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# counterpunch

edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

## *The Inevitability of PTSD*

### Welcome Home, Hold Your Tongue

By BRUCE PATTERSON

The late comedian George Carlin did a bit about Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (back then it wasn't called a Disorder). During WW1, Carlin reminded us, we called it "shell shock." Now those two words pack some punch, don't they? It's shocking language, really. So during WW2 we started calling it "combat fatigue." As if war makes a soldier sleepy and, after a nap, milk and cookies, he's as good as new. During Vietnam we started calling it Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Has a nice ring, doesn't it? You're given a choice between "trauma" and "post-trauma" — which are you going to take? Experiencing "stress" is something we can all sympathize with. Getting stuck in traffic is stressful. And who knows what a "Syndrome" is? Yet it's a pretty word that rolls off the tongue... Carlin's riff was a lot more elaborate and entertaining, but — if memory serves me right — that was the gist of it.

Today PTS is a scientifically established Disorder. Still I intensely dislike the term and resent how it is used and abused. Nowadays getting your legs blown off by a landmine in some outrageously foreign, poverty-stricken place is like being a New York City supermodel, falling down in your bathtub and knocking your teeth out. War wounds have become everyday injuries and everyday injuries provide individuals with the opportunity to excel in the Special Olympics and star in a hometown parade.

2,600 years ago the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, "Victory in war is a funeral procession." As a young boy in Vietnam, I won my victory and I shuffled in the procession. Beginning in the spring of 1968 I spent three months in various military hospitals and during that time I saw a ghoul's gallery of the hideously wounded. I saw the psychological impacts of physical mutilation and how phony the distinction is between the two. If you wish to experience not just "trauma" but real pain and suffering, whack your thumb with a roofer's hammer. Smash your thumb and see how that affects your psychological well-being. Now imagine taking three machine gun rounds through the belly and surviving. Imagine getting your jaw and nose blown off and surviving. When you're young and looking forward to a lifetime of pain, disability and poverty, wearing your battlefield Badges of Honor doesn't feel like such a privilege. Almost inevitably, PTSD is the result.

This isn't to say that war doesn't create plenty of purely psychological casualties. While I was in An Khe Field Hospital I saw a teenaged, round-eyed, GI nurse Breaking like a twig in a monsoon gale. The poor girl surrendered to her pent-up agony and she ran wailing from the ward. Struck dumb, all of us bloody cot-covers felt deeply ashamed. Here we were on the wrong side of the world and we couldn't even protect an American girl. In that instant the nurse became our mothers and sisters, neighbors, classmates,

girlfriends and everybody else we'd willingly left behind. Now we couldn't even return to them with all of our fingers and toes.

I was just passing through the hospitals but GI nurses were forced to pull full tours. What must that have done to them? I'll never forget the blackened midnight wards echoing with delirious, drug-induced moaning, raging and begging. And I'll never forget that American girl. Is it possible she has forgotten? If so, at what cost? At whose cost?

It's telling that combat nurses, medics and doctors never get listed as casualties of war. Like war correspondents and combat photographers, flag-draped coffins, helpless civilians slaughtered wholesale, the massive, gold-plated "contractor" dungeons crammed with rats and illiterate, penniless native boys, the junkyard refugee camps stretching for miles and teeming with millions of the terrorized, destitute, broken and defiant — like the entire blood-drenched and despicable military history of the 20th Century — nurses and doctors are erased from public consciousness. "Heroes," civilians in the mother country call them, absolutely oblivious to the fact that heroes get wasted.

We have "re-invented war for the 21st Century" by making it as bloodless as a video game or an Exxon commercial. So when an American girl walks into an ambush up in the Hindu Kush and she gets her brains sprayed on an ancient adobe wall, we don't want to see it. When an American boy spills his intestines into the dust of a village square surrounded by shrieking, barefoot little boys and girls, don't show us the video. Yet, when an extended family of dirt poor dirt farmers sits down to supper and gets blown into smoking chunks of meat by an American Predator Drone, please show us the "battle" from the robot's perspective. Show us the beautiful greenish tint of the machine's night vision cameras, its high-tech gunsight, space age, BMW dashboard and the purifying flash of its white ball of flame. We can identify with Predator Drones.

The dirtiest little secret about war is that they are always fought for domestic political reasons. LBJ invaded Vietnam because, facing an election, he wished to cut the legs out from under his red-baiting, warmongering opponent, Barry Goldwater. George Bush junior invaded Iraq because he knew if he blamed Saddam Hussein for the attacks on 9/11, and for all sorts of other crimes and fiendish plots, then the great bulk of Americans would line up behind him like newly-hatched ducklings. Having won the hearts and minds of the American people, the Bush regime, their party and sponsors would reap a bonanza.

Regarding the "opposition party" in the Senate and House, they'd never allow themselves to be put on record as being against "preemptive" war. Nor would they ever stand up for the Charter of the UN, the Nuremburg Principles, American ideals (not practices), the US Constitution or — least of all — the American Bill of Rights. The American people (think Germans, Chinese, English, etc., etc.) wouldn't stand for it. Not when they've been convinced by those in the castle keep that the barbarians are at the gate.

So it is that the current President is escalating the not just losing but self-defeating wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. If the President wants voting Americans to like him enough to maybe re-elect him, he must make his bones. Peace is a filthy word when Victory means National Security.

We cling to so many illusions about war because we have learned how to lie to ourselves. We are able to sleep easy because of the vast distance we maintain between ourselves and our actions. It's only our soldiers who get to roll around in the mud, blood and guts, and it's only they who have no say in the matter. We have made them expendable, after all. To the extent that we can allow ourselves to even acknowledge their existence, we bury them under layers of self-serving rituals and myths.

Take the notion of “survivor’s guilt” and how it’s twisted out of shape. Sharing foxholes supposedly makes you a Band of Brothers and, having watched your brothers getting wasted in the most gruesome ways, the rest of your life you can never live it down. Like, why did you survive but not them? That’s a part of survivor’s guilt, sure. But it’s a very small part and it only hits you after you are back home all safe and sound. In real life, if you’re lucky enough to survive an ambush but your partner gets zapped, the first thing you think is, “better him than me.” Whether or not you are in a place where at anytime you can be killed, that’s just human nature. In combat, if your partner gets zapped, you don’t feel guilty or anything resembling guilty. Getting a partner zapped reinforces your hatred of the enemy. Humping around a huge load of homicidal hatred makes fighting a war a whole lot easier. Your buddy didn’t die for nothing. You’d even the score and then some if lived long enough.

Or take these pious numbskulls who declare that “there are no atheists in foxholes.” What a crock. I was an “atheist” and so were plenty of my holermates. We knew the shit we were going through was manmade. And if by some chance there was some supernatural force lurking in the bushes and swarms of bugs, it wasn’t God but the Devil. For every frontline soldier convinced that God has his back, there’s another soldier just as convinced that God has deserted the field of battle. Or — at the very least — has washed his hands of it.

While the realities of PTSD are twisted out of shape, one thing is proven: the likelihood and severity of the disorder increases according to the intensity and duration of the combat a soldier (or civilian) has endured. Since the world’s war literature has illuminated this very point for thousands of years, I don’t think these Pentagon and VA Mental Health Professionals should pat themselves on their backs too hard. Now there’s MHPs getting paid hundreds of millions of tax dollars to probe the human psyche for ways to make multiple combat tours palatable. As if the existence of the human conscience amounts to battlefield cowardice and, like homosexuality, pacifism and feminism, it undermines the Martial Spirit of the Manly Race. Which goes to show that for every five of America’s warmongering Bible-thumpers on the public dole, there is a least one mad scientist.

Already there are over one million American war veterans who, unlike their fathers and grandfathers, have pulled multiple combat tours. According to the VA (they lie), at least 20% of them are already suffering from PTSD. Because it is a whole lot easier to salute an upside-down rifle, an empty steel helmet and a pair of empty boots than it is to fix what you have broken, few of them will ever be made whole. Welcome home, forget, hold your tongue and join the unemployment line. How many generations of vets have gone through that? There’s no reason for today’s crop to expect any different. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

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