

## TESTIMONY TO CONGRESS JUNE 6, 2017

Although every mission of service is crucial in our military, only about 10% of soldiers experience sustained combat. And yet an estimated 25% are thought to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Humans have evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to survive and even thrive despite extreme violence and hardship, and if a quarter of our ancestors were psychologically incapacitated by trauma, the human race would have died out long ago. Many of our vets seem to be suffering from something other than trauma reaction.

One possible explanation for their psychological troubles is that - whether they experience combat or not - transitioning from the kind of close communal life of a platoon to the alienation of modern society is extremely difficult. Humans evolved to live in small groups where survival depended on being tightly bonded to those around us. We did not evolve to live alone or in single-family units that were independent of the wider community. Ironically, when you collapse modern society - such as during the London Blitz or the attacks of 9/11 - there is often an *improvement* in mental health. It is thought that the enforced communalism of a crisis actually buffers people from suicide and depression. As one English official observed during the Blitz, "The chronic neurotics of peacetime are now driving ambulances."

Interestingly, PTSD is virtually unheard of among Afghan and Iraqi fighters, and the Israeli military reportedly has a PTSD rate as low as one percent. All of these

societies enjoy both widespread military service and exceedingly tight community bonds. Furthermore, none of these societies incentivize veterans to see themselves as permanently damaged wards of the state. In a misguided attempt at reaching more people, the VA allowed veterans to both “self-diagnose” PTSD, and exempted them from having to cite any traumatizing incident during the war. As a result, the percentage of Global War On Terror vets on PTSD disability is so high that the VA appears unwilling to release the figure. I have tried for two years to get that figure without success. Even highly-placed administrators at the VA who tried to help me eventually gave up.

Obviously, a small number of combat vets will experience severe long-term trauma reactions and need full disability payments. A larger number of combat veterans will need temporary financial support while they undergo counseling and dedicate themselves to rejoining the work force. But if you want to create hundreds of thousands of depressed alcoholics in our society, give them *just* enough money so they never have to work again and tell them that they are too disabled to contribute to society in any way. In the civilian population – which does not have access to lifelong PTSD disability – trauma reaction is considered both treatable and temporary. It would be interesting to see how the survivors of the Deepwater Horizon disaster are faring - or the survivors of Hurricane Katrina, or the survivors of a town that was hit by a tornado. Surely the vast majority of these people have resumed productive lives despite having been deeply affected by the trauma they survived. We are not doing veterans a favor by warehousing them in a lifelong entitlement program.

I would like to make one further point. In order for soldiers to avoid something called “moral injury,” they have to believe they are fighting for a just cause. And that just cause can only reside in a nation that truly believes in itself as an enduring entity. When it became fashionable after the election for some of my fellow democrats to declare that Donald Trump was “not their president,” they put all of our soldiers at risk of moral injury. And when Donald Trump charged repeatedly that Barack Obama – the commander-in-chief – was not even an American citizen, he surely demoralized many soldiers who were fighting under orders from that White House. For the sake of our military personnel - if not for the sake of our democracy – such statements should be quickly and forcefully repudiated by the offending political party. And if that is not realistic, at least this committee – which is charged with overseeing the welfare of our servicemen and women - should issue a bipartisan statement rejecting such rhetorical attacks on our national unity. That unity is all soldiers have when they face the enemy, and you must do everything in your power to make sure that it is not taken away from them.

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