

Afghanistan and Iraq: The Soldiers' Experience



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Few, if any, soldiers emerge from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq unchanged. For many—indeed, probably for most—the negatives outweigh the positives. While the views of individual veterans may change with the passage of time—mellowing for some, hardening for others—the public should seek out those who served while the troops' experience is fresh and while they still struggle with its meaning.

For policy-makers and a public that has remained largely disengaged during the wars, the troops' experience offers an entry point into an overdue national conversation, one with significant implications for expectations of the military in coming years. U.S. policy less than fully informed by this experience will suffer accordingly.

The experience of the veterans consulted in this research has a number of themes. Recurring positives include the performance of difficult tasks with a high degree of professionalism, the sense of cohesion among the troops, the expressed concern for civilian populations, and the greater sense of direction and commitment to country and community emerging from the experience. Recurring negatives include the lack of preparation for the carnage encountered,

widespread ambivalence among the troops about the wars and the troops' mission, the erosion of soldiers' sense of humanity, and the challenges of re-entry and rehabilitation. Positives and negatives are often intertwined.

Positives

Professionalism

Most of the men and women deployed into the two principal theaters of the Global War on Terror were highly professional. They took absences from family and community in stride, even the involuntary “stop-loss” extensions of their tours designed to meet the military’s critical manpower needs. Some National Guard members who enlisted in advance of 9/11 with no thought of overseas deployment felt that the ground rules changed in mid-stream. Yet even they made necessary adjustments with a minimum of complaining. Not only the Guard but also other reserve personnel as well as active-duty troops uniformly honored their commitments when summoned.¹

The discipline exhibited by veterans who consistently placed a sense of duty above inconvenience and personal opinion was striking. “President Bush is my commander in chief,” said Lt. Col. Ralph Riley. “As long as I’m in the Army, whatever he says goes” (qtd. in Minear, *Through* 33; Riley 43537). “I’m part of the military and I believe in its ways,” said Lt. Ron Maloney. “Where else do you get a job that reinforces those types of values: personal integrity, personal courage, selflessness? Not too many bosses out there say, ‘Hey, these are the

¹ For an elaboration of the experience of those serving in the National Guard, see Minear, *U.S. Citizen Soldier* 19-25.

key requirements for you to be in this job” (qtd. in Minear, *Through* 33).

One crucial ingredient of military professionalism involves putting politics aside. Whatever their personal views about the two wars, most veterans took their responsibility as soldiers with great seriousness. Not that the troops were without political views. Letters and blogs from the two 9/11 theaters confirm that politics regularly heated up the atmosphere in billets and bunkhouses. “I always find it amusing when people talk about the ‘military’ vote,” wrote Sgt. Sharon Allen, a diesel fuel tanker driver in Iraq. “Tempers can get heated and on some days it probably isn’t a good idea that we are all armed” (qtd. in Minear, *Through* 33). Yet deeply held personal views on the politics and policies of the wars did not, by most accounts, impede the performance of duties.

The troops’ commitment to each other dwarfed personal reservations about the strategies and tactics employed by their superiors. “There are quiet professionals wherever you go,” said a female West Point graduate who, during the course of 15 months in Iraq, flew her Black Hawk helicopter in more than 200 hours of combat (Hough 10). “I can honestly say,” reflected one Army officer who commanded an eight-man infantry squad in Iraq in 2005–06, “that I never once supported the cause” of freedom, the stated rationale for the U.S. military presence. “The only thing I supported was the commitment I had made to my fellow soldiers. When it comes to your capacity to take responsibility for your men, it is a moot point

whether or not you are a conscientious objector.”² Others, too, took care not to let personal opinions undercut their performance.

Despite the manifold challenges, veterans downplayed the difficulty of their tasks. Their constant refrain was, “What I did was not heroic. I was simply doing my job.” In fact, many expressed discomfort with the lavish thanks for their service received from total strangers in airports and at sporting events. Of course, such receptions were a pleasant contrast to those given troops returning from Vietnam. Indeed, the warmth of the receptions was a gratifying indication that, post-Vietnam, Americans now separate the warriors from the wars.

Yet some veterans also found themselves wondering whether their well-wishers had any real clue about what their “service to the nation” may have involved. Reflecting on the reception following his Army tour in Iraq, Sean Casey was unnerved by the public’s increasingly routine “celebration of his violent profession.” If the strangers who professed gratitude knew more about the actual soldiering, he mused, they would be less effusive in their praise. He shares his uneasiness in his writings, he said, because doing so helps bring “order to the internal chaos,” he feels (33).

Other soldiers were even more explicit in rejecting the hero label. “WE ARE NOT YOUR HEROES,” writes Jennifer Pacanowski, an Army combat medic from Iraq, in words that scream from the written page. “We are your BURDEN, smacking you in the face with our honesty of this needless war. I wish I never came back” (151). A small

² Interviewed by the author, this veteran requested anonymity.

number of veterans, willing volunteers at the outset, sought formal recognition and honorable discharges as conscientious objectors.³

Cohesion

A second theme emerging from the research is the high degree of commitment among the troops toward each other. All who served did so by their own choice. Conscription ended in 1973 following the Vietnam War, and all who fought in the Global War on Terror did so voluntarily. Like it or not, observed Navy Commander (now U.S. Senator from Illinois) Mark Kirk, “We all signed up for this” (Minear, *Through* 166; Kirk 38582).

The major incentives for enlistees were economic (the doldrums of a slack economy, especially in rural areas) and educational (the desire to earn degrees during and after service). Some enlisted out of a sense of patriotism, seeking recruiters in large numbers especially in the days immediately following the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. But many in the ranks found the concept of a “Global War on Terror,” the official rationale for Operation Enduring Freedom (the Afghanistan campaign) and Operation Iraqi Freedom, something of a stretch.⁴

The palpable solidarity among the troops also reflected a camaraderie born of shared hardships. Robert D’Amico, a Marine Lt.

³ The experience and treatment of conscientious objectors are the subject of a separate article by the author: Larry Minear, “Conscience and U.S. Military Service: The Uneasy Fit in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *Journal of Military Ethics* (2014, forthcoming).

⁴ For the views of National Guard personnel on this point, see Minear, *U.S. Citizen Soldier* 39–43.

Colonel who served in both Afghanistan and Iraq, observed that the experience of “sharing bad times with good people . . . has a tendency to bond you for the rest of your life” (Minear, *Through* 166; D’Amico 62471). “You know you miss your family but you’re with another family,” added Air Force Colonel William Andrews. “The squadron you’re part of kind of takes on a family atmosphere of its own” (Minear, *Through* 144; Andrews 42880). Army 1st Lt. Trevor Bradna noted that in the circumstances, his fellow troops were his “only source of support and entertainment” (Minear, *Through* 144; Bradna 47553).

The depth of commitment to each other is reflected in the distress felt by many who returned to the States for medical or family reasons while their units remained in the field or who, following their units’ rotation back home, did not return with their units to the field. The bonds of those who shared common risks and entrusted their lives to each other often overrode even very deep-seated views related to gender and race. Such solidarity also existed despite the recurring pattern of rampant sexual abuse, often of lower-ranking women by their superiors, which became a major concern for Congress and the military in 2013. Such strong bonds influenced many veterans’ decision to re-up, irrespective of the reality that another deployment would place them once again in harm’s way and would force another round of difficult adjustments for their families on the home front.

Concern for Local Civilians

A third recurring positive is the troops’ widely expressed concern for local civilians. Many soldiers were taken aback by the wretched

situation of ordinary Afghans and Iraqis and sought ways of reaching out to them. In actuality, however, their daily contacts with civilians were strictly circumscribed by security concerns. “We were segregated from the local population,” observed Sgt. Ben Flanders. (Minear, *Through* 61). “It would have been nice,” commented Capt. Ralan Hill, “to have a little more interaction” with the locals beyond those employed as translators and laborers on military bases (Minear, *Through* 61; Hill 43145). Few Americans spoke local languages or had local friends.

The most satisfying aspect of the experience for many involved assisting those who lived near military bases with textbooks and soccer balls, vaccinations, and jobs. Friends and family in the States donated many items, an activity that gave them a sense of participation in the war effort. U.S. military officials viewed “civic action” programs as helpful in generating sympathy for U.S. military presence. They were also seen as providing reasonably safe tasks for the females in the ranks, although many women—far more than was generally perceived or acknowledged—were themselves exposed to combat.

Sgt. Stephanie Corcoran, who served in Iraq with a military police unit from Fort Benning, Georgia, expressed in e-mails to family and friends how much she learned in her travels “outside the wire” about the Iraqi way of life and about the blessings she took for granted back home (Minear, *Through* 61-62). In Afghanistan, one officer described his informal evening meetings with tribal elders as the highlight of his entire deployment.

Humane activities and sentiments notwithstanding, there were strict limits to such interactions. As the troops pointed out, their aid programs were geared to winning hearts and minds; programs which did not succeed were sooner or later reduced or terminated. Other programs fell into disrepair when the troops withdrew or were destroyed by the soldiers themselves upon their departure so as to not benefit the insurgency.⁵

Sgt. Corcoran herself found that “everything over here has an invisible ‘approach with caution’ sign on it.” Interactions with local populations were understandably monitored closely, she observed, to avoid compromising unit security. She also identified as “the most disappointing part” of her deployment the “hate toward the people of Iraq” expressed by members of the U.S. military. The soldier who slipped away for informal evening get-togethers with local Afghan elders was AWOL, he acknowledged, whenever he did so.

An Opening to the Future

A fourth positive theme is the impact of the experience on the attitudes and worldviews of the troops. Many returned home with a strong sense of accomplishment. “I wear my uniform proudly,” said Sr. Amn. Patrick J. McGonigle III. “I wear it every once and a while just to wear it and say, ‘Hey, I earned this’” (Minear, *Through* 25; McGonigle 48161). For some who had neither a clear sense of direction nor articulated values prior to joining the ranks, military service gave them something to build upon. “I was living a little bit of a crazy lifestyle,” recalled a veteran, “and wanted to get things

⁵ For additional examples, see Minear, *U.S. Citizen Soldier* 92-96.

together—basically to get my head straight.” Building on his wartime experiences, he was able to identify a career path and apply himself with new-found energy and determination.

One woman with a son in the Vermont National Guard spoke emotionally about positive changes she had witnessed. Before his unit was called up, he had been an indifferent student and a real loner. Returning from the fray, he showed new interest in family history and participated in community affairs and the celebration of national holidays.⁶ The recruiters’ best friend often turned out to be the recruit’s parents (frequently the fathers) of young men who told their offspring in no uncertain terms to get out of the house and do something useful for a change.

Spec. Philip Wade Geiger credited his military service with making him a better person. “It has made me more respectful and more socially conscious. . . . Before I enlisted, I didn’t care about any world events or news. This keeps my eyes open now because I’m interested in things that are evolving that could involve me or friends of mine” (Minear, *Through* 22; Geiger 30333). His military commitment fulfilled and back in civilian life, one officer jumped at the chance of returning to the Middle East for a year as a teacher. “Having gone to fight against people I didn’t know anything about,” he explained, “I wanted to see the culture through a different lens.”⁷

Sgt. Mathew Sean Neely described his time in an infantry division in Iraq as “a life-changing experience for sure. I view life a lot

⁶ Comments by the participants in a focus group at the National Guard Armory in Bradford, VT, on 13 Nov. 2006 were not for attribution.

⁷ Name withheld at the request of the interviewee.

differently. I have a better handle on things” (Minear, *Through* 22; Neely 29104). Marine Lt. Cpl. Brian Aria is thankful simply for having survived: “I appreciate things every day now” (Minear, *Through* 22; Aria 50547).

Spec. Jennifer Schwab, who signed up with the New Hampshire National Guard while still in high school, used her combat bonus to underwrite college tuition costs. From her base in Afghanistan, she took distance-learning courses, completing her degree upon returning. She parlayed her experience with the Guard into work in journalism and with NGOs (Minear, *Through* 21). Others developed the skills acquired overseas, moving up career ladders or into new careers altogether. Many completing military service were still in their twenties, giving them ample time to build on their experiences. And of course some re-upped and pursued careers within the military.

But the experiences described in interviews and journals were by no means uniformly positive. One soldier who faithfully kept a diary destroyed it before returning home to avoid keeping open a chapter in his life he preferred to forget. Another turned down invitations to join veterans’ organizations in his desire to put the whole experience behind him as quickly as possible. He had paid enough already, he said, and had no desire to commit to annual dues. Others found homes in veterans’ organizations, traditional ones such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars that, broadly speaking, have championed the 9/11 wars as well as newer-breed groups with an anti-war persuasion, such as Iraq Veterans Against the War.

Negatives

Rampant Carnage

From the early days, soldiers were stunned by levels of carnage exceeding anything they had experienced or expected. They confronted carnage both in its narrow definition as “the flesh of slain animals or men” and in its wider sense of “the great destruction of life, as in battle.” Reflecting on his time in Iraq, where he did medical evacuations by helicopter, Sgt. Matthew Miller was struck by how greatly his day-to-day duties differed from his work as a paramedic in Maryland. “At home, it’s car crashes, but their body parts are still on them,” he explained. “Here there is so much blood and pieces of bone missing. We have sprayed our aircraft and found pieces of bone” (Minear, *Through* 57).

Sgt. Steve Pink reported a searing experience: shaking a man’s hand that was no longer attached at the arm. It was “dangling from the exposed bone that used to be his elbow,” he recalled, “like a child’s safety-clipped mitten dangling from their winter coat” (Minear, *Through* 56-57). Having encountered violence at close range, and with such images indelibly etched on their minds, almost half of the 2.5 million veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq are seeking compensation for injuries they sustained, many of them psychological.

The sheer brutality of the conflicts has taken a heavy toll. In a deposition on the factors that contributed to the suicide of a man in his unit, one officer explained to the court that many troops “weren’t prepared for what they saw.” One of the most unsettling practices of the Iraqi enemy, he said, involved sending “children out to blow up truck convoys.” The troops’ rules of engagement stipulated that “when

the children were seen in the road, the soldiers were told to actually keep going and run right over them . . . because if they stopped for the children, as would be the norm, there was a possibility that these children could be armed or wired with explosives” (Minear, *Through* 81–82). The moral ambiguities were excruciating. In situations already fraught with insecurity and tension, soldiers had to make life-and-death judgments quickly. “If you’re looking at a kid on the side of the road with something in his hand,” observed one analyst, “if it’s a grenade and he throws it and kills someone in your unit, you’ve failed your comrade. But if it’s a rock, you’ve just shot a kid with a rock.”⁸

The Army conducted a survey in 2003 to pinpoint the intensity and pervasiveness of the violence soldiers were experiencing. Of the 2,856 troops polled, 39 percent of those serving in Afghanistan had seen dead bodies or human remains; in Iraq, 95 percent. Thirty and 65 percent respectively had seen dead or seriously injured Americans; 46 and 69 percent had seen injured women or children whom they had been unable to help. Twelve and 48 percent reported having killed an enemy combatant. U.S. troops were surrounded and inundated by violence (Hoge et al. 18). Even the Green Zone in Baghdad, a “safe” area from which to conduct diplomatic and military activities, offered no enduring refuge.

The mayhem that many soldiers witnessed caused what mental health professionals within and outside the government have come to call “moral injury.” It is defined as “perpetrating, failing to prevent,

⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock, quoted in Freedman (n. pag.). Brock is founding co-director of the Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University.

bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.”⁹ The affected individual feels that he or she has violated core individual or organizational values and norms. The ferocity of the carnage and the destabilizing effects of the accompanying moral injury help explain why some veterans have had great difficulty reconnecting with their families. Preparing for the return from Iraq of her husband, Army Sgt. Charles M. King, Dana Canedy mused, “What he had seen and done over there I could not imagine. But there was clearly no way to emerge from a world in which you are routinely involved in taking and saving lives and not be transformed” (189).

Some soldiers changed to such a degree—or had been away for so long—that their own children no longer recognized them. Long-awaited airport reunions were transformed from events of anticipated joy to encounters of excruciating pain. Meeting him on one of his arrivals home after an extended deployment, one of the children of Lt. Col. D’Amico did not recognize him and refused to speak to him for a week (Minear, *Through* 129; D’Amico 62471).

A once mild-mannered veteran who returned to rural Vermont from Afghanistan had such an “attitude,” his wife recalled, that she did not dare leave him at home alone with their children. Army Specialist Gonzalo Gonzales went to great lengths to arrange employment in a school. “It really helped me out,” he said, “just being around children” (Minear, *Through* 139; Gonzales 60176). Some veterans were reluctant to tell their children about their war

⁹ The definition is from Litz, et al. as quoted in Litz and Maguen (4).

experiences or even to share details with interviewers except under strictest guarantees of confidentiality. Some were non-committal when asked whether they would encourage their own children to seek careers in the military. Others planned to try to dissuade them when the time came.

Mission Ambivalence

The level and intensity of the carnage were connected to a second theme on the negative side of the ledger: reservations among veterans about their mission and their accomplishments. Many found the declaration of war against Afghanistan in September 2001 an appropriate response to the 9/11 attack and to the country harboring its mastermind, Osama bin Laden. However, the expansion of the Global War on Terror in March 2003 with the invasion of Iraq was far less widely supported. The invasion seemed only remotely connected to U.S. interests and lacked the international imprimatur given for the Afghanistan war. Failure to discover weapons of mass destruction, the stated rationale for invading Iraq and deposing its leader, further fueled doubts.

The views of individual veterans of the conflicts and the carnage did not follow predictable patterns. Some who at the time of deployment had serious misgivings became convinced of the rightness of the wars. “Everybody goes through a cycle,” observed Staff Sgt. E-6 Bradley Burd. “After two months on the ground in Iraq, soldiers doubt the mission of the troops. After four months they’re unsure. And by six months they’re absolutely persuaded of its importance” (Minear, *Through* 36; Burd 30269). Others who started out with great

enthusiasm became less sure over time. “I was pretty gung-ho at first,” recalled Army Sgt. Greg Mayfield. “But now,” he said, after months of intense combat in Iraq, “I question a lot of policies and the politics of it. I mean, you just don’t go to war for any damned reason. You’d better have a good reason to do it, because it is so damaging” (Minear, *Through* 37; Mayfield 60193).

Thinking back to the time of his deployment to Afghanistan, a disillusioned Sgt. Mike Moriarty recalled, “I supported the mission. But [now] I’m starting to say to myself, ‘What the fuck?’ If the problem isn’t going away, then kick it up a notch. And I don’t give a fuck if that means nuking this whole fucking country. Meanwhile, there are fucking innocent fucking U.S. soldiers getting killed” (Minear, *Through* 67). Indicating how a soldier’s views may change over time, Marine Thomas Gibbons-Neff found himself reassessing his own role after the bombing of the Boston Marathon in April 2013: “I deployed to Afghanistan believing that my presence in that country would help stop attacks such as Boston’s from happening. But instead, my war has spilled over. I wonder,” he mused, “have America’s wars made the homeland less safe?” Boston was the hometown of Gibbons-Neff and his parents.

Erosion of Humanity

A third recurrent theme involves the challenge of retaining, under the duress of combat, a sense of humanity, both among the troops themselves and in relation to their adversaries. Maintaining familiar pastimes and routines became important, however the circumstances in theater changed. Marine Lt. Col. Robert D’Amico, deployed twice to

Afghanistan and seven times to Iraq, helped his daughter Becky Ann with her homework via nightly Skype connections—he in his unit’s telecommunications room, she at the family’s kitchen table (Minear, *Through* 115; D’Amico 62471). Being connected on a daily basis with family was the next-best thing to being there in person.

Daily postings of bird sightings kept Sgt. 1st Class Jonathan Trouern-Trend in touch with family and friends back in Connecticut. “The birds gave me both the excitement of the new and exotic and the anchor of the familiar,” he wrote in *Birding in Babylon*. “I hope to return to Iraq one day, armed only with binoculars and a camera” (Minear, *Through* 59-60; Trouern-Trend 11-12). A woman in the Vermont National Guard would recover a sense of equanimity by listening to a cassette tape with sounds of her favorite trails in the White Mountains.

Some veterans came to view respect for the humanity of Afghans and Iraqis as an investment in keeping their own humanity intact. In a 2003 letter to his son and his cohorts in Iraq, Vietnam veteran Stan Goff offered an impassioned warning, based on his own Indochina experience. “When you take away the humanity of another,” he wrote, “you kill your own humanity. Do whatever you have to do to survive, however you define survival. But don’t surrender your humanity” (Minear, *Through* 139).

Mario Figueroa, a Marine deployed to Iraq, was prepared to pull the trigger if necessary. “However, I was constantly in fear,” he recalled, that if he did so, “my humanity would be consumed, and that I would be turned into the broken shell of a man similar to those dejected soldiers that had returned from Vietnam.” He recounted an

instance when, by delaying firing, he was spared the need to shoot two Iraqis. “I would eventually kill another man,” he concluded, referring to a later incident. “It was everything I feared it to be. I still maintained my idealism and my empathy for life, but I was one of the lucky ones” (Warrior Writers 87–88).

Figueroa’s comment recalls the observation by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman that “Killing another person, even in combat, is difficult as it is fundamentally against our nature and the innate guiding compass within most human beings.” In *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace*, Grossman wrote, “In combat, warriors must psychologically distance themselves from the humanity of their opponent ... The adversary becomes a target or an objective or any number of derogatory epithets that separates ‘them from us’” (341).

Based on work with veterans suffering from PTSD, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay sounds a cautionary note. Rather than denigrating soldiers’ adversaries as subhuman species who “don’t value human life like we do,” the enemy should be understood to be dangerous “because they are human just like us” (Shay 203). The humanity of the enemy is the subject of “Turntables,” a poem by Nate Lewis, who deployed with his Army unit to Iraq in 2003:

If things were the other way around
20-year-old Iraqi soldiers would write home to
girlfriends about the cold New York winter...
A captain would stand under a tall pine in Appalachia and call
home to Baghdad on a satellite phone. . .

Children would scribble the number and type of every enemy vehicle in Crayon . . .

Iraqi veterans return to Mosques, classrooms and Parliament to speak about the murder and destruction. The war crimes. (Lewis 15–16).

The international rules of warfare seek to affirm and protect the humanity of the warring parties in their treatment of each other. Sgt. John McCary, an intelligence officer with an infantry division in Iraq's Anbar province in 2004, affirms this importance. In an anguished e-mail to his family in North Carolina, he asked, "What do you say to your men after you've scraped up the scalps of an entire Iraqi family off the road, right next to the shattered bodies of your soldiers, held together only by their shoelaces, body armor or helmets? 'We're fighting the good fight'? I don't think so. We're just fighting. And now we're dying." Despite the brutality of the struggle, McCary concluded, "We will be harsh and strict, but not unjust, and we will not give up. We cannot. Our lives are tied to those lost, and we cannot leave them now" (Minear, *Through* 73-74).

Yet the framework for professional military conduct in both 9/11 theaters was neither clear nor binding. Veterans' experience suggests that the legal framework has had at best an uneven impact on the conduct of military operations—in some instance, little discernible influence at all. Soldiers acknowledged receiving training in the international rules of warfare, carrying plastic cards that reminded them of the "soldier's rules." However, given the confused situation on

the ground and flagrant and repeated violations by the enemy, the international rules may have been honored largely in the breach.

Patrick Resta recalled an exchange with the commander of his infantry platoon, a unit tasked with running a small prison camp in Jalula, Iraq. “The Geneva Conventions don’t exist at all in Iraq,” he remembers being told, “and that’s in writing if you want to see it” (Minear, *Through* 77-78). The rules of engagement (ROE), the legal framework established to govern the conduct of military operations in specified locations, often seemed unclear to the rank and file. “We changed the ROEs more often than we changed our underwear,” commented Adam Kokesh.¹⁰

In the wake of the international furor unleashed by the 2004 revelation of abuses by U.S. personnel in Abu Ghraib prison, the military held crash briefings on the Geneva Conventions. However, the climate was not particularly receptive. An Army survey in Iraq in 2006 confirmed that about one third of those interviewed felt that torture of prisoners should be allowed if it helped gather important information about insurgents. Four in ten would support torture if it saved the life of a fellow soldier. “Less than half of soldiers and Marines,” the report found, “believed that non-combatants should be treated with dignity and respect.” About 10 percent of those surveyed reported having mistreated civilians in Iraq. Senior Pentagon officials conceded that the report’s findings were “not always easy to look at” (Minear, *Through* 71-72).

¹⁰ For additional examples, see testimony by a dozen soldiers in the section on rules of engagement in the study by Iraq Veterans Against the War and Glantz: *Winter Soldier* (13-54).

Some soldiers were critical of how their cohorts breached the rules of combat and mistreated captured prisoners, in effect steeling the enemy's resolve to fight. Some challenged the view expressed by General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2001-05, that "the Geneva Conventions were part of our military culture and every military member was trained on them." General Myers held that the United States represented the "gold standard" among the world's militaries in adherence to the principles of international humanitarian law (203). Others agreed instead with clinical psychologist Kathleen Dahlstedt that "military training does not prepare troops for the inherent moral and ethical dilemmas that war poses" (n. pag.).

Re-entry and Rehabilitation

"The toughest part of fighting a war is coming home," observes Army Capt. Andrew Michael Wells in identifying the fourth and final negative theme. "People want to know everything you experienced, but they don't really want to understand—and can't possibly understand." As patriotic fervor wanes and as people lose interest, Wells found that he appreciates the simple thank-you more than the occasional probing question (Minear, *Through* 131; Wells 54819). Randi Moriarty, wife of Sgt. Mike Moriarty, took a dim view of how much could be shared, even between spouses firmly committed to each other. "He so badly wants me to understand what he went through," she said. "I will never understand, just as he will never understand what I went through" (Minear, *Through* 130).

Beyond the struggles of communicating at the individual and family levels are problems that institutions have identifying and responding to needs of returning veterans. New Hampshire offers a microcosm of the problems faced by the country as a whole. Of the roughly 800 soldiers in its National Guard unit who returned from Iraq in early 2005, officials discovered an array of needs. Some 48 soldiers required immediate assistance, 398 requested a follow-up phone call during the first month of their return, and 84 others sought help during the first year. In all, some 530 of the 800 soldiers availed themselves of mental health services at one point or another. New Hampshire's insistence on one-on-one debriefings of returning troops (despite pressure from military leaders and local families for the quickest possible reunions) became something of a model, as did its promotion of cooperation between the public and private sectors in assisting veterans (Minear, *Through* 151-153).

Such alarming data lends credibility to the assessment by Matthew J. Friedman. "The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq," he said in 2006, "are likely to produce a new generation of veterans with chronic mental health problems associated with participation in combat." Head of the network of post-traumatic stress disorder centers run by the VA, Friedman has concluded that "Most people who have survived this experience will be changed by it, whether crossing some psychiatric threshold or not" (Minear, *Through* 159).

In fact, the nation's public and private social service institutions have been struggling to cope with the need. An independent study released in early 2013 of the problems of veterans returning to the U.S. more than a decade into both conflicts found a backlog of more

than 600,000 claims: “The average wait to begin receiving disability compensation and other benefits is 273 days, and up to 327 days for veterans making claims for the first time” (“The Grim” n. pag.). By then, the number of veterans’ lives lost by suicide exceeded the number killed in action in the two theaters. In 2013, the VA committed itself to eliminating the backlog of unprocessed disability claims by the end of 2015, two full years into the future (“2013”).

The return of veterans has focused attention on the costs of the two wars: direct and indirect, immediate and longer-term, individual and institutional, economic and social. Of the 2.5 million U.S. troops who have served in the two theaters, the Defense Department reports that as of September 4, 2013, the number of military personnel killed in action (KIA) in Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) as 2,265, with 19,250 wounded in action (WIA). For Iraq, military deaths associated with Operation Iraqi Freedom and its successor, Operation New Dawn, are reported at 4,476 KIA, with 32,230 WIA (U.S. 1).

Economist Linda Bilmes estimates the eventual cost of both wars at \$4 to \$6 trillion, much of it yet to be paid. Rehabilitation costs, including treatment for the projected lifetimes of the wounded, represent a significant portion of that sum (Yglesias n. pag.).

Implications

The voices of veterans in this article and in the primary sources on which it is based deserve to be heard and pondered. The experience of veterans is irreplaceable, their perspective indispensable. As Marine Sgt. Dax Carpenter, who returned from tours in Afghanistan and Iraq with both PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury, explained, “History is

written by man. But the person that does the writing wasn't there" (Minear, *Through*130; Carpenter 57035). Carpenter has paid his dues and, like other boots on the ground, knows whereof he speaks.

Veterans of the 9/11 conflicts are in a unique position to keep elected officials and the public, historians, and social science researchers honest. The nation's reliance on an all-volunteer army puts a premium on addressing the negative aspects of recent experience in the interest of attracting men and women into the ranks. The wider array of veterans' groups existing today and their more variegated participation in the public policy process requires greater attention to their views. The reluctance of some from the 9/11 theaters to recommend military service to their own sons and daughters—in some instances, even actively seeking to dissuade them from enlisting—should serve as a warning flag.

Such a "ground-truthing" role, a recurring function played by American boots on the ground in every war, is particularly essential for the two 9/11 conflicts. The public's lack of engagement with the issues of the wars lends urgency to launching a serious dialogue regarding the true costs of the conflicts. Indeed, as soldiers ponder their own experience, the American public has an opportunity to reach its own conclusions about the validity and value of what has been done in its name. Two issues stand out with particular clarity from the experience of U.S. troops.

First, what should trigger future deployment of U.S. military forces? The question has special urgency given the widespread reservations in the ranks about the legitimacy of the war against Iraq—a "war of choice"—which were not shared about the war against

Afghanistan—a “war of necessity.” Yet even that distinction needs examination. However provocative the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. had choices in how it responded, only one of which involved declaring war and putting hundreds of thousands of boots on the ground in Afghanistan. The grinding war that followed also involved choices of its own.

It would be an oversimplification to conclude that most U.S. military personnel returned with jaded views about America’s engagement in these two wars, or in all wars. As noted earlier, some veterans overcame initial doubts and became persuaded of the merits of one or both engagements. Some personal balance sheets came out clearly on the positive side of the ledger. A number of veterans maintained that however negative their own personal experience, the nation as a whole was well served by these wars.

The jury will remain out for some time on U.S. engagement, strategy, and tactics in the Global War on Terror. Yet, even veterans who affirm the effectiveness of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom are more circumspect about what should trigger military action in future crises and what the U.S. military, once deployed, should expect to accomplish. After fighting for more than a decade in each conflict, the U.S. should review whether the choices made were the most effective and cost-effective in the circumstances.

A second issue involves the commitment of this nation to those who serve in its military, both in the theaters of battle and after returning home. Many veterans believe that the nation did not meet its responsibility for equipping and training its military forces or for addressing their needs afterwards. A concern for protecting the

humanity and the well-being of its troops should give added weight to the notion—less radical than it might first seem—that the United States should not launch new military action unless it can provide adequately for the safety of its troops in the field and for their expected needs upon returning. That condition alone would put the military on a shorter leash and give greater weight to non-military alternatives.

At this writing in the fall of 2013, some are clamoring for more “robust” involvement of the United States and its military forces in the crisis in Syria. They are doing so largely without acknowledging the experience and views of American combatants in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq such as those chronicled in this article. Indeed, the debate on whether to launch a military strike against Syria in the wake of the use of chemical weapons by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has morphed into a mini-referendum on the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. The strongest and most authentic cautionary notes in the debate have been sounded by veterans themselves. In its Statement against Military Force in Syria, Iraqi Veterans Against the War (IVAW) agrees with the Obama Administration, “The use of chemical weapons in Syria represents a ‘moral obscenity.’” At the same time, IVAW asserts, “We believe that U.S. military action in Syria is also obscene. We condemn the use of chemical weapons, not only against civilians, but against all peoples in all nations.” The IVAW statement recalls that “In Iraq and Afghanistan, we were party to America’s introduction of white phosphorus and depleted uranium and know all too well their disastrous legacy on the people of those countries. We continue to watch our veteran brothers and sisters die of cancer from exposure to

these and other substances employed on the battlefield . . . We implore our leaders not to follow the mistakes that led to the Iraq war by violating national and international legal conventions” (n. pag.).

While veterans are not in a position to craft U.S. policy, their experience in Afghanistan and Iraq offers a point of entry into a more realistic discussion of the challenges framed by Syria and other such conflicts in the future. Their experience illuminates complexities that policy makers and the public often obscure. Veterans can be expected to insist on more realistic objectives and more workable rules of engagement. They may deflate the messianism that often accompanies the contemplation and dispatch of U.S. troops.

Surely it would be difficult both to honor the diverse experience of U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq and, at the same time, to proceed unchastened into another conflict, however irresistible the provocation, however different the particulars, and however compelling the morality of engagement.

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