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VOICES / A FORUM FOR COMMUNITY ISSUES

Schoolkids Go Begging as Military Gets Billions

By John Carter, John S. Carter is a salesman in Los Angeles.

Like many of my friends on both sides of the political spectrum, my frustration has been rising of late. Recently it reached the boiling point and spilled over at my local office supply store.

Standing in line behind a woman and her packed shopping cart, I felt my usual impatience express itself silently. I figured she was a small-business person or an office manager restocking the supply cabinet. The line grew longer behind me.

As the customer began to unload her basket, I took silent inventory. A couple of dozen small crayon packs, construction paper, several reams of lined writing paper, pencils, paste.

"You must be a schoolteacher," I said. "How can you tell?" she responded with a harried half-smile. "Preschool?" I continued. "No, first grade."

The reason I asked whether she taught preschool was because I'd learned some time ago that most preschool teachers were required to buy their own classroom supplies. But first-grade teachers? This was a new and puzzling development to me.

"L.A. Unified?" I pressed. "Yes," she replied matter-of-factly. "But you get reimbursed, right?" I asked. No reimbursement, she told me, but that didn't matter. She cared about the kids. Seems that the district doesn't always provide what's needed, and the ones who suffer, in addition to the frustrated teachers, are the kids.

That was my breaking point. Without pause for thought or propriety, I blurted out, "You mean we can spend \$4 billion a month to keep the military in Iraq, but we can't afford crayons for first-graders?"

Well, that silenced the line and the passersby. I proceeded with some bombast about how the time had come to speak out against this madness.

I'm not schooled in politics but I love this country. After the horror of 9/11, my heart swelled with pride and the community spirit that swept our country and the international community. Now, two years later, I fear the worst for the republic and for our standing as the bastion of liberty and champion of the world's oppressed. Our nation cries for leadership. Our ship of state is piloted by mean-spirited bureaucrats and their cronies who are robbing the commonwealth. They are building prisons at record rates while our schools, parks, air, water and, yes, the economy deteriorate before us.

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Enough is enough. I told the teacher that we must work for a real change in Washington. The teacher confessed that she too wanted to do something but felt that it had become "unpatriotic to speak against the president or his policies." I told her not only was it not unpatriotic but it was her civic duty to do so. This is America, and our speaking out ensures our liberty.

I was a combat medic with the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam — the same division that today occupies central Iraq. In the last decade I've been a registered Democrat, a Republican and a Green. Now I don't know where to turn. I beg the media to turn up the heat on these political scoundrels. Alert the citizenry. Demand that they tell us why corporate criminals who steal millions and ruin the livelihoods of their workers and shareholders go free.

And where is the money for crayons for our children? I'm not talking about test scores, I'm talking about the basics. Millions for bombs, but not one penny for crayons. Get thee to a polling place!

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