

What is war?

May 24, 2026 The Plain Dealer / Opinion column by Patrick McLaughlin



The reality of war, the sacrifices of those who've fought our wars and what we owe them. Illustration by Susan Santola, Advance Local, Library of Congress

In 1861, at Camp Thomas, Ohio, the U.S. 18th Infantry Regiment was constituted. During the Civil War, the 18th fought in many battles, including Stones River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and the Atlanta Campaign under Ohio son Gen. W. T. Sherman.

The Civil War wasn't just a war; it was total war. Sherman, a soldier, knew war: "I am sick & tired of war," he wrote in a May 1865 letter. "Its glory is all moonshine. ... It is only those who have neither heard a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded and lacerated ... who cry aloud for more blood & more vengeance, more desolation."

"War is hell," Sherman later famously told the 1879 graduating class of the Michigan Military Academy.

Following the Civil War, the 18th was sent to the Powder River territory of what is now north-central Wyoming. This was Indian country. A brevet lieutenant colonel named William Judd Fetterman who served with the 18th during the Civil War, by then reduced in rank to captain, was ordered to Indian country to rejoin the Regiment.

On Dec. 21, 1866, the regimental commander, Col. Henry B. Carrington, ordered Capt. Fetterman, commanding a force of 80 men made up of 49 troops and two officers of the 18th Infantry, 27 horse soldiers of the 2nd Cavalry, and two civilians, to exit the fort on patrol. A force of 2,000 Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho braves caught the patrol in the open and took no prisoners. The fight is often referred to as The Fetterman Massacre. Native Americans refer to it as the Hundred in the Hand.

When my grandchildren take American history, they won't read about the Fetterman Massacre because it was overshadowed by Gen. G. A. Custer's fight at the Little Bighorn ten years later.

War comes in many forms, almost always tempered by one's engagement, or lack thereof, in the vagaries of war. A wise Greek named Plato said, "Only the dead have seen the end of war." Sadly, mankind has not disappointed Plato.

If America learned any lessons from the Vietnam War, it is, as Gen. William Westmoreland observed that, "The military don't start wars. Politicians start wars." Don't blame the warfighters if you are unhappy; blame the politicians whom you elected.

On the academic side of “war,” the political scientists at the Correlates of War (COW) Project require a 1,000-battle-death cutoff among engaged armed forces for inclusion in the COW data. Battle deaths less than 1,000 are called Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID), not war.

As for the current war, or for those not in harm’s way in the current MID in Iran, some on the home front loudly voice displeasure at higher gas prices, which are still less than retail gas prices in June 2022 when we were not at war. And need I say it, when Donald Trump was not president.

To many, certainly the Democratic Party, it’s all about Trump. Democratic Sen. John Fetterman of Pennsylvania (no known relationship to the unfortunate Capt. Fetterman) said this in a recent Washington Post op-ed: [“The president could come out for ice cream and lazy Sundays, and my party would suddenly hate them.”](#)

Congress is in a sad state. Half of Congress refused to fund the Department of Homeland Security comprised of agencies that defend our maritime borders, protect cyber infrastructure, counter weapons of mass destruction and provide intelligence analysis, all while drawing *their* paychecks while thousands of government employees worked without pay. Shameful. They deserve Gallup’s late April 2026 poll results showing Congress with 10% approval and 86% disapproval, a historic low.



Patrick M. McLaughlin, left, shown in Vietnam with fellow members of Charlie Company in 1967. The Plain Dealer

Trump’s conflicting, imprecise, bombastic remarks on the Iran front are unseemly and unhelpful. Can’t someone say: “Mr. President, please shut up and let JD Vance, Marco Rubio, and Gen. Dan Caine brief the public when appropriate to do so.”

If Pete Hegseth can be something other than a cheerleader, then he may be on that list. Let’s remember Teddy Roosevelt, who understood it is best to *“speak softly and carry a big stick -- you will go far.”*

As we approach Memorial Day, a day when the soulful sound of taps is heard throughout the land, let us remember that our war dead and those who served with them are the reason that we will celebrate 250 years of independence.

In Cuyahoga County since 1899, there have been 5,552 members of the military who died in service during war. See www.clevelandvetmemorial.org. Greater Cleveland has been dutiful in raising men and women who have taken the oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

On Memorial Day 2026, let us honor those who, as Abraham Lincoln so eloquently said, *“gave the last full measure of devotion.”* Then, let America have a celebration worthy of 250 years of independence guaranteed to us by those who raised their right hands and took the oath.

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