

The article below is an editorial written to the Chicago Tribune by Garrison Keillor.

Below that is my response which I have sent to Garrison Keillor and posted on as many websites as I frequent.  
Rusty

The roar of hollow patriotism  
Garrison Keillor

May 28, 2008

Three hundred thousand bikers spent Memorial Day weekend roaring around Washington in tribute to our war dead, and I stood on Constitution Avenue Sunday afternoon watching a river of them go by, waiting for a gap in the procession so I could cross over to the Mall and look at pictures. The street had been closed off for them and they motored on by, some flying the Stars and Stripes and the black MIA-POW flag, honking, revving their engines, an endless celebration of internal combustion.

A patriotic bike rally is sort of like a patriotic toilet-papering or patriotic graffiti—the patriotism somehow gets lost in the sheer irritation of the thing. Somehow a person associate Memorial Day with long moments of silence when you summon up mental images of men huddled together on amphibious assault vehicles and pilots revving up B-24s and infantrymen crouched behind piles of rubble steeling themselves for the next push.

You don't quite see the connection between that and these fat men with ponytails on Harleys. After hearing a few thousand bikes go by, you think maybe we could airlift these gentlemen to Baghdad to show their support of the troops in a more tangible way. It took 20 minutes until a gap appeared and then a mob of us pedestrians flooded across the street and the parade of bikes had to stop for us, and on we went to show our patriotism by looking at exhibits at the Smithsonian or, in my case, hiking around the National Gallery, which, after you've watched a few thousand Harleys pass, seems like an outpost of civilization.

There stood Renoir's ballerina in pale blue chiffon and Monet's children in the garden of sunflowers. And Mary Cassatt's "The Boating Party," which I stood and stared at for a long time. A lady in a white bonnet sits in a green sailboat, holding a contented baby in pink, as a man rows the boat toward a distant shore. (Perhaps the boat is becalmed.) The man wears a navy blue shirt, he is preoccupied with his rowing, and the lady looks wan and mildly anxious, as well a mother should be. The baby is looking dreamily over the gunwales. Is the man a hired hand or is he the husband and father?

A work of art can lift you up from the mishmash of life, the weight of the unintelligible world, and the situations where vulgarity squats on you like an enormous toad and won't get off. You stroll down past the World War II Memorial, which looks like something ordered out of a catalog, a bland insult to the memory of all who served, and thousands of motorcycles roar by disturbing the Sabbath, and it depresses you for hours.

If anyone cared about the war dead, they could go read David Halberstam's "The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War" or Stephen Ambrose's "Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944 to May 7, 1945," or any of a hundred other books, and they would get a vision of what it was like to face death for your country, but the bikers riding in formation are more interested in being seen than in learning anything. They are grown men playing soldier, making a great hullabaloo without exposing themselves to danger, other than getting drunk and falling off a bike.

No wonder the Current Occupant welcomed them with open arms at the White House, put on a black leather vest, and gave a manly speech about how he'd just "chopped in" and saw the horde "cranking up their machines," and he thanked them for being so patriotic. They are his kind of guys, full of bluster, giving off noxious fumes, and when they leave town, nobody misses them.

Meanwhile, the man pulls at the oars, the lady wonders if this trip was a good idea or if some disaster is at hand, and the child lolls on her lap, dazed by the sun. They started this trip in 1894 and haven't advanced an inch, meanwhile half the people who ever stood and watched them have reached that distant shore and the rest of us are getting closer every day.

I am the boatman and maybe you are too—it is quiet on the water, we lean on the oars, and we are suspended in time, united with every other man, woman and child who ever voyaged afar.

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Garrison Keillor is a buffoon.

By Rusty Bongard

USN 78-82

USNR 01-06

MiNat Guard 06-08

Garrison Keillor is a songbird of prose. He is a gifted orator of other men's words, capable of effectuating the meaning and resonance of a great thinkers thoughts so that they engage with clarity the hearts and minds of common men and women, and evince justice and benevolence upon the writer or soothsayer he quotes. Garrison Keillor is however, a buffoon. An entertaining jester, talented, but a buffoon. One wonders if he has the capacity to see anything beyond his own upturned nose.

Perhaps never having served a day in the service of his country he did not see. Yes, for those who were not there, who never wore the uniform, who never knew the brotherhood and sacrifice, perhaps for them memorial day is a time for quiet reflection, and conjuring images of their fantasized ideals of those who gave.

For those three hundred thousand, mostly veterans, mostly survivors, warriors who were not felled, it is a celebration. A communion of the type only fellow warriors can know. This is no "tribute to our war dead". This is a reunion akin to the opening of the doors of Valhalla allowing for one sacred and monumental moment those who lived and those who died to reunite. It is a ghost dance. How anyone could not see the spirits of those dead warriors return and RIDE with these men is beyond understanding. Since World War 1 returning survivors, warriors who lived through it, have gathered themselves together on two wheels and rode hard. They share their secrets with one another, they take care of each other, and they remember those who are "GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN".

Those fat men on Harleys were once slim, even skinny, young men. Snatched from the American dream and cast into a life that abides no individualism. Freedom is denied in order to preserve it for others. Many, forced to endure deprivations, and tragedy so immense there are no words to describe them, have spent their lives with mental images they can only see, and they can only feel. Questions of right vs. wrong, political aspects of their service, why they were there, all ultimately pale in importance beside their loyalty, love, and sense of duty to their fellow brothers in arms, both living and especially those not.

Those bikers, riding in formation were NOT interested in being seen, by anyone who walks with living eyes.

Only a buffoon would guess that they have anything to learn. The insult of suggesting that, "they are grown men playing soldiers" was made by either a very brave man, or an idiot of monumental proportions. That these men should gather at the tables, and drink mead and shout the names of the dead, and regale each other and slap each other on shoulders, and wrap their arms around their brothers is not a disreputable act to the dead. The dead rejoice in their halls, glad that these fellows celebrate their lives, their sacrifices, and FREEDOM. They would join them, and will, someday. No "Garrison Keilor" has ever wept hard, or suffered the loss, of our dead warriors as have these warrior survivors.

As for the welcome with open arms by the occupant of the white house? What choice did he have? These biker warriors are not to be denied. They ask no permission to make this pilgrimage. The opinion of the President as

to the irritating effects of this event has as much meaning for these men, as, Garrison Keillors. ZERO! If no one was there to witness or be irritated by this rendezvous with the dead warriors of our nation, no fewer of our living warriors would have come.

As much as I have laughed at this buffoon, and his humor. As much as I have enjoyed his rhetoric, and recitations. I will commit to close the book on him in my life. I will delegate him to the shelf that Hanoi Jane resides upon. Its as easy as a flick of the channel or a turn of the knob. A brief opportunity for enlightenment to take hold, and to make a very moving apology, is passing quickly. Even then though, he will always remain a buffoon. Thorsblood