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Victims of War *A Heinous Human Enterprise*

by HOWARD LISNOFF

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Just about one year ago an article appeared in The Daily Beast written by Jamie Reno concerning the number of veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (“Nearly 30% of Vets Treated by V.A. Have PTSD,” October 21, 2012). In addition to a discussion about the exact number of veterans of these two wars suffering from PTSD, the article cites the discrepancy between the number of these war vets who have made claims for their disability with the Veterans Administration and the number of vets who are actually being treated for their disability.

An astounding 44 percent, of a total of 247, 243 veterans are not being treated for their diagnosed disability. Only 137, 911 of those who have been diagnosed with PTSD are being treated and the numbers of those treated are probably due in part to the Obama administration’s push to serve more veterans from these two wars. Multiple deployments to these wars and the kinds of injuries suffered in these wars have certainly driven the number of vets with PTSD higher.

Because more generous veterans' benefits were enacted by Congress during the first decade of this century, the numbers of veterans returning from military service and entering the post-secondary educational system in the U.S. is also increasing.

As an instructor at a large community college, I have first-hand knowledge of the vets who have begun to trickle into the courses I teach. In no way are the small number of veterans I teach representative of any larger population of veterans, but my experiences working with these vets in the classroom has been an eye opener! It has been an especially illuminating and transforming experience from a personal perspective because I was labelled as having Vietnam Syndrome by the military (despite never having served in Vietnam) before being denied benefits by the Veterans Administration after a lengthy appeals process over thirty years ago.

The veterans I've seen over the past three years have expressed a whole range of issues in our talks and during class discussions. One veteran expressed privately that he was having problems adjusting to civilian life because of the dilemma he faced after returning from the war zone. He had trouble coming to terms with the issue of having been in an environment where death was ever-present, then returning home where the admonition not to kill was a strong part of his value system, a value system he felt that he had jettisoned upon his arrival in a theater of war.

Another veteran is now homeless. He spoke about his wartime experiences seeing numbers of people lying dead after a military engagement. He struggles with the demands of civilian life, not being able to find an anchor in the way of a comfortable home base from where to lead his life. He complains of physical symptoms and expresses a concern that some faculty members do not sympathize with what he has witnessed and how those experiences affect his ability to complete course work.

Some students identify themselves as veterans and the issue never comes up again during a semester. They seem like very typical students. But another veteran seems hardly able to cope with issues that begin with PTSD and go on into areas whose expertise I do not have the ability to address.

Following the end of the Vietnam War, thousands of veterans were denied benefits in what seemed to be a concerted effort to move as many veterans off of the roles of the V.A., or never allow them access to the services they needed. As both a veteran and war resister, I spent decades trying to sort out how I felt about the issues I've raised in this writing. It seems only in the very recent past that I have been able to confront these issues objectively and see that many veterans have been as victimized by the horrors of war as those who have been made victims of

the barbarism of war itself. With this newly found perspective, I believe the government owes all veterans and all victims of war restitution for their suffering and loss.

Wars are fought for many reasons: for empire and natural resources or the lack of those same resources; for religion; for the perception of invincibility; for tribal hatreds; by warlords; against the skin color of the intended targets of war. Wars always involve misogyny. Wars always involve torture or the killing of innocent civilians. They are fought on the whim or lust of a megalomaniac, or for a political or economic system. But the victims of war are the common denominator of this heinous human enterprise.