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Beyond hero-worship

Happy is the country which requires no heroes," Bertolt Brecht commented. Today, by that standard, the United States is a very unhappy country.

These days, the public's genuine eagerness for heroes is difficult to gauge. If media output is any measure, the hero industry is engaged in massive overproduction. Whether the "products" are entertainers, star athletes or politicians, the PR efforts are unrelenting. Some brands catch on.

In mass culture, the media consumer is constantly encouraged to swoon for personalities who seem to turn glitz into a verb. From MTV to the mall multiplex, the role models are on the market, glorious in two dimensions.

Among politicians, heroism has become a holy grail. During his first months as president, George W. Bush – a militarist without a military record to speak of – could hardly qualify. On his resume, the only people he had killed were death row prisoners in Texas. But in the aftermath of 9/11, with the title of "wartime president" conferred on him, Bush made use of ample opportunities to sprinkle himself with heroic stardust, marinated in blood, from Afghanistan and Iraq. Others died, he preened.

Now, with the election scarcely two months away, the media spotlight is largely focused on military backgrounds. The partisan crossfire has put the big propaganda guns in the hands of veterans.

Someday, the news media may get around to re-examining the assumption that killing foreigners in their own country is the best patriotic credential imaginable.

A front-page New York Times story the other day referred to Sen. John McCain as "the most popular national political figure in the country." McCain built his career in politics while news accounts routinely described him as a "war hero," with frequent references to the captivity and torture that he withstood for years after a North Vietnamese missile brought him down from a plane he was piloting over Hanoi. Media outlets rarely put a fine point on the fact that McCain had been dropping bombs on civilians.

Four years ago, I was inside a huge amphitheater in Philadelphia while McCain

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spoke at the Republican National Convention. It was a night of oratory dedicated to celebrating the military exploits of the United States. Any mention of a war – past or prospective – touched off enthusiasm among the delegates so ecstatic that it often seemed delirious.

Thirty-three years ago, speaking out against the war in Vietnam, John Kerry was an anti-war hero for some. Now he deserves to be no one's hero. Like Bill Clinton, he has proven himself ready and willing to embrace war based on lies.

Widely shared outlooks on the American left include a twofold understanding – that 1) it's imperative to defeat the Bush-Cheney ticket on Election Day, and 2) we want to build a powerful antiwar movement against a Kerry administration from the outset. That's why, on the left, there's so much hold-your-nose-and-vote-for-Kerry support in swing states <www.swing04.com>. Kerry is seen as a corporate militarist who would replace a significantly worse corporate militarist in the White House.

It's all well and good for leftists to denounce any pretense that such politicians deserve hero status. But closer to home, it may be much more uncomfortable to closely scrutinize the 2004 presidential campaign of Ralph Nader, whose claims earlier this year that his candidacy will help defeat Bush have collapsed under a mountain of poll results to the contrary <www.theunitycampaign.org>. As someone who supported and voted for Nader four years ago, I was sad to read about his recent visit to Florida, where – as in other swing states – his campaign must be delighting the Rove-Cheney-Bush administration.

A strong supporter of Nader in 2000, Barbara Ehrenreich, wrote an insightful New York Times column in mid-July referring to Nader's current presidential campaign as "predictably farce" and "grotesque." That column couldn't have been pleasant to write. It can be easy to scoff at other people's heroes; not so easy to recognize the clay feet of one's own.

"A fixed idea ends in madness or heroism," Victor Hugo wrote in 1879. This year, turning a longtime virtue of stubbornness on its head, Nader clings to the fixed idea that he must again run for president even in states where he could tip the balance in favor of a second term for George W. Bush. In this case, words from F. Scott Fitzgerald are apt: "Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy."

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