Commentary: Is It Time for a New Policy or an Overdue Apology?

Hilda R. Heady
Atlas Research

COMMENTARY:
IS IT TIME FOR A NEW POLICY OR AN OVERDUE APOLOGY?[*]

HILDA R. HEADY
ATLAS RESEARCH

"Only the dead have seen the end of war."-Plato

At this writing, most of our troops are returning from our war in Iraq, and for many this is the first holiday season home in years. Our troops are returning to welcome home banners and admiring crowds in airports, armories, and train and bus stations across the country. Retailers are giving special services and discounts to these returning troops. Yet not all of our troops from previous wars received the same welcoming home. For some presently-returning troops, the war will never end just as it has never ended for warriors of previous generations. In my work with veterans and their families, regardless of the war era, I have heard veterans say, "they (civilians) just don't understand" or "they just don't get it." I have also heard from their family members, and said myself, "he (or she) is just not the same person who left for war."

In this issue we have shared research regarding the disproportionate representation of rural people among veterans, as well as some of the issues they face upon reintegration into civilian life. As I reflect on the works in this volume, which are timed so closely to the withdrawal of our Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) troops, I am challenged by my own memories of returning troops, the winding down of the Vietnam Conflict, and the social impact of war. This commentary is not about a particular policy. Instead it is directed to the American public for whom all our wars are fought to ensure our freedom to participate in the American way of life. I challenge all of us to think about our role in our government's decisions to go to war, and, please make no mistake about it, if you participate in our economic system you are part of this decision.

I pose the following questions for all of us to ponder: 1) Do we need to give an overdue apology to those who disproportionately fight for us and for whom our

---

[*]Please direct all comments to: Hilda R. Heady, 968 Ashton Place, Morgantown, West Virginia 26508-6874, hheady@atlasresearch.us, (304) 288-9003

220

COMMENTARY 221

assisting efforts are inadequate upon their return? and 2) Is it time for us to reevaluate the policies that contribute to our need to be a warring nation?; I think the answer to both questions is yes and it is time that we address both questions. There is a long list of men and women to whom we owe an apology. We owe an apology to rural people and minorities for their disproportionate service; we owe an apology to Vietnam veterans for the way they were treated and are still regarded; we owe an apology to those veterans who become homeless or are at risk of losing their homes today due to current economic conditions; we owe an apology to roughly one-third of female veterans, who enter the military and are not safe within the rank of their fellow service members; and we owe an apology to all female veterans for taking so long to acknowledge and adequately serve them within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Furthermore, the policy work that remains undone is complex.

We need better social and economic policy to give rural and minority people greater access to education and wealth. We need more informed policy regarding resiliency education and training among those who volunteer for military service and their family members. Our current system focuses on resiliency of the service member for battle readiness as a military service member. We need more research and informed policy on resiliency education and training regarding reintegration into the family, the workplace, and society as a civilian.

Charles W. Hoge, MD (Col. Ret.) in his book, *"Once a Warrior Always a Warrior,"* (2010) speaks to warriors and those who love them by giving steps to reintegration and coping with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury through very practical recommendations. As a physician and warrior, he speaks the language and has the experience with which other service members can identify. Countless veterans have reported that being with other combat veterans is essential to their reintegration.

As long as we have been a nation, we have engaged in war. The policies that guide our decisions to enter war and the social pressures and norms that influence who is selected or encouraged, and/or who volunteers, to go into war are somehow always inadequate to address the sacrifices made by our military veterans and their families. In the recent past in most high schools across the country, and especially in rural high schools, military recruiters have been permitted to develop relationships with guidance counselors to identify those students who may not be 'college bound' and may be predisposed to military service. As a matter of policy, should we not also find ways to address the educational needs of these students so that such students could have the choice of college and/or military service? Recent

policy to create 'military-friendly' campuses in our higher education institutions do create more supportive environments for returning veterans to go to college. Do we need to examine policies that could provide the same focus at the high school level? These programs have increased college graduation rates of younger veterans and work to integrate the business and workforce communities early in the veterans' education to assist with career placement.

While we are still in the nascent stages of developing stronger policies to improve the lives of veterans returning from war, we have advanced our battlefield medicine and science to the point where we have greatly increased the survivability of war injuries. These accomplishments are laudable and have had a tremendous impact on servicemen and women and their families, yet we have made no advances in preventing war from occurring in the first place. In his book, *"War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning,"* Chris Hedges (2002) describes the myth of war that we convey to our generations of enthusiastic and idealistic youth and the social and economic policies that continually lead us to be predisposed to war as a solution to our social and economic problems. His book is based on his experiences as a war journalist and is well researched and timely. The myth of war is largely perpetuated through the glamorization of war, and because many Americans are not familiar with the nature of war and military service. According to a survey of Americans by the Pew Research Center (Taylor 2011), less than 1 percent of Americans serve in the military in the post-9/11 era, and we know roughly that 44 percent of these Americans are rural. Our most popular war, WWII, saw the highest proportion of Americans serving, roughly 9 percent. WWII was glamorized in movies and there were heroes everywhere. Those heroes returned home to build a nation thriving in the 1950s.

Beginning with black and white silent film clips before WWI, through surround sound and full color today, we have learned about war safely from movies, books, and music. Those experiences of war are sterile, void of the fear that is ever present in war (Hedges 2002). Our technological advances in warfare have given us the ability to completely depersonalize war and separate us from our earlier 'rules of engagement' and humane considerations in battle. As the Pew research indicates (Taylor 2011), both civilians and military service members oppose a return to the military draft and, among veterans in this study, 86 percent support the use of unmanned 'drone' aircraft for aerial attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, whereas 68 percent of civilians support this use of military technology. While I also oppose a return to the draft, both policies contribute to the disparate view of war from the realities of war by the American public. Today, with so few Americans personally

COMMENTARY   223

exposed to service members and to war, it becomes increasingly challenging for the American public to identify with, and understand, the sacrifices made by military service members and their families. This lack of understanding continues to reinforce the abstraction of war for most of Americans who then become more disconnected from military service.

I am pleased that we have come to the point where we do not blame our warriors if we do not like the wars in which they fight and die. Generally, Americans do support our current wars and our troops, but historically this has not always been the case. Currently, 91 percent of Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center (Taylor 2011) feel proud of our troops. Seventy-six percent of the civilians reported that they have thanked a service member for their service. Among the service members in the Pew survey, most report service to their country as their primary reason for enlisting and seeking better employment as the least-influential reason. In contrast to the current climate, during the Vietnam Conflict era Americans gradually began to oppose the war and certainly did not thank our returning troops. Many of our Vietnam veterans returned home to hostility and were humiliated by the public who blamed the warrior for this unpopular war. In the years following the Vietnam War, these veterans were painted as drug and alcohol-addicted misfits with little to contribute to society. For the very small number of those combat veterans who did suffer from post-traumatic stress and therefore self-medicated with drugs and alcohol, this reaction by society only drove them further into their isolation, guilt, and shame. Our apology to these warriors for our behavior and the slow grinding of our policy machine to address their issues is seriously overdue. In fact, the U.S. government granted an apology and amnesty to those who left the United States to avoid the draft in 1978, but those who served and were treated poorly upon return have yet to receive an apology.

Some years ago while returning from a day working trip to Gilbert, West Virginia, a colleague and I were discussing our memories of the turbulence of the 1960s, our efforts at social change, and how some things had changed and others had not since those days. Throughout the conversation I discussed personal insights gained through caring for and loving two Vietnam veterans: being baffled by, and then surrendering to, the mysteries of what the horrors of war can do to a man's soul. During those days, the confusion was ever present and only broken by split seconds of clarity and understanding when I would realize that my personal experience was more common than I realized. I recall saying to my friend that country (rural) people have been going to, and affected by, war for generations. My friend recommended that I read an article that she had seen some years earlier in

JOURNAL OF RURAL SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Washington Monthly. The article was entitled "Let Those Hillbillies Go Get Shot," (Lessard 1972). The author had overheard this comment at a cocktail party in Washington, D.C., made by a student attending college on an educational deferment of the draft. The sentiment clearly described the schism of the generation fighting the war and those resisting the war. The point the author made was that the anti-draft movement had failed to bring about the social change it sought. However, the following year, the selective service policy of conscription, or draft, ended and three years later April 30, 1975, Saigon fell.

Over the years I have noted that each successive generation believes its war is unique and different from previous wars. While some aspects of the military science that guides the conduct of the war and the politics that drive the war are different, the impact upon the warrior and his/her family and the burden carried throughout their lives remain the same. An example of the differences in generational perceptions regarding their respective war, or the war that defines their time in history, is the debate over the length of our current wars versus other wars. Vietnam veterans are sensitive to public media reports concerning the war in Afghanistan being our longest war in history at 10 years. However, the first Americans entered the Vietnam conflict in 1955 with the first casualties in 1958 and 1959. The reason the Vietnam War is not now called the longest war in our history (lasting about 19 years), is because this conflict was called a 'police action' and war was never officially declared by Congress. Most historical accounts date the beginning of the conflict as 1964 with the first large troop commitment, continuing through the largest commitment of troops from 1967 to 1968, and ending in 1975. Although undeclared as war, this conflict was a war in every sense of the word characterized by the same heroism and marked by the same tragedy as we have seen in our current wars.

One illustration of the difference in public, and even military, attitude concerning these two wars comes from my personal experience. My former husband served in Vietnam as a medical evacuation helicopter pilot and his helicopter was shot down in August 1969. Through his leadership and command of the situation, he saved himself, his crew, and 10 wounded soldiers by taking cover behind an irrigation dike in the rice paddy in which they crashed. While under enemy fire, he retrieved smoke markers and flares from his crashed chopper to mark their location so the rescue helicopter could find them and pick them up. There were no news accounts or ceremonies to recognize his heroic efforts. In the fall of 2007, while watching the news, I saw a video clip of another helicopter pilot who had saved himself, and possibly nine others, when they crashed in Iraq. The video clip showed

the awarding ceremony in Iraq and once he returned home another ceremony recognizing his heroism for which he received the Distinguished Flying Cross was held (Speckman 2007). In the fall of 1972, after my husband had been separated from the service for nearly eighteen months, and three years after the crash in that rice paddy in Vietnam, he received a bronze star for his heroic actions. The medal and letter explaining the basis for the award were not delivered by military personnel, but were sent in the mail. There was no ceremony, no dress uniform, and no other family members to witness this recognition. That same evening, as previously planned, we had friends over for dinner and he told our friends about receiving the medal. After showing it to our friends, he stood slowly and asked me to 'ceremoniously' pin his Bronze Star on his white T-shirt. We have no way of knowing how many similar events marked by such disregard occurred in the months and years following the end of the Vietnam War.

If we can apologize for going to war and then not adequately assist our warriors and recognize their sacrifice, then surely we can do a better job of understanding how to better prepare our warriors for war in a way that maximizes their health and well being to return to their lives as they want them to be. During a recent meeting a few colleagues and I discussed the mental health needs and inadequate resources for rural veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A friend and colleague stated, "We have broken a generation." I agreed and responded that I believe we have broken every generation we have sent to war and we have yet to find the appropriate moral compass as a guide to help improve this fact. As older veterans become ever more invisible and are taken for granted by popular society, we must recognize that rural and minority people have been taken for granted for their military service since the founding of our nation. If the 'cause' for which we go to war defines the way we treat our warriors, then it is time we examine the 'cause' and seek other solutions.

The cause for which our current wars, and other more covert conflicts, at home and abroad are being waged is to defeat terrorism in our broader Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). On September 11, 2001 there were 2,977 Americans killed in all events including civilians, firefighters, officers, and service members. Such horror required a decisive and immediate response. Twenty-six days later we began our bombing of Afghanistan. The total number of service members and civilians killed in OEF/OIF and Operation New Dawn (beginning September 1, 2010) is 6,348 or roughly two service members killed in war for each American killed on 9/11 (Department of Defense 2012; New York Magazine 2012).

226   JOURNAL OF RURAL SOCIAL SCIENCES

Roughly half of Americans (51 percent of veterans and 52 percent of civilians) believe that excessive military force creates hatred of the United States and generates more terrorism (Taylor 2011), whereas roughly 40 percent of veterans and 38 percent of civilians believe this to be the best approach to defeat terrorism. So today, we are not united in our belief of how best to address our continuing efforts against terrorism. Public information is not readily available on the number of terroristic acts prevented by our domestic policies and our military actions, but we know that such events have been prevented. I believe we are intelligent enough to advance more effective and humane solutions.

I challenge policymakers, business and military leaders, economists, academics, researchers, and civilians to do more than thank veterans for their service. I challenge all Americans to stare war square in the face, admit we are a warring nation, and say there has to be a better way. I challenge us all to find a better solution. There has to be a better way to solve the social, energy resource access, and economic problems that we believe we have with other nations. It is time for better policies to give more Americans a chance to grab the brass ring. It is past time for an apology to those hurt by war, and to those who disproportionately serve in the military and allow us to reap the benefits of the American way of life.

To my rural and minority brothers and sisters, and my kindred spirits of the Vietnam era, I profoundly apologize to you for what you had to endure on my behalf and I thank you for your service. I commit to you that I will continue to work for better policies to guide our decisions to assist you to put the pieces of your lives back together in the manner you chose. Thank you.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Hilda R. Heady is a social worker, speaker, consultant, and rural health leader with 40 years of experience working in rural communities as a community organizer and advocate. Her experience includes work in health care facilities, and in academic settings to further practice, policy, and research affecting the lives of rural and minority people. She is known for her national advocacy and work on a variety of issues including rural veterans' access to health and mental health care, women's health, and rural health professions training and education. She currently serves as the Senior Vice President for Rural Health Policy and Research for Atlas Research, a service-disabled veteran owned small business (SDVOSB) based in Washington, D.C. Ms. Heady lives and works in Morgantown, West Virginia. Email: hheady@atlasresearch.us

COMMENTARY 227

REFERENCES

Hedges, Chris. 2002. *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning.* New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Hoge, Charles W. 2010. *Once a Warrior Always a Warrior: Navigating the Transition from Combat to Home.* Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press.

Lessard, Suzannah. 1972. "Let Those Hillbillies Go Get Shot: The Role of an Unfair Draft in the Failure of the Peace Movement." *The Washington Monthly*, April, p. 5–14.

New York Magazine. 2012. "9/11 by the Numbers: Death, Destruction, Charity, Salvation, War, Money, Real Estate, Spouses, Babies, and Other September 11 Statistics." Retrieved January 9, 2012 (http://nymag.com/news/articles/wtc/1year/numbers.htm).

Speckman, Stephen. 2007. "Distinguished Flying Cross: Guard Pilot Saves Lives in Copter Crash." *Deseret News*, September 13. Retrieved January 9, 2012 (http://www.deseretnews.com/article/695209539/Distinguished-Flying-Cross-Guard-pilot-saves-lives-in-copter-crash.html).

Taylor, Paul. 2011. "War and Sacrifice in the Post 9/11 Era: The Military-Civilian Gap." *Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends*, October 5. Retrieved January 9, 2012 (www.pewsocialtrends.org).

U.S. Department of Defense. 2012. "Defense Link US Casualty Status." Retrieved January 9, 2012 (http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf).