3/Stop Thanking

Stop thanking the troops for me: No, they don’t “protect our freedoms!” (Excerpt)

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Why is pro sports constantly jamming military fervor down our throats? Their claims are wrong in more ways than one

By Justin Doolittle

We discover that Brooklyn Nets star Paul Pierce is incredibly grateful, at a deeply personal level, that the men and women of the U.S. military are willing to “protect” him and his country (“I’m so thankful that they are able to do that for me, to make this a safer place for me to live”). Roy Hibbert, starting center for the Indiana Pacers, sees Pierce’s gratitude and raises him in a big way, making the latter’s sentiments seem woefully weak by comparison:

They’re protecting our country, they’re protecting the world, and, you know, obviously we wouldn’t have freedom without them.

This is just an extraordinary sentence. It contains three distinct, factual claims. While the first two are highly debatable, let us suspend consideration of them in order to focus on the third, which is actually an outright falsehood. Not only does Hibbert confidently assert that “we wouldn’t have freedom” were it not for the beneficence of the U.S. military, but that this is “obviously” so.

Freedom has become one of those politically charged terms that means whatever people need it to mean. There is no coherent conception of freedom, though, in which it only exists at the pleasure of the U.S. military. It’s simply a non sequitur. The “freedoms” most Americans think of when they hear the term are enshrined in constitutional and statutory law. They are in no way dependent on the size, scope or even the existence of the U.S. military. If John Lennon’s ghost assumed dictatorial control of the U.S. government tomorrow and, as his first order of business, disbanded the entire military, Americans’ “freedoms” would not suddenly vanish.

Other than military promotion, there is no other conceivable context in which an athlete, officially representing a major professional sports league, would go on television and say something that is so bizarre, explicitly political and manifestly untrue. Whether Roy Hibbert was simply reading something that was handed to him, or expressing his own sentiments, is immaterial. What is problematic, in any case, is that this peculiar, nonexistent connection between “freedom” and the military continues to be perpetuated as an uncontroversial truism, and is met with virtually no resistance, at least within the confines of the mainstream.

We need not thank the troops for every breath we take. When we do, we reduce our entire existence as free people to something that only exists at the whim of the U.S. military, and suffocate critical thought about the military and what it’s actually doing in the world.