

## As Attitudes Shift on PTSD, Media Slow to Remove Stigma

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In 1999, President Bill Clinton convened the first White House Summit on Mental Health. The aim of the conference and the public campaign that followed was, in part, to educate the media on the moral and ethical imperative related to dispelling the stigma associated with mental illness. In a radio address to announce the conference, Mr. Clinton said, “Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but stigma and bias shame us all.”

In recent years, the Department of Defense has made unprecedented progress toward eliminating the stigma associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues affecting service members. This cultural shift within the military is a sea change, as more and more of our service members are seeking and receiving the support they need and deserve from a grateful nation. In the face of that progress, it’s unfortunate that some in the media continue to perpetuate a stigma linking military service to mental illness and violence.

This is seen in news articles throughout the country, with some referring to veterans as “ticking time bombs.” By describing vets as “time bombs” who are highly trained in “guerrilla warfare,” media outlets prove far too careless with regard to providing societal context for isolated acts of violence committed by people who sometimes happen to be veterans.

Reporting has been biased toward paper-selling sensationalism that perpetuates the stigma of a dangerous combat veteran akin to Rambo, invading our neighborhoods and homes. Consider the media coverage of the case of Itzcoatl Ocampo, who has been charged with the murders of several homeless men in California. Some news outlets went as far as to identify him as a former Marine before even mentioning his name. Others were sure to immediately identify him as an Iraq war veteran, and then described how the victims were tracked in a meticulous manner, blatantly attempting to portray Mr. Ocampo as if he believed he was still on mission. Mr. Ocampo has even been called an “Iraq war veteran” and a “monster” in the same paragraph, connecting the two.

If the charges against Mr. Ocampo are proved true, it’s very likely he is a monster and a terrible threat — no different from a serial killer who is not a veteran. However, the unfortunate reality is that the message that far too many Americans take away from stories crafted in this way is a stigma that paints all veterans with the same brush, and the color of the paint is disturbing and dangerous.

Most unfortunate, and misleading, are the links these reporters imply between military service, mental health and an increased

propensity for extreme violence. In 2008, The New York Times published a series of articles focused on “veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who have committed killings, or been charged with them, after coming home.” The Times found “121 cases in which veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan committed a killing, or were charged with one, after their return from war.” At the time those articles were published, the population of post-9/11 veterans was about 750,000, an offender rate of 16 homicides per 100,000 veterans.

Data from the Department of Justice indicates that the homicide offender rate in the civilian population during that same period varied between 25 and 28 homicides per 100,000 young American males — implying that veterans might actually be less likely than their non-veteran, age-group peers to commit a violent homicide.

Also not supported by facts is the link often implied by the media between combat stress and crime in general. A recent study published in the British Medical Journal indicates that veterans with combat trauma are no more likely than other people to end up in prison. Further, data from state and federal prisons highlights that the number of incarcerated veterans has at worst remained unchanged, and in many states declined, throughout the past decade of war.

For better or worse, the media will play a large and important role in shaping the cultural narrative that defines this generation of veterans. Unfortunately, that narrative has been a story of extremes to date. At one extreme, it’s the story of the veteran as the superhero — unstoppable and iconic. At the other extreme, it’s a narrative that frames the veteran as “broken,” whose life course will be defined by post-traumatic stress, domestic violence, suicide, unemployment and homelessness. The result is a caricature of the American veteran as someone who exclusively represents one of these extremes.

The reality is 99 percent of veterans do not represent either extreme. Instead we live our lives in the middle of this continuum. We are teachers, plumbers, doctors, pilots and bus drivers. We’re your neighbors. On behalf of this 99 percent, I appeal to the media to keep that in mind while shaping the public narrative that the entire community of veterans will ultimately inherit.

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