

COMMENTARY

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The effects of war, on all of us

BY PAUL WOODRUFF AND THOMAS PALAIMA

There are as many experiences of war as there are soldiers and people back home who know and love them. The candidacies of Gov. George W. Bush and Sen. John McCain for the Republican presidential nomination remind us that there are equally many experiences after war. We as a people think it important to know what our public figures did during wartime, and we examine their war records for clues to the kinds of individuals they were and the kinds of leaders they are likely to be.

But we should not forget that war is a stern teacher for all those who live through it and after it. War changes individual lives, and few of us have not been affected by the wars our soldiers have fought and by the lives these wars have changed. Those changes will be explored Oct. 4-8 in a symposium at the University of Texas at Austin called "How War Changes Lives."

Sigmund Freud, in a classic essay written during World War I, explained how for society as a whole war creates "disillusionment" by altering normal value systems. Men and women who were taught by their laws and religion "thou shalt not kill" are now trained and commanded to do so. Love and respect for other human beings are transformed into hatred of identified enemies. These new enemies, who were just yesterday fellow citizens of our civilized world, suddenly become subhuman targets of destruction. But until recently little attention has been paid to how soldiers and societies are supposed to move from peacetime to wartime and back again and still hold their lives together and preserve their values intact.

War itself gets most of the glory. Films like "Saving Private Ryan" and "The Thin Red Line" capture its savagery, its difficult moral choices and its human cost and loss. Recovering from war gets much less attention. That is no surprise. Taking the war out of a soldier is a long process, some would say a lifelong process. Recovery from war is a much harder subject than war itself.

The journey from war to peace is not

'How War Changes Lives' symposium

For a complete schedule of the symposium, contact Karen Bordelon Hartwell with the Plan II Honors Program at kjb@mail.utexas.edu or 471-1442.

easy, but it is important for us as human beings to understand how to go about making it and why some of us never make it completely back. The ancient Greeks understood this. Homer left us two great national epics, one about war, the other about coming back from war. During his return from the long and brutal Trojan War, Odysseus, otherwise known as Ulysses, encounters many dangers and temptations before he arrives on the shores of his own island. It does not look like the place he left. It does not resemble the world he dreamed of when he was fighting to go home. And he himself has been so changed by the war and his journey home that his own wife does not know who he is. Most of us know what he has to do to recover his place at home. It is a story full of blood and deception, and the iron determination of a soldier, father and husband to come through and restore the family that had been separated and made vulnerable by war.

This is a myth, not a fairy tale, and it is a myth that tells a truth that many veterans know very well. It is hard to come home from war, hard to forget a war, hard to tell the truth of war. It is hard to come back into loving relations with family and friends, and equally hard for those friends and family to understand what has become of the loved one. We need to remind ourselves of the human truths behind such great myths from time to time.

"How War Changes Lives" begins with a performance from Homer's "Odyssey" and ends with a discussion of the rupture in American life — especially our political life — that was caused by the war in Vietnam. In between, we will explore how ancient writers covered the theme of war, how war has affected the lives of American women, the experience of black Vietnam veterans and the act and art of writing about the Korean and Vietnam wars. Please join us.

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