

# The Primacy of Healing

by tyler boudreau

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Like many veterans of the occupation of Iraq, I came home bearing unexpected skepticism toward our operations there and a fresh perspective on America's application of military power. And also like many, I found myself emotionally and psychologically harried by my experiences on the battlefield. But unlike many, after discharge I landed in a community where criticism for the occupation was both socially acceptable and common, leaving me free to process a distress which was directly connected to US foreign policy. I found myself, literally and figuratively, quite at home, even though it was not the place where I'd been raised. So naturally, I couldn't help noticing how the political dissent of my community was indirectly facilitating my personal healing process. That has given me reason to consider all the ways in which politics correspond with and influence the discourse on combat stress and its treatment. While some combat survivors have benefited from this relationship; others have found the very same dynamic impeding recovery.

Combat stress has a stigmatic heritage, well-recognized now, but that was not always so. World War I was an era in which distraught soldiers were often characterized as lacking moral fortitude; and yet, the unspeakable carnage of 'The Great War' seemed to have produced some measure of public acceptance for the representations and expressions of traumatized veterans. But after World War II, an infinitely more popular cause, veterans became known more for reticence than effusion and for a stoical veneer beneath which lingered the quiet tumult of moral distress. With the country so steeped in enthusiasm, it is not surprising that their invisible wounds went largely unnoticed. After all, with whom, in such a politically enthusiastic environment, might veterans have shared their horrible stories? Vietnam marked a new era for politics and for combat stress. The antiwar movement was never so vociferous, the veterans never so outspoken. But the term "Post-Traumatic Stress" was still, at that point, virtually nonexistent and was not listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until years after the war's conclusion. Widespread criticism of the conflict changed all that. The antiwar movement did not merely give veterans room to recover; it created space in the American consciousness for the possibility that the experiences from war could, in fact, be psychologically devastating. This consequently opened the door to the study of combat stress. Today combat stress is nearly taken for granted as an innate component of armed conflict. And yet remnants of the stigma surrounding combat stress survive throughout the country, within the military, and even in the mental health field. Why?

The trouble with combat stress (and the traumatic accounts that go with it) is its tendency to call into question the morality of the military operations in which the combat was experienced. Regardless of the policies, the objectives, or the administrations that enact them, war's essence is challenged outright by the mere existence of combat stress. Upon witnessing the sundered

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consciousnesses of so many returning soldiers, and learning the alarming rates of veteran suicides, and finally hearing about all the horrible events these veterans have witnessed, endured, or participated in, one finds it difficult to conclude that a battlefield could be anything other than a horrible place. Clearly the justness of a given war is not defined solely by the number of casualties it produces, but when young soldiers reach the point where they find it difficult to bear the feel of their own skins, or withstand their own memories, or steady their own moral compasses, it tends to create suspicion among the citizenry about the moral substance of the policies and the culture that led to war in the first place. And that is precisely the problem. Like it or not, combat stress is, in its own way, a political statement. It is a silent judgment of war (and of society), and that is why the understanding and treatment of it remains in perpetual tension.

For instance, there has been much discussion within the mental health community about reducing the criteria for post-traumatic stress in future editions of the DSM or restricting the types of events deemed traumatic as many clinicians have come to believe that the word 'trauma' has become too broadly defined and overused, contributing to, among other things, imprecise data collection. Their claim, in other words, is that too many people have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. This must be the only epidemic in human history whose remedy is simply to eliminate the symptoms by which one is diagnosed, thereby normalizing the condition itself, which, in this case, would be the psychological effects of war. The link between politics and combat stress is hardly subtle; it is intuitive. Articulated or not, people sense it. For example, across the country literally hundreds of grass roots organizations and projects have formed to reintegrate veterans and help them through their process of coming home. And in nearly every one of them, you will find some disclaimer or note of political neutrality. "It's about veterans, not politics!" is the ongoing mantra one hears. The very presence of this message reiterated ad nauseam is enough to let anyone hearing it know that this absolutely is about politics and that politics are inextricably bound to healing. These attempts at nonpartisan reintegration are fashionable—even admirable—but sadly destined to fail on a large scale because communalizing healing is not possible without first communalizing the violent policies and operations that precipitate it. The occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan were anything but communalized.

While society continually attempts to segregate veterans from the political implications of their combat experiences, the veterans themselves will be searching for meaning behind those experiences and will inevitably reach politics because, as the reputed military philosopher Karl Von Clausewitz notoriously points out, "War is the continuation of politics by other means." Whatever conclusions veterans reach in the aftermath, one can be sure they will be politically charged. To deny the ruminations of veterans on the grounds of nonpartisanship is, for one thing, to ignore the long-standing and often erroneous assumption that silence indicates consent; and for another, it is to prohibit those veterans from processing a major element of their torment. On the

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other hand, to embrace their political outbursts too fervently or to focus too narrowly on the partisan weight of their every word is to lose sight of the central process underway. That is what is currently happening across the country. The kind of reluctance to deal with combat stress that one might expect to find within the military has now plagued the home front as well. In communities that have adamantly supported American military operations, returning veterans have found their ability to express pain often inhibited or even forcefully suppressed because it tends to sound too much like criticism. Those whose distress results from the danger they experienced or the death they narrowly escaped find at least some level of acceptance. But for those whose angst comes specifically from their deeds in war—from the violence they inflicted or from the deaths they caused—those veterans will face taut resistance.

Members of my former unit hailing from various parts of the country have found themselves practically gagged by the pro-war culture of their own hometowns, leaving them no with way to process their pain and no way to heal. So strong is the intolerance for dissent, which their traumatic memories appear to represent, they are forced to process their pain through drinking, drugs, violence and a host of other illegal or self-destructive activities. These veterans come to understand one immutable truth: It is better to break the law than break the faith. If they turn reckless or criminal, they might serve some jail time, but if they turn their backs on the war and on their former comrades, they will certainly face ostracism, and that is a far harsher penalty for anyone, let alone an emotionally troubled combat veteran already under the significant weight of solitude. Such patterns of oppression must seem rather obvious to members of the antiwar community, who generally understand the phrases “recovering from war” and “opposition to war” as having the same meaning. In many ways, the two terms can be, and indeed are, synonymous, although not inherently so. The distinction may be slight, but I have found a great deal of misunderstanding can gather between them. Traumatic healing is not the same thing as political activism. They are driven by different forces and so must be treated differently. This is a lesson that goes missed all too often.

When I first came home, I got became heavily involved with activist efforts to end the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and I remember a friend said to me, "Be careful." I asked him what he meant and he told me the story of another outspoken veteran who'd been invited to an antiwar rally. "He was talking about his time in war. He was screaming. His eyes were red. His mouth was spluttering. And everyone loved it. They hooted, and hollered, and called out his name. And when the veteran was done telling his story, when he stepped off the stage, went home, and was out of sight and mind, they forgot about him, leaving him to stew in those agonizing juices all alone." My friend shook his head disapprovingly and said to me, "They cared more about his politics than his pain." That may not have been entirely accurate or a fair assessment of the entire antiwar movement, but since coming home and having participated in a few rallies myself I've

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seen enough of the overzealous encouragement and standing ovations to confirm my friend's suspicion. On the other hand, having gotten to know so many people myself at such rallies, I suspect now that their neglect was not truly from callousness but more so from misunderstanding combat stress and the ways it tends to manifest in human consciousness and behavior.

The crucial mistake being made, I think, by so many in the pro-war, antiwar and apolitical populations alike, is their assumptions that the outbursts of veterans are necessarily whole-hearted and carefully considered expressions of dissent. More likely, they are expressions of moral anguish. It just so happens that their context is political and therefore their vocabulary is political as well. And while these expressions may be more affirming to the Left than to the Right, they are, for neither side, exclusively political statements. I don't mean to invalidate the thoughtful contributions of veterans returning from war, including my own; however, I would like to note that there's more going on in the mind of a combat veteran than politics. The search, I would say, is foremost for some level of serenity. Any new ideologies picked up along the way are often by-products of the process itself and do not always endure. That's an important point to remember. Veterans' experiences in combat are extreme; their emotions are extreme; so their views will often sound extreme as well, at least initially. But their political destinations remain uncharted because until their pain has receded, their political maps will remain incompletely drawn. For my part, I was reading a lot of radical texts when I came home from war and quoting a lot of radical thinkers. After all, radical politics and wars are closely related. The problem, at that stage of my recovery, was that I was doing more regurgitation than any real thinking of my own. When I finally calmed down enough to contemplate the situation for myself, I found a place that was not exactly where I'd started and not exactly where others might have liked to see me end up, but it was far more satisfying to me because it was a place of my own design, discovered through my own process.

I believe that the antiwar community has provided me and many other veterans receptiveness and acceptance for our oppositional views of war and the politics which drove us there and that has been truly precious to me; however, I also believe it is a mistake to hear such expressions as purely political rather than part of a healing process. (The pro-war and "neutral" communities could stand to consider this point, too.) For returning veterans, the healing process is the central activity on-going, not politics. They need time and room to speak their piece; they need the freedom to lash out verbally so they don't feel cornered into finding other, more destructive outlets. At some point veterans may emerge from their inner fray enough to soberly define their political disposition and place themselves in communities accordingly. Until then, compassion is required from all, compassion, which includes both tolerance and restraint, both letting politics in and simultaneously keeping it out, and having both the courage to acknowledge the intrinsic presence of politics in combat stress and the wisdom to recognize the primacy of healing