

Watada Chose to Stop Fighting

By US Rep. Mike Honda

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U.S. Army 1st Lt. Ehren K. Watada volunteered for military service following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on our country out of a desire to protect his family and compatriots. His service record has been exemplary, and he was deemed "among the best" by his superiors.

All that changed on June 22, 2006, when Watada was ordered to deploy to the Middle East as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Opposed to the premise and conduct of the war in Iraq, Watada refused to comply with this order. He now faces a court martial and up to six years in prison.

Lt. Watada has taken a solemn oath of allegiance as a military officer. With the order to deploy to Iraq, he found himself with a dilemma: Either follow this oath or risk the severe consequences of disobedience. In the spirit of Henry David Thoreau, this young man searched his soul and found himself unable to suppress his conscience and opposition to what he views as an immoral, illegal war.

Watada is not alone. Poll after poll points to an ever rising tide of public opposition to President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq. This soldier is unique, however, in that he is the first commissioned U.S. military officer to refuse Iraq deployment.

I am neither a lawyer nor a veteran, and it is not my place to opine on the legality or military propriety of Lt. Watada's actions. I am, however, a proud and patriotic American solemnly entrusted by his friends and neighbors to represent them, their hopes, their dreams and their principles in the greatest deliberative body in the world.

I voted against giving President Bush the authority to use military force in Iraq, and do not believe his justifications for taking us into war were even minimally adequate. As a duly elected member of Congress, I express my admiration for a young American who, in the same spirit, has heeded his conscience at tremendous risk to livelihood, reputation and personal freedom in order to right what he and the vast majority of his compatriots see as a tremendous wrong.

This soldier is neither a conscientious objector nor a pacifist. He volunteered to serve his nation in the armed forces, has expressed his willingness to fight in our struggle in Afghanistan, and declined his superiors' offer to deploy to a desk job in Iraq, out of harm's way. There is not, nor can there be, the slightest doubt as to this young man's bravery, patriotism or commitment to his fellow soldiers.

In facing charges of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, it is my belief that Ehren Watada has laid bare a fact that is becoming increasingly plain: Mr. Bush has handled this war in a manner unbecoming a United States president.

At best, our president misled the nation on the rationale for going into Iraq. He has embroiled this great country in a cycle of brutality there that has grievously tarnished America's international reputation, has further destabilized an already precarious Middle East and has taken the lives of more than 3,000 American fathers, mothers, sons and daughters.

Watada has risked being deemed guilty of breaking one law in furtherance of a higher, moral one, rather than participate in a fight that, in his and my view, needlessly sends our compatriots to their deaths.

In Watada's own words: "To stop an illegal and unjust war, the soldiers and service members can choose to stop fighting it" (www.thankyoult.org, click on YouTube video).

Democrat Mike Honda represents San Jose in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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