

Betrayal

Laura Slattery

Laura Slattery graduated from the United States Military Academy, West Point, NY in May 1988. She was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Medical Service Corps and was stationed at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii with the 25th Infantry Division. Since leaving the military in 1991, she has worked as an international volunteer in Mexico and El Salvador, a chaplain in a hospital, a high school teacher, and a Catholic Worker. Laura received her Masters in Theology from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA in 1988. She currently works as a NewVoices Fellow for Peace Bene Franciscan Nonviolence Service as their International Coordinator for the From Violence to Wholeness Program.

Betrayal is an ugly word. Accusation of it laced my mother's response when I asked if she had any military photos of me. "Do you think I'm stupid?" came her stinging reply. "You want those pictures so you can burn them in effigy like you did your jacket? I saw the picture of you," she said. She was referring to the picture that appeared in the paper of me, hanging my last Battle Dress Uniform (BDU) jacket on the chain-link fence at the gate of Ft. Benning at the School of the Americas protest last November (2001). I explained that my action was done with the utmost reverence, accompanied by a prayer, but that did not matter. I had been walking a fine line with her due to my nonviolent activities for a long time now, and September 11th and the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan had only aggravated the situation. In her mind, my symbolic renunciation of my military career betrayed not only my country, but her as well. She had supported and encouraged me during my years in the Service, and has bragged about my military career often. I am still at times introduced as "the daughter who went to West Point."



Laura Slattery, West Point cadet

That sense of betrayal weighs heavily on me as I write this article, a veteran speaking against a military institution in particular and military solutions in general. What will my friends with whom I went to school and served, who risked their lives and continue to do so, think? My allegiance was always more to them and to the principles of integrity and justice, than it was to some vague notion of country. I do not feel I have betrayed my country by calling for the closing of the School of the Americas (SOA), now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. If anything, my actions help make the country stronger, by calling on people to uphold the principles of democracy upon which it was founded. But what of my friends and family?

It's hard for me to think of myself judged by my former fellow servicemen and -women. It's even harder to have them think that I am judging them. Though the latter is an inevitable consequence of taking a stand against military action or a military school, my judgment is reserved for those who use our national self-interest as a justification for wars, rather than those who are called upon to serve in them.



Photo by Sgt. Donald Grimes, *Hawaii Army Weekly*, July 13, 1989.

During these past ten years of civilian life I have been moving slowly away from my internal and external connections to my military experiences and toward my present work in nonviolence. At times I have felt at home with both the military community and its supporters, and also with the activist community; other times I have felt alienated from one or the other. My experience at Ft. Benning this past November highlighted this.

During the solemn funeral procession I connected easily with those demonstrators trying to expose some of the truths about the SOA and close it down. I was on the right side of the fence that was erected

to keep the protesters off Ft. Benning. But when the puppeteers, anarchists, and youth took up the position at the fence with shouts, drum banging, and a bit of mayhem, I felt my old “disconnect” with protesters creep in. I identified more with the soldiers then. Though I knew I was on the right side of the issue, I felt like I was on the wrong side of the fence.

Something happened to this longstanding dichotomy, however, when I hung my last jacket on the fence. I broke free from my internal continuum of soldier on one side and protester on the other. I chose a third way—a step away from the two choices and toward humanity. I still love my friends with whom I served and value their perspectives, desire for service, and love of country. Nonetheless, I do not believe in military solutions. And though I wish the activist community were much more organized and focused, my commitment to justice demands that I stand with those who are seeking, nonviolently, to change the status quo that maintains the United States in the number one position in the world, to the detriment and death of many in the Third World.

Reflecting upon my action several months later, I see now that it was, in a sense, a homecoming, both for the jacket and for myself. I gave the jacket back to whom it really belonged, to those who still believe that violence is a possible solution. In a class I once learned that Gandhi instructed soldiers to stay in the military if they still believed in the power of violence. He told them that it was their moral obligation to continue to use violence to defend others unless they became convinced that it did not work. Giving up my last jacket was a coming home for me because it was a letting go of the last vestiges of a hope that I held: hope that U.S. military involvement and instruction in the ways of war could have some outcome other than the killing of my brothers and sisters, and the sowing of seeds for more war. I laid down part of my history so that I could fully, with both hands, grasp active nonviolence as my means to change society and resolve conflicts.

And that is good, and I believe fully that nonviolence holds the answers. Still, the tiny voice—of my mother, myself, or soldiers—that accuses “betrayal” dies hard. Bertrand Russell sheds some light on this for me when he writes: “Conventional people are roused to fury by departures from convention, largely because they regard such departures as criticism of themselves.” The military is based on convention, and I had been a faithful follower. Departing from that has been difficult indeed.

It is natural to want to believe in our government, to want to support it, to want to believe that everything will be all right, and that we are the “good guys” in the fight against evil. The annual protest at the School of the Americas, and perhaps any nonviolent action that calls for an evaluation of the present system, is likely, then, to be met with anger and a sense of betrayal by the mainstream. I want to support and believe in our government as well, but my experience of living in El Salvador in 1992 after the conclusion of the U.S.-supported twelve-year civil war won’t allow me to do so fully.

Nor will the knowledge of some of our government’s past and current activities in Latin America, which include: support of brutal dictatorships in Haiti and Nicaragua, the staging of coups in Guatemala and Chile, the attempt to overthrow a democratically elected government in Nicaragua, and the past teaching of torture and the continuation of teaching of Low Intensity Conflict (i.e., war against an unsupportive civilian population) at the School of the Americas to Latin American-soldiers. The U.S. has claimed our interventions and military aid are necessary to maintain security in the region.

From my research and experience of living in El Salvador, Colombia, and Mexico, I saw that our government has often confused economic opportunities with national security. And it is the poor of Latin America who pay the price. By putting our economic interests before the rights of the poor and training soldiers in those countries in the ways of Low Intensity Conflict, we betray the principles of freedom and democracy upon which our country was founded.

I am left with the question: Who has betrayed whom? As a cadet I was required to memorize a speech by Douglas MacArthur that extolled the virtues of duty, honor, and country. I hold those values dear, more so today than when I was at the Academy, for I have seen firsthand the price that many pay for freedom.

When I am tempted to feel that I have betrayed my brothers and sisters in arms by speaking out against a military institution, I remember what I have learned and seen in the past ten years, and know that I betray my brothers and sisters in Latin America, and my integrity, if I fail to speak out. The values of duty, honor, and country are slowly losing their luster by wave after wave of exploitation by our government of the peoples of the world, especially the Global South. Betrayal of those values comes not with my separating myself from the military, but with my failure to do so.

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Veteran Laura Slattery (left) marches in solemn funeral procession at Fort Benning, GA on Nov. 18, 2001. She carries BDU jacket she will hang on the newly constructed, high-security fence that demonstrators will transform into a memorial wall for Latin American victims of SOA/WHISC. Photo by Linda Panetta, SOA Watch/NE (See pp. 79-80 for contact information.)

