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Stranger than parody

June 22, 2007

BY NEIL STEINBERG Sun-Times Columnist

Opening shot

Eager young people have been handing out The Onion downtown in recent weeks.

While the comic newspaper is famous for manufactured news, its writers are so good at capturing the madness of the moment that, even knowing what you're reading is made up, you still wonder if it's true.

For instance ...

On the front page of the June 21 issue is the headline: "Barack Obama Tiger Beat Cover Clinches Slumber Party Vote" and an article that begins:

"According to a poll released Monday by Teen Zogby! both Barack Obama's approval and dreaminess ratings among slumber party-attending tweens have risen to 82 percent ..."

I looked at the mock teen fan magazine cover and thought: "That's made up ... right?"

Of course, when the staid Tribune is sincerely referring to Obama on its front page as "the charismatic celebrity-politician," it's hard to cull truth from truer-than-truth.

Go beyond the magnets

The problem with spending too much time online is you forget what action is. Forget that much of what passes as "doing something" is just an endless Punch and Judy battle between zealots flinging insults at each other.

But there are people to whom "support" means something more than flag-waving bravado. Consider this letter from Diane Sepelis of Brookfield:

"Read your article about Supporting Our Troops -- struck me right where I live!!!!

"Do I have a yellow ribbon on my car ... or my tree? No!

"BUT, I have been supporting our heroes for over three years now. [I] have adopted 12 soldiers and thank God, each one of them has returned home safe. My newest adoptee is a chaplain who has 800 soldiers under his watch.

"These fine young warriors need to know that the folks back home are supporting them -- all politics aside. Many, many of them have no family or do not receive anything from back home.

"Many people think I'm a bit silly to put so much time, effort and money into sending things to strangers that I have a very slim chance of ever meeting. Sorry, these warriors are putting their life on the line every hour for each one of us, and I can think of no better way to honor them and to let them know they are loved and cared about.

"The postage for the care packages can cost from \$18 to \$25 and more, depending on what I am sending. Sometimes I have boxes packed and ready to go, but must wait till I have the funds to mail them -- frustrating at times!

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"I just wanted to let you know, it makes my heart so happy when I come home from work and in the mailbox is a letter with no stamp, but marked "free" in the corner and it is from a soldier -- makes my day!!! ... These are things that mean so much to me, so the time that I take to 'hunt' for bargains for 'my guys,' is well worth it and really is not an effort at all -- matter of fact, it is something everyone should be doing."

She said there are several Web sites that hook citizens up with soldiers in Iraq.

"Names of soldiers -- for their security -- are not released to just anyone. You need to sign up with the organization to get names and addresses -- and once you get them -- you are not allowed to share them -- again, security reasons.

"So, that's my story and I'm stickin' to it!!!! Just wanted to let you know, this one person supports our troops in every way I can -- from some new socks, cinnamon for oatmeal, stationery, puzzle books, trail mix, toothpaste, clean sheets. If it sounds boring, it's not, when you are in the 'sandbox' and the nearest Wal-Mart is a million miles away!!!!!!"

I asked Diane what organizations she suggests, and she recommends the following:

- • anysoldier.com
- • soldiersangels.org
- • adoptaplatoon.org
- • mysoldier.com.

People should sign up to help actual soldiers before claiming to "support" them in theory.

Hire a vet

Diane's letter so inspired me -- the idea of simply doing something vs. spouting red-white-and-blue bromides -- that I wondered if I could do something to help our soldiers.

And I thought about a persistent problem that vets face: They serve their country, then come home and often have trouble finding employment. You'd think, with all our chin music about supporting troops, that employers would leap to hire them -- and the state offers tax breaks if they do. But for some reason -- perhaps lingering bad karma from the draft Army -- the vast array of real-life experiences and complex skills one gets in the military is undervalued in civilian life.

So this is my idea -- if you are an unemployed veteran, looking for work, send me your photograph and a brief description of your skills and work experience. Don't send them if you're a mope, but if you're employable, I'll cull through them, and print ones I think are the most worthy. Perhaps we can hook you up with a job.

This might not work -- I keep trying to figure out why it's a Bad Idea. But it seems at least worth giving a try. Send picture and data to: Neil Steinberg, Hire a Vet, Chicago Sun-Times, 350 N. Orleans, Chicago 60654. No promises, but let's give a whirl and see what happens.

Today's chuckle

Tim, the bartender at Hackney's on Lake, told this to Sunni Lindahl, who sent it to me:

A census taker is making his rounds, going from door to door.

He knocks at a house and is greeted by a 10-year-old boy with a Playboy tucked under one arm, a beer in one hand and a cigar in the other.

"Are your parents at home?" the startled census taker asks.

"What the #@!\$%! do you think?" replies the kid.

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