

U.S. veterans need to share the moral burden of war

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The Washington Post | Opinions May 24, 2013

Recently I was a guest on a national television show, and the host expressed some indignation when I said that soldiers in Afghanistan don't much discuss the war they're fighting. The soldiers are mostly in their teens, I pointed out. Why would we expect them to evaluate U.S. foreign policy?

The host had made the classic error of thinking that war belongs to the soldiers who fight it. That is a standard of accountability not applied to, say, oil-rig workers or police. The environment is collapsing and anti-crime measures can be deeply flawed, but we don't expect people in those fields to discuss national policy on their lunch breaks.

Soldiers, though, are a special case. Perhaps war is so obscene that even the people who supported it don't want to hear the details or acknowledge their role. Soldiers face myriad challenges when they return home, but one of the most destructive is the sense that their country doesn't quite realize that it — and not just the soldiers — went to war. The country approved, financed and justified war — and sent the soldiers to fight it. This is important because it returns the moral burden of war to its rightful place: with the entire nation. If a soldier inadvertently kills a civilian in Baghdad, we all helped kill that civilian. If a soldier loses his arm in Afghanistan, we all lost something.

The growing cultural gap between American society and our military is dangerous and unhealthy. The sense that war belongs exclusively to the soldiers and generals may be one of the most destructive expressions of this gap. Both sides are to blame. I know many soldiers who don't want to be called heroes — a grotesquely misused word — or told that they did their duty; some don't want to be thanked. Soldiers know all too well how much killing — mostly of civilians — goes on in war. Congratulations make them feel that people back home have no idea what happens when a human body encounters the machinery of war.

I am no pacifist. I'm glad the police in my home town of New York carry guns, and every war I have ever covered as a journalist has been ended by armed Western intervention. I approved of all of it, including our entry into Afghanistan. (In 2001, U.S. forces effectively ended a civil war that had killed as many as 400,000 Afghans during the previous decade and forced the exodus of millions more. The situation there today is the lowest level of civilian suffering in Afghanistan in 30 years.) But the obscenity of war is not diminished when that conflict is righteous or necessary or noble. And when soldiers come home spiritually polluted by the killing that they committed, or even just witnessed, many hope that their country will share the moral responsibility of such a grave event.

Their country doesn't. Liberals often say that it's not their problem because they opposed the war. Conservatives tend to call soldiers "heroes" and pat them on the back. Neither response is honest or helpful. Neither addresses the epidemic of post-traumatic stress disorder afflicting our veterans. Rates of suicide, alcoholism, fatal car accidents and incarceration are far higher for veterans than for most of the civilian population. One study predicted that in the next decade 400,000 to 500,000 veterans will have

criminal cases in the courts. Our collective avoidance of this problem is unjust and hypocritical. It is also going to be very costly.

Civilians tend to do things that make them, not the veterans, feel better. Yellow ribbons and parades do little to help with the emotional aftermath of combat. War has been part of human culture for tens of thousands of years, and most tribal societies were engaged in some form of warfare when encountered by Western explorers. It might be productive to study how some societies reintegrated their young fighters after the intimate carnage of Stone Age combat. It is striking, in fact, how rarely combat trauma is mentioned in ethnographic studies of cultures.

Typically, warriors were welcomed home by their entire community and underwent rituals to spiritually cleanse them of the effect of killing. Otherwise, they were considered too polluted to be around women and children. Often there was a celebration in which the fighters described the battle in great, bloody detail. Every man knew he was fighting for his community, and every person in the community knew that their lives depended on these young men. These gatherings must have been enormously cathartic for both the fighters and the people they were defending. A question like the one recently posed to me wouldn't begin to make sense in a culture such as the Yanomami of Brazil and Venezuela or the Comanche.

Our enormously complex society can't just start performing tribal rituals designed to diminish combat trauma, but there may be things we can do. The therapeutic power of storytelling, for example, could give combat veterans an emotional outlet and allow civilians to demonstrate their personal involvement. On Memorial Day or Veterans Day, in addition to traditional parades, communities could make their city or town hall available for vets to tell their stories. Each could get, say, 10 minutes to tell his or her experience at war.

Attendance could not be mandatory, but on that day "I support the troops" would mean spending hours listening to our vets. We would hear a lot of anger and pain. We would also hear a lot of pride. Some of what would be said would make you uncomfortable, whether you are liberal or conservative, military or nonmilitary, young or old. But there is no point in having a conversation about war that is not completely honest.

Let them speak. They deserve it. In addition to getting our veterans back, we might get our nation back as well.

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