

Duty - A Definition

Jul 04, 2018 • spencerburleigh.com/duty

When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.

- *The Unknown Citizen*^[a]: WH Auden, 1939

WH Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* is a cynical response to perceived bureaucratic encroachment by western governments in the 1930s so this is admittedly a pretty odd poem to write a July 4th post about but I found it odd that my residential advisor would post it in the hall [1] of my dorm freshman year so here we are. For some reason, these middling stanzas have stuck with me as a good definition of doing your duty to country.



American (indeed most Western countries') culture is largely focused on the encouragement of individualism. Great wealth has been created through the hard-fought execution of people's crazy ideas. As a people surrounded by this individualistic culture from childhood, giving any of this

freedom up is difficult. Sacrificing all of this freedom temporarily or permanently is particularly noble.

Thank you, Dad, Grampy, Gramps, and all others who have heeded our country's calls for help. The rest of us wouldn't be here without you.

Related reading:

The Unknown Citizen is a parody of Melvin Tolson's [The Unknown Soldier](#)^[b] – I like this poem and its ending:

"I am the Unknown Soldier: I open doors
To the Rights of Man, letters incarnadine.
These shrines of freedom are mine as well as yours;
These ashes of freemen yours as well as mine.
My troubled ghost shall haunt These States, nor cease
Till the global war becomes a global peace."

a lot more than Auden's parody. Of course the United States (and [many other countries](#)^[c]) maintain tombs housing the remains of soldiers "known but to God" as the American tomb's inscription reads. It is worth a visit if you find yourself in the DC area [2].

When I cross posted this on [my Medium](#)^[d] on 06/29/19 I added some reflection:

[1] White lie I need to confess to here. My RA posted this poem on the door of a stall in the bathroom as part of his "poo for poetry" initiative or something like that.

[2] 99% Invisible recently had a fantastic episode about how the remains in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier representing the Vietnam War were identified and brought.

Links

- a. poets.org/poetsorg/poem/unknown-citizen
- b. poetryfoundation.org/poems/56030/the-unknown-soldier-56d2382b0ed60
- c. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomb_of_the_Unknown_Soldier
- d. medium.com/@spencerburleigh