



“An Obscene Bid to Smear our Veterans”

The Myth of our Returning Veterans and Violent Crime:

“A long-standing goal of the left, recently invigorated, has been to drive a wedge between our military and our society.”

— Ralph Peters, *New York Post*, 1/21/08

Many times, across this last decade of war, law enforcement leaders and trainers, politicians, business leaders, and media reporters have asked me, with great and sincere concern, about our returning veterans and their potential for violent interaction with police. They are worried about the “whacko veteran” coming home and committing violent crimes.

Is this a legitimate concern? Just how much should we worry about this possibility?

I heard a National Public Radio piece a few months ago, saying that, “Over a hundred veterans have come home and committed murder!” Think about that for a minute...

We’ve had over 2 million Americans in the war zone, and are currently in our

10th year of war. The Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics tells us that the homicide rate for Americans between ages 18-25 is around 25-per-100,000. (<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/homicide/tables/oagetab.cfm>) So, out of any million Americans in that age group, there should be around 250 murders per year. Out of 2 million, there should have been 500 murders. Extrapolate that back across 10 years of war,

and there should have been, statistically speaking, thousands of murders by this population group. All they “proved” is that the murder rate for our vets is less than a tenth of that for other citizens of the same age! (Which is pretty much in keeping with the stats from our past wars.)

Many of those who are concerned about our returning veterans are demonstrating a noble and patriotic response. But a lot of this concern is based on flawed information. Our veterans deserve our support, primarily by honoring them, thanking them, and (most important of all) employing them!

They are our nation’s finest. And we will “be there” for that small percentage who have some emotional and psychological baggage. But we must never forget that a new Greatest Generation is coming home.

Those in our media who are perpetuating this myth are deeply offended when you tell them that good things can come out of war. The idea that war tends to strengthen, empower and mature a veteran is contrary to a deeply held, almost religious philosophy of the “evil” of war.

The whole idea of the “whacko” veteran coming home and committing violent crimes is basically a media myth. Worst yet, upon close examination, it appears to be, in large part, a politically driven myth, claiming that our veterans are, “Victims of an Evil President’s Evil War!”

During the Vietnam War the media depicted our returning vets as “baby killers” ... “villains” supporting an evil war. Some of them were spit on and attacked upon returning home. (If you don’t believe that happened, read the section in my book, *On Killing*, that addresses and documents this.)

Today our veterans are being depicted as “victims” and “damaged goods” ... but at its heart, at its core, the goal is still the same: to systematically undermine the war and our nation’s ability to wage war.

The great military author and retired Army officer, Ralph Peters, wrote in the *New York Post* (Jan 21st, 2008) that this is an “obscene bid to smear veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan as mad killers.” He was writing about an article in the *New York Times*, but with NPR and others picking up the drumbeat, his words apply to the media in a broader sense. He goes on to say that the media:

“...is trying to make you fear our veterans (Good Lord, if your daughter marries one, she’s bound to be beaten to death!). And to convince you that our military would be a dreadful place for your sons and daughters, a death-machine that would turn them into incurable psychopaths...

“Pretending to pity tormented veterans (vets don’t want our pity—they want our respect), [this is, in reality] an artful example of hate speech disguised as a public service.

“The image we all [are] supposed to take away [is] hopelessly damaged, victimized, infected human beings who’ve become outcasts from civilized society...our vets as freaks from a slasher flick.

“The hard left’s hatred of our military has deteriorated from a political stance into a pathology: The only good soldier is a dead soldier who can be wielded as a statistic (out of context again). Or a deserter who complains bitterly that he didn’t join the Army to fight...

“Yes, war is a terrible crucible. Some vets, past and present, do need help. And they deserve the best help our country can give them. But the left-wing fantasy of hordes of psychotics driven mad by drill sergeants and Army chow is just that: a fantasy.”

The result is a generation of slandered veterans who currently have an unemployment rate of 20% (largely because employers don’t want to hire “damaged goods”!) and a nation that has been primed to look for, to seek out, to amplify, and exaggerate any examples of the “whacko, murderous, out of control, returning veterans.” But our veterans are not victims, and they are not villains, they are our nation’s finest, forged in the flames, and prepared to give 100% to those will employ them. The vast majority of our veterans do not experience post-traumatic stress (PTSD)...they experience post-traumatic growth! Everyone has heard about PTSD; how many have heard of the far more common stress response know as post-traumatic growth?

And it is absolutely vital that we confront this slanderous myth, on every front, because it undermines our very ability, as a

society, as nation, and as a civilization, to fight the Global War on Terror and to fight for our survival.

The PTSD Trap

In this age of sensational tabloid journalism, the media can encourage our returning warriors to wallow in a “pity party” by presenting endless reports and exaggerated “news” pieces implying that virtually every veteran of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan (and, by extension, any police who experience combat on the home front) is suffering from full-blown PTSD. This can create dire consequences. A landmark article in the April 2009 issue of *Scientific American* referred to this in an article titled “The Post-Traumatic Stress Trap” In looking for PTSD (or, as I call it, “wallowing in the pity party”), we can actually cause it.

Furthermore, the negative persona that the media is creating can affect the seriousness of any post-war issues returning soldiers are having. Coming back with slight mental scars and being met with negativity, coupled with a sense of self-doubt

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after being unsuccessful in securing a good job, could compound into more serious issues. They deserve better than this! Those who have selflessly served our country and protected our freedoms deserve better treatment than this “obscene bid to smear our veterans.”

Here is a letter that I often send the press in response to their queries about the military and PTSD. It’s taken in part from an article of mine that appeared in *Greater Good* magazine:

Today I am on the road almost 300 days a year speaking to police agencies and numerous military organizations deploying and returning from combat. I teach them that there are two dangers they must guard against. One is that of the “macho man” mentality that can cause a soldier to refuse to accept vital mental health services. The other danger is what I call the “pity party.”

The idea that a World War II veteran was a shallow, fragile creature who would break under pressure was ridiculous.

Interestingly, the very awareness of the possibility of PTSD can increase the probability that it will occur. There is a tendency for human beings to respond to stress in the way that they think they should. When soldiers, their spouses, parents and others are convinced that the returning veteran will suffer from PTSD, it can create a powerful self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is important to point out that PTSD is a very real disorder that affects a small percentage of military veterans (and others who have experienced traumatic events in their lives). But we must refuse to be part of the “drumbeat of voices” that tells veterans that they are doomed to a lifetime of psychological trauma. At every level, at every opportunity, we must confront the media-driven myth that “the war will destroy all the soldiers and we’ll pay a price for generations to come.” This sensationalist “if-it-bleeds-it-leads” journalism is irresponsible because it can cause more harm to our warriors.

Sadly, it is not difficult to find people in the mental health community to support the thesis that anyone who kills, experiences combat, or witnesses violence (or any other fill-in-the-blank “victim du jour”) is doomed to lifelong PTSD and, consequently, needs lifelong mental health care.

Mental health professionals must communicate to their patients that 1) they can recover from PTSD and that 2) they will become stronger from the experience. That expectation must be present if there is to be hope of anything other than a lifetime of therapy. If you tell them that they have to “live with it for a lifetime” and they believe you, then you have damned them to a lifetime of mental illness!

(Q: How many psychologists does it take to change a light-bulb? A: Just one, but the bulb has to believe it can change.)

Here is what I tell all my military and law enforcement audiences: PTSD is not like pregnancy. You cannot be “a little bit pregnant;” either you are, or you are not. PTSD is not like that.

PTSD is like being obese. Many people

carry around 10, 20, or 30 pounds of excess weight. Although it influences the individual every minute of every day, it might not be a big deal healthwise, and it would

be grossly inaccurate to call them obese. But for those people who are 500 pounds overweight, it will likely kill them any day now. There was a time when we could only identify people who had “500 pounds” of emotional baggage. We couldn’t identify them until they were literally “dropping before our eyes.” Today we are able to spot folks who carry lesser loads: 10, 20, or 30 pounds of emotional baggage.

I have read statistics that say 15 percent of our military is coming home with “some manifestation of psychological problems.” Others claim it is 20 percent and still others report 30 percent. Well, depending on how you want to measure it, 30 percent of all college freshmen have “some manifestation of psychological problems.” Mostly what is being reported today are people with low levels of stress (10, 20, or 30 pounds of emotional baggage) who in previous wars would not have been detected. We are getting damned good at identifying and treating these individuals and, when the treatment is done, most people are better for the experience.

PTSD is not like frostbite. Frostbite causes permanent damage to your body. If you get frostbite, for the rest of your life you will be more vulnerable to it. PTSD is not like that.

PTSD can be more like the flu. The flu can seriously kick your tail for a while. But once you shake it off, you probably are not going to get it again for the rest of the year. You have been inoculated. PTSD can kick your tail for a while (months and even years). But once you have dealt with it, next time it will take a lot more to knock you off your feet because you have been stress inoculated.

When I was a kid, World War II veterans were everywhere. They were our police sergeants, captains and chiefs. They were our battalion commanders and our senior NCOs. They were our business leaders and our political leaders. The idea that a World War II veteran was a shallow, fragile creature who would break under pressure

was ridiculous. (There were some people like that; everyone knew of a few, but they were rare.)

Nietzsche said, “That which does not kill me makes me stronger.” The Bible says something similar many times. For example, Romans Chapter 5 says: “...we glory in tribulations...knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed.” Throughout history, we have understood that bad things can make us stronger.

The World War II generation was the Greatest Generation and today a new Greatest Generation is coming home. That is, if we do not screw them all up by telling them (and their families, their neighbors and their employers) that they are ticking-time-bombs doomed to a lifetime of mental illness.

Four Lies for the Price of One

Here is what I believe is the heart of the matter. To harm and destroy people you have to lie:

- **Lie Number 1:** Ignore the vast majority who are just fine and report only on the minority with problems.
- **Lie Number 2:** Fail to report that most cases of emotional baggage are people with only 10, 20, or 30 pounds of emotional baggage, people who in previous wars would have gone undetected.
- **Lie Number 3:** Fail to report that we are damned good at treating PTSD and that we are getting better at it every day.
- **Lie Number 4:** Fail to report that PTSD can be a step on the path to stress inoculation and that those who suffer from PTSD can be stronger when they come out the other end.

Lie four times over. Lie the worst kind of lie: the lie of omission that gives only the distilled essence of the bad news. Create an expectation in veterans (and their families, employers and neighbors) that they are all fragile creatures who could snap at any time and are doomed to a life of suffering. Get veterans invested in their grievance and in their role as victim. Get them to draw disability from PTSD and convince them that they will never recover.

I want the media to care, but I am convinced that most of them are part of a mob-mentality, a pile-on, if-it-bleeds-it-leads profession that does not care about the harm they do. Indeed, I believe that some of them are actively, intentionally, politically motivated to systematically distort the situation in order to undermine our ability to wage war.

Remember, this is the same profession that put the Columbine killers on the cover of Time magazine twice—yes, twice—thus giving those brutal mass-murderers the very fame and immortality they wanted. This in turn inspired the Virginia Tech killer, who also appeared on every news show and on the front pages of every newspaper in the nation. Sadly, this too inspires countless others as the media continues to be their happy co-conspirators in a murder-for-fame-and-immortality contract.

Please forgive me if I have been harsh, but the situation calls for us to be passionate. Yes, some of our veterans will suffer from PTSD, and we have an obligation to give them the best possible support. But

we also need a balanced, tough love, which creates an expectation that they will get over it, get on with it, and be better for the experience—that they will be the new Greatest Generation.

We should prefer to emphasize the positive expectations. Positive self-fulfilling prophecies. Now there is a nice concept. But will we ever see it in the news?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Army (Ret.), is an internationally recognized scholar, author, soldier, speaker, and one of the world's foremost experts on human aggression, the roots of violence, and violent crime. In addition, He has authored a course for the American College of Forensic Examiners. The new release from ACFEI is a credential essential to surviving a violent encounter, **Certified in Survival Mindset, CSM**. The course materials cover each of his

books, *On Killing, On Combat, and Warrior Mindset*. It will prepare you for the physiological and psychological aspects of violent encounters and equip your body and mind to survive disastrous events. See the course trailer at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQA_Y6C2qHc

Lt. Col. Grossman also will be a keynote speaker at the 2011 National Conference on October 12-14 in Branson, Missouri.

As an Airborne Ranger infantry officer and a prior-service sergeant and paratrooper, Lt. Col. Grossman has over 23 years of experience in leading U.S. soldiers worldwide. He retired from the Army in February 1998 and has since devoted himself to research, speaking, teaching, and writing. He has combined his experiences as a former Army Ranger and former West Point psychology professor and a professor of military science to become the founder of a new scientific endeavor, that has been termed "killology." In this field, he has made revolutionary contributions to our understanding of killing in war, the psychological costs of war, the causes of the current "virus" of violent crimes raging around the world, and in the processes used to help victims of violence heal in times of peace and war.

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