

First Place High School:

Teddy Tawil, 11th Grade, Hunter College High School, New York, NY

Freedom to Entertain

To most Americans, the idea of fighting a war evokes the traumatic scenes of combat, gunfire, and carnage that soldiers on the front lines experience. However, there is more than one way to serve your country. Indeed, those who itch to serve but cannot, choosing to contribute their “time and laughs” instead are a shining example of what it means to ask not what your country can do for you, but do whatever you can for your country.

During World War II, Bob Hope used his celebrity and comedic talent to lift the spirits of the troops and provide an escape, albeit momentarily, from the destruction of war. Traveling constantly for five years, he told topical jokes spanning from cannons to Churchill, bringing a slice of home to the foreign lands in which American soldiers fought. Along the way, he visited hospitals and gave wounded soldiers front-row seats to his shows, attempting to give those who personally experienced the pain and suffering of war relief in the best way he knew how. Hope serves as a constant reminder of the incredibly important role artists can play in times of war and conflict and of how supporting the troops can be extremely impactful to the young men and women behind the uniforms and guns.

Today, as our nation grows increasingly polarized, celebrities have often politicized their fame and used it to support partisan causes. However, in spite of (and perhaps because of) this new political environment, the role they can choose to play in supporting the brave citizens who now fully volunteer to put their lives on the line to defend ideals of freedom and democracy abroad is more crucial than ever. Today, celebrities with different talents on both sides of the political spectrum remind us of the importance of this work and help keep the legacy of Bob Hope alive: country musician Toby Keith has played in 17 different countries and for nearly a quarter million soldiers, Mariah Carey sang in Kosovo for American troops, and comedian Kathy Griffin has performed on numerous USO tours.

Perhaps the most powerful examples of artists reaching across the aisle to support American servicemen and women are those who support the troops in spite of opposing the wars. For example, comedian Robin Williams opposed the Iraq War, frequently making it the butt of his jokes, but went on four tours to support the troops who risked their lives fighting it. Furthermore, he eschewed the VIP tents and special perks for USO performers to meet and spend time with soldiers and give every base a personalized show. For a week in 2009, anti-interventionist liberal talk show host Stephen Colbert hosted his show in Baghdad to call attention to the valiant troops still fighting there even as the rest of the media had all but forgotten that the Iraq War raged on.

Yet while these celebrities have acted admirably in supporting the troops in the capacity that they could, it is their First Amendment right that they are under no obligation to. Freedom of speech and expression is a central tenet of the democracy for which the United States fights abroad. In the words of actor Tim Robbins, who came under fire for his opposition to the Iraq War, “isn’t it what we were fighting for there...to spread democracy, to give the Iraqis the right to express their opinions in a public forum?” We cannot turn to repression at home to fight oppression elsewhere. We must uphold these values within our country to make them worth fighting for.

To undermine artists' right to use their work to protest as well as defend American war efforts would not only stand in opposition to the fundamental liberties that make our country free, but also endanger one of the chief checks to the sort of needless intervention and warmongering that can cause the lives of courageous soldiers to be sacrificed in vain. In fact, artists speaking out against war such as Muhammad Ali, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan in the countermovement to the Vietnam War have been extremely important in helping to mobilize support for the United States to heed the lessons of history and exercise caution in involving itself in foreign conflicts. It is artists' right and duty as active participants in American democracy to honestly express their views on war, and in turn, we must respect what they have to say. While I personally believe that you can support the troops but not the war, the fact that not everyone else has to share this belief and that others have the freedom to publicly oppose it is one of the virtues of American liberty.

Norman Rockwell serves as an example of not only the integral role artists can play during wartime, but also of why their right to abstain from doing so is of vital importance. Rockwell wanted to fight in World War I but was underweight, and instead supported the country in his own way. He drew government posters and Saturday Evening Post covers during both World Wars to rally support for the troops and war efforts. His work commissioned in this context ranks among the most important American imagery, including Rosie the Riveter, the iconic posters promoting war bonds, and the series of paintings memorializing Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. And yet, of all the Four Freedoms that he so vividly illustrated, the one he considered most important was freedom of speech and expression. It is precisely to uphold this right, to protect American values, and to live by the beliefs for which we fight abroad that this freedom applies to everyone, and thus it is critically important yet not mandatory that artists support America's bravest men and women.

Second Place High School:

Jentry Myers, 12th Grade, Van Buren High School, Van Buren, AR

Laughter and Joy in War

"When you are leaving or are gone on deployment, you would give ANYTHING for just one more moment. Whether it's just to hear their voice or it's being able to see their faces, any moment possible is priceless and that is exactly what the USO has given service members, so thank you." These words were spoken by Sgt. 1st Class Tyler Arnold, a veteran of multiple combat tours. He was able to attend fall concert by the USO and Hunter Hayes. Many service men and women state that without celebrities and artists honoring them with their time, the monotony of life in service would be much harder to endure.

Entertainers and artists during wartime do not have any binding obligation to give their time to the troops in the field, but some do it anyway. They aren't volunteering up their own lives during the fighting, but they are giving their time and trying to give those that are sacrificing their lives a sense of well-being and hope. They are providing a small taste of what they've left behind; they are giving them a little glimpse of the normalcy of home. The entertainment is a welcomed diversion from the front lines and the day to day struggles of those enlisted to fight.

During World War II, Betty Grable gave those serving overseas this taste of home in the form of autographed pictures and responses to the letters they sent her. Glenn Miller used his fast music to bring the troops morale by boosting tunes and slow ballads to rekindle thoughts of their loved ones at home. An entire nonprofit organization sprung up during the horrors of World War II to bring some form of entertainment and art to the fighting men - the United Service Organizations or USO. The USO gave a quoted "home away from home" to those men and still continues to provide that same feeling to troops today.

Given all that entertainers and artists have done both in the past and today, I don't feel that they're obligated to reach and support men and women fighting in our wars. I think that the entertainer being obligated would cheapen what they provide. If a soldier knows that they're being forced to perform for them then it would lessen the enjoyment they would derive from the entertainer. I believe it would only be detrimental. The role of entertainers during wartime should be what it is during peacetime, to provide some enjoyment, relaxation, and a break from whatever monotonous form life has taken. I don't think that an artist or entertainer should remain neutral or uninvolved with politics during times of war. If they are forced into something against their beliefs, then what are the men even fighting for?

As an American, I feel that even if I don't agree completely with someone they are still entitled to their opinions. The only thing I think entertainers and artists should do during wartime is what they want to do. If that's volunteering their time and talents to the men and women fighting, then so much the better. I feel that knowing that they're voluntarily giving of their time and entertaining for their own sense of purpose would mean far more to those doing that same thing during war. Bob Hope put it best, "I was offering time and laughs - the men and women fighting the war were offering up their lives. They taught me what sacrifice was all about." The troops exemplified what sacrifice was and if those doing the fighting and those that know what sacrifice truly is can see those artists coming to give them a small taste of home it means immeasurably more to them. If soldiers can see that the entertainers are in it because they personally believe in what is being done. It would let them know that people still care. Those at home aren't ignoring their sacrifices and aren't forgetting what's happening in the fighting man's world. If people are still remembering them and appreciating what they are doing, the boost to morale will be all the greater.

Bob Hope showed this from his first performance on the RMS Mary Queen in September 1939 all way until the Gulf War in the beginning of the 1990's. He proved to the fighting men and women who viewed his performances that he personally appreciated their sacrifices, and I think that enhanced the effects of his visits and those of the USO. Entertainers, artists, and musicians don't have any kind of obligation to perform for the troops during times of war. They have no moral obligation to remain silent in their beliefs on current events. They are entertainers, not soldiers or politicians. Their job is to make people feel a little happier, laugh, and enjoy their downtime. Those that do support the troops and use their platforms to show support as well are the ones who will have the most impact. They will be the most effective at letting the soldiers know that people back home care. They will provide that little slice of normal home life, the break from the routine horrors of war, and they will give the most sense of enjoyment to those doing the true sacrificing. The entertainers like Bob Hope that do this kind of work are the entertainers and artists that truly appreciate the individuals they are entertaining.

Third Place High School:

Rowan Taylor, 12th Grade, Blue Springs South High School, Blue Springs, MO

The Art of War

The beauty of art is not just in its appearance but in the power of its purpose. Entertainment, happiness, and improving morale are important impacts of art, but its valuable influence can reach even deeper into peoples' minds and transform their ideas and actions. In times of chaos and confusion, brushstrokes and ballads can stop bullets. Everyone has a job to do during times of war, a moral obligation to help their fellow man. Artists' role in war is to create unity and expose the truth in order to help bring peace to the nation, both internally and externally.

Whether they are singers or comedians or painters, artists can bring people together with their creations in a moment of shared happiness, creating a bond over something simple yet so powerful. This is especially important in times of war when everyone is being torn apart. Political divides, us-vs-them attitudes, and separated families can divide the nation internally at a time when we need to work together the most. Artists should use their talents help bridge that divide, reminding everyone that they are all fighting to protect a shared home and values. In WWII, American jazz singer Glenn Miller sung for the troops and the American people, playing songs laced with love, hope, and joy. Soldiers could listen to the same song their family was hearing back at home, bringing them closer to what they loved most, while helping unify the Home Front with the front lines. Bitter feelings between soldiers of different ranks could melt away with the melodies. Different types of people could watch a Bob Hope comedy show, sitting shoulder to shoulder, sharing a laugh instead of their opposing political opinions. The essence of American values laced within Hope's jokes and the diversity of his subject matter created common ground among the audience. If people can laugh together, they can learn to work together.

Artists also have a unique ability to help people understand and relieve their emotions, finding peace in their shared grief. Poems like "In Flanders Field" written by John McCrae during WWI express the sorrows that weighed down the souls of the millions afflicted by the violence. This inspired people to share their feelings openly, creating a sense of camaraderie that transcended societal divisions. Art still unifies us today after events such as the 9/11 attacks. Photographs of first responders pulling people out of rubble and country songs with patriotic lyrics personified America's hopeful, undying spirit and helped us pay our collective respects. A unified nation is a strong nation, and only when our internal wounds are healed can it make peace with a world waging war.

Artists possess the influence to display the truth about the horrors of war in a personable and absorbable way. Without the confusion or bias of the money driven media and propaganda fueled politicians, they can display the true anguish that war causes, providing people with broader perspective and greater motivation for peace. Instead of remaining neutral and watching their homes crumble beneath them, they can take a stand to create positive change. During the Vietnam War, artists like Giles Caron and Nick Ut used photography to shed light on the truth with gripping scenes depicting napalm attacks and burning villages, spurring an anti-war movement that defined a generation. Eric Kensington, a WWI soldier and an avid painter, told his personal story on canvas and exposed the gruesome reality of trench warfare. This helped spur a realization in the French upper class that more legislation was needed to aid their soldiers.

Even today we are still seeking the truth masked by muddled conflict. America has been at war in the Middle East for seventeen years with no resolution in sight. It has been part of our culture for so long it has faded to the background of our collective consciousness. The excess of opinions and biased report make it difficult to understand what is real. Artists can cut through the static and remind the public that there are still brave soldiers fighting out there at this very moment. Steve Mumford was embedded in the U.S. army recently in Afghanistan and Iraq, painting the parts of war most people don't get to see like the female barracks that couldn't keep out the heat and the destruction of farms made by IEDs. More artists like Mumford are needed to paint a whole picture for the public. Younger generations tend to ignore the news, but they respond well to art forms like music that mirror the emotions they are feeling. Artists can inspire them to be the change that can end the wars we are still fighting. By showing the tears and tribulations of individual men and women, art can influence politicians and public opinion by making the battle personal and real for those not fighting. With the truth that artists illuminate comes understanding, and with understanding can come peace.

Art has always captivated me with its ability to weave emotions of events I've never experienced into my mind, bringing me closer to people thousands of years or miles away. Listening to our favorite song unites me with my best friend who moved to the other side of the country, and walking through my local art museum helps connect me with my culture's past. When my uncle was in the navy stationed at Pearl Harbor, he and his shipmates would bond by listening to the local Hawaiian music as they worked. When he came home, he found it easier to show us pictures and sketches of his submarine than to talk about it. I have seen how art has brought unity and truth to my family's life, and I believe it has the power to shed that same light on a global scale. Artists today should carry the torch lit by artists like Hope, Kensington, and Mumford to bring peace to the battles we still face today.

High School Honorable Mentions:

Graham Templeman, Swampscott High School, Swampscott, MA
Daniel Coppinger, Simsbury High School, West Simsbury, CT
Grace Keller, Ursuline Academy of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA
Randi Wilk, Deerfield High School, Deerfield, IL
Julia Abbott, Palisades Charter High School, Los Angeles, CA