right now there's a war going on, fought by a tiny fraction of the population of this great Republic. Right now, somewhere around five percent of Americans have ever even served. Among *young* Americans, that percentage drops sharply. In my profession, teaching, military service is virtually unheard of. It's just not *smart* to give up a life's momentum, ambition's edge, youth's liberty to serve. And who sets the example? When I was a kid, a meeting like the one I had with those guys on Lexington street was only too common; now what struck me about it was that it was so rare as to be exceptional.

Jesus Christ says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

The weak of mind. The *stupid*. I guess that'll have to be

our consolation. *That* and assemblies like this one, which bring together everyone in the community to celebrate that flag and the things--the *stupid* things--done in her name *and* the men and women--the *stupid* ones--who do them. I'm terribly proud to count myself among their number. And to address you today. Thank you for havin me. The Lord love you for that.

