

Commentary

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The unyielding psychology of war, from Troy to Tikrit

We have had about twice as many military fatalities in Iraq since May 1 as we had during major combat operations. What is this kind of war doing to our troops? For an answer, we can look to ancient and recent history.

In psychiatrist Jonathan Shay's "Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character," we learn that the symptoms and causes of combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were the same for foot soldiers fighting on the plains of ancient Troy and for Shay's patients who fought in Vietnam. War for soldiers on the ground holds grim and constant truths.

The key factor in soldiers' combat experience that may lead to what Shay calls "ruin of good character" is "betrayal of what's right." Such betrayal can take many forms: equipment failure, faulty intelligence, death and injury on missions that have no clear

purpose, death by friendly fire, cowardice or negligence among fellow soldiers or the failure of officers in charge to take all necessary measures to protect the lives of common soldiers. These are all things that can be controlled on our side of the equation.

One thing that is not under our control is the enemy's refusal to fight on terms that we consider fair. This is what we can no longer control in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

From Jan. 21-27, 10 American soldiers were killed in seven separate bomb attacks. We are no longer fighting our kind of war, the kind that relies on superior firepower, superior-trained and -equipped personnel and superior mobility. What we are good at does not stop a bomb from exploding in a civilian vehicle.

Our soldiers have to be affected, and seriously. All nonaccidental deaths and injuries in Iraq now come from

terrorist or guerrilla-style violence. And Shay links the high incidence of PTSD among Vietnam veterans directly to the fact that in World War II and Korea, 3 percent to 4 percent of U.S. deaths came from mines and booby traps, but in Vietnam 11 percent of deaths and 17 percent of injuries came from such devices. They create a psychological environment of constant terror for soldiers on the ground.

Vietnam veteran-author Tim O'Brien tells us this in his first novel. He catalogues different hidden explosive devices and how they tear apart bodies. He even reckons time in human limbs: "In the three days I spent writing this, mines and men came together three more times. Seven more legs, one more arm." This is O'Brien's way of stressing the real and psychological costs of being exposed to such violence.

The major variant in Iraq — suicide bombers who deliver explosive devices right to unsuspecting soldiers —

intensifies feelings of enemy treachery, irrationality and lack of courage. In such circumstances, it is normal for soldiers to become frustrated and angry, to acquire overwhelming desires for "payback," to wonder why those in power are exposing them to such random danger.

This was as true more than 2,500 years ago as it is today. The Greeks did not know suicide terrorism, but regular armored citizen soldiers, who were trained like our soldiers to fight according to civilized and honorable conventions, detested light armed troops and archers who harassed them without engaging in a fair fight.

In the "Iliad," the Greeks' combat bible, a duel is negotiated between the Greek warrior Menelaus, brother of the commander-in-chief Agamemnon, and Paris, warrior son of the king of Troy and direct cause of the Trojan War. This duel was agreed upon by leaders on both

sides in order to bring an end to the war after nine brutal years. But "what's right" is "betrayed" first when Paris, near defeat, is rescued by the goddess Aphrodite, and then when the Trojan archer Pandarus wounds Menelaus with a treacherous bow shot.

In reprisal, the Greek warrior Diomedes vents his rage in a murderous killing spree. Agamemnon mocks Menelaus for even thinking of sparing a Trojan prisoner of war. Agamemnon then declares that all the men, women and children of Troy, and even unborn babies in their mothers' wombs, will be slaughtered and left unburied and unmourned. He wants payback with a capital "P."

And this is how trained and experienced soldiers can be undone by bow shots and car bombs.

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