

COMMENTARY BY CALEB S. CAGE

Heroes and Victims

America's understanding of its veterans in recent times can be reduced to two basic narratives: the hero narrative and the victim narrative. The former narrative states that those who have served in uniform are heroes and due eternal gratitude, while the latter narrative asserts that those who have served are victims and are due eternal support. These narratives accommodate various social and political needs: they serve as shorthand, they affirm political preconceptions, but they often fail to match the same when described by those who experienced them.

These narratives represent America's divided political culture. The hero narrative is the dominant narrative of the political right, an ideology that promotes a strong national defense and appreciates military service to promote it. The victim narrative, conversely, is largely the view of the political left, factions of which have historically critiqued the nation's wars and military service. Both sides of the political spectrum have also been willing to appropriate both narratives to manipulate the public for political gain.

Although these narratives can be seen across American culture, they have arguably been most pronounced within country music. Mainstream country music has increasingly sought to appeal to conservatives in recent years, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provided an opportunity for musicians to explore conservative values during wartime. Alternative country music, which fills a far narrower niche within the country music audience, has responded with protest music that appeals to the genre's more urban and liberal audience.

Although the list of mainstream country music songs extolling the heroism of America's veterans is lengthy, no artist has taken on the message like Toby Keith, especially in his song "American Soldier." The song tells the story of a man defined by his sense of duty, commitment to his nation, and willingness to sacrifice for both, even to the point of death. As the title suggests, he is a representative for all who serve, and he is a hero.

There are numerous alternative country songs that speak to the costs of the war, but "Mama Bake a Pie, Daddy Kill a Chicken" by the Drive-By Truckers provides a poignant example. Like Keith's song, it also tells the story of an American soldier, but their young character is returning home after losing his legs. In a broad sense, the band is singing about America's class structure, but their specific story addresses the themes of loneliness, loss, and shame, and these characteristics of victimhood are presented as continuations of the character's war.

These two songs represent the larger discussion happening within the divided parts of American culture. These narratives are reflected in books about the wars, news coverage, and movies. Although some social and political commentators have challenged these narratives in recent years, they have not become a part of the cultural conversation in any significant way until 2014.

In June of 2014, Army Captain Benjamin Summers wrote a piece for the *Washington Post* titled, "Hero Worship of the Military is Getting in the Way of Good Policy." Summers acknowledges that some veterans deserve praise for heroism, but identifying all who served as heroes has numerous unintended consequences: it diminishes the sacrifices made by actual heroes and it frames the policy debate for wars, funding, and other resources around either being for or against the troops.

While music directed to a liberal audience highlights the victim narrative, liberal political commentators have taken the lead in challenging the hero narrative.

Authors Cara Hoffman and David Masciotra address the problems with the hero narrative in the progressive online magazine Salon.com in July and November of 2014, respectively. In "Stop Calling Soldiers 'Heroes': It Stops Us from Seeing Them as Human—and Dismisses their Experiences," Hoffman calls for specific societal changes to address issues like veteran suicide. Masciotra's article, "You Don't Protect My Freedom: Our Childish Insistence on Calling Soldiers Heroes Deadens Real Democracy," aggressively challenges the hero narrative from a populist perspective.

Hoffman and Masciotra address similar challenges facing veterans, particularly of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both analyze the hero narrative in literary terms, Hoffman calls for an end of attaching "cowboy-and-Indian narratives" to

the “sad and extremely common reality of violent conflict,” while Masciotra reduces the reliance on the hero narrative to a simplistic need for a villain. Interestingly, both Hoffman and Masciotra attack the hero narrative while embracing the victim narrative. Hoffman writes that labeling veterans as heroes merely turns them into fictional characters, which is “little consolation for the weight of physical and psychological injury these people incur.” Masciotra writes, “far from being the heroes of recent wars, American troops are among their victims.”

Masciotra’s article has much in common with Rory Fanning’s October 2014 piece on the progressive AlterNet.org entitled, “Army Veteran: Why Do We Keep Thanking the Troops for their ‘Valor’?” Fanning’s piece considers a concert dedicated to veterans, and why icons of the left like Bruce Springsteen are so willing to support the effort. Finding political common ground with both Hoffman and Masciotra, Fanning concludes his piece by arguing that it is “years past time when anyone here should be able to pretend that our 18-year-olds are going off to kill and die for good reason.”

The victim narrative also became the subject of critique in 2014. While not always coming from explicitly conservative writers and sources, critiques of the victim narrative have been mainly from the conservative worldview. That is, at the core of the victim narrative critique are notions of self-reliance, personal responsibility, and service and sacrifice, all of which are characteristics idealized within the conservative worldview.

Retired Marine General James Mattis directly addressed the subject of victimhood in a speech at San Francisco’s Marines’ Memorial Club in April of 2014. “While victimhood in America is exalted I don’t think our veterans should join those ranks,” Mattis said. While many discuss Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Mattis argued instead for the concept of post-traumatic growth, where individuals have seen personal growth from their experiences.

Mackubin Thomas Owens relies on Mattis’ speech for his article, “Life After Wartime: Combating the Veteran-as-Victim Narrative,” published in the conservative magazine, *The Weekly Standard* in June of 2014. Like both Hoffman and Masciotra, Owens invokes the literary definition of the hero, but unlike them, he argues that veterans should be treated as heroes and as objects “of admiration and respect.” He agrees that growth can happen after trauma, and often does, and asserts that the victimization of veterans is largely a construct of liberal media and academia.

While not as clearly conservative as Owens’ argument, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz and Rajiv Chandrasekaran write from a similar perspective in their

October 2014 piece in the Washington Post entitled “Want to Help Veterans? Stop Pitying Them.” The authors published the piece with the release of their book, *For Love of Country: What Our Veterans Can Teach Us About Citizenship, Heroism, and Sacrifice*, the title of which clearly indicates their perspective. They try to navigate between the hero and victim narratives, arguing that a “better recognition of the overall veteran experience—the bad, the good and everything in between—is essential to forging a lasting compact between those who have served and the rest of us.”

Nearly all authors on either side of the issue accept that a key reason for the development of these narratives is the growing distance between the nation and its military. That is, these narratives arise out of a lack of common experience, but this distance does not have to be permanent. Hoffman writes that the broader public can gain a stronger understanding of these experiences “by listening and by opening our eyes” she writes, “by letting people who are returning take off the masks society insists they wear.”

Fortunately, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have presented the opportunity to be understood by the broader public in an unprecedented manner, as embedded reporters, combat camera units, and camera ready and Internet capable soldiers have provided more information from the front. Perhaps most interesting, though, is the growth of oral history efforts for veterans, which aim to capture first person combat and wartime narratives. Recent collections consist of many hours of unedited, in-depth interviews with veterans, often relying on a scripted set of questions and resulting in recordings or transcriptions of personal accounts, all of which can be used by academics and writers to attempt to analyze the veteran experience from the current wars. Several books in recent years have capitalized on the opportunity provided by the growth of this format, namely, Larry Minear’s 2010 book, *Through Veterans’ Eyes: The Iraq and Afghanistan Experience*, Lori Holyfield’s 2011 book, *Veterans’ Journey Home: Life after Afghanistan and Iraq*, and Trish Wood’s 2006 book, *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers Who Fought It*.

While there is great opportunity presented in new oral histories, there are also challenges, depending on how the authors and editors choose to present and interpret the interviews. Minear and Holyfield, for instance, approach their work by editing various interviews, news sources, and other commentary, into similar passages and categories while adding their own thoughts. Conversely, Wood engages in almost no editorializing, choosing rather to simply present the words of the veterans. These approaches lead to vastly different interpretations, with Minear

and Holyfield relying on the victim narrative to unify the themes and messages of their works, while Wood allows the interviewees' words to speak for themselves.

Minear's approach in *Through Veterans' Eyes* seems aimed at confirming his opinion from the outset. Although he claims to only want to make his book one "in which veterans tell their own stories, with [his] own role limited to setting the state and filling in a few blanks," he does not succeed, seeming instead to selectively edit the interviews and inject his own conclusions. Too often, the wars are not presented through the eyes of veterans, as his title suggests, but rather through the lens of victims, where nearly every grievance is aired as fact and every hardship and reality of warfare is determined to be yet another example of war's theft of the soldier's humanity.

Minear begins his analysis of veterans as victims immediately in *Through Veterans' Eyes* by dividing the book into three sections, "The Setting," "The Experience," and "Reentry." In "The Setting," he tries to grasp the unique complexities of the broader wars through the words of the interviewees. It is not just the geography that he is attempting to describe, but also those who are involved, concluding that they are different: "They belong to an all-volunteer military," he writes, many are "citizen-soldier" members of the National Guard," and many more than before are women.

Minear describes the equally unique wars that these soldiers endure in "The Experience." It begins with a discussion of the politics and beliefs that led many to join during wartime and how those politics and beliefs conflicted with their professionalism. He focuses a chapter on "coping with unfamiliarity and violence," concluding somewhat obviously that "most of those interviewed found soldiering in Afghanistan and Iraq to one degree or another unnerving and disorienting." They faced difficult ethical issues in combat, they were "operating under duress," faced unwinnable circumstances fighting a counterinsurgency war among a largely civilian population, and had a strange and strained relationship with the media. Many might describe these as typical wartime experiences.

In "Reentry," Minear discusses the veteran's reintegration into civilian society. He goes to great lengths to discuss the experiences each service member had, state and federal programs that have been effective and ineffective, and the relationships between different generations of veterans. The discussion of how a civilian nation addresses the needs of those it sent to war is an important one, but focusing on the government services provided to veterans suggests that Minear is at least working from the perspective that all who served are broken or wounded, that they are victims of these wars.

Linda Holyfield differs from Minear's approach in *Veterans' Journeys Home*, but the outcome is the same. She is the daughter of a veteran and a sociology professor at the University of Arkansas, and both facts inform her writing. But no matter how different her approach, she still writes in a way that is condescending to her subjects. "As sociologists," she writes, "we are in the business of examining how social processes work in order to understand who benefits and who loses from structural arrangements." If one were to judge her on how well she accomplishes this task in *Veterans' Journey Home*, they might conclude that her results were mixed at best, due in large part to the enormous difference in the way she approaches the first and second halves of her book.

The first half of Holyfield's book essentially makes the argument that contemporary social and cultural conditions combine with military structures and practices and postmodern military combat to create an epidemic of traumatic injury for a generation of veterans. Specifically, she argues that the nature of today's service members, the military socialization process they experience, the complexities of asymmetrical combat, and military gender norms all combine to create a "perfect storm" for mental health issues. By the way she frames the argument, it is not hard to conclude that all who serve return broken or potentially so.

Holyfield opens *Veterans' Journey Home* by exploring why her interviewees joined the military, what they experienced, and how those experiences reflect a new military at war. She then focuses on the "hazing rituals and degradation rituals" imposed on her subjects during their transition from civilian to soldier in basic training, which she uses to show how military inherently impacts the soldiers the reader met in the previous chapter. She then delves into the professional language of her field, which allows her to argue that the uncertainty and intensity of asymmetrical warfare are contributing to the mass diagnoses of the wars' "signature injuries," Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. She also dedicates two chapters to exploring how gender norms within the military structure also work to set the conditions for the epidemic of traumatic injury.

Though this argument may be objectionable to some, it is at least coherent, which cannot be said for the second half of the book. In it, Holyfield sheds her objective, critical, and scholarly tone, pursuing instead a subjective and personal narrative to detail her experience at various "Vets Journey Home" psychological retreats. This approach allows her to embrace the victim narrative while detailing the history of the program and the rituals and techniques meant to manage without having to examine the evidence or science behind the approach. The final chapters are merely pages of long quotations from her interviewees and her students in response to a

question on the importance of veterans sharing their stories, and in response to the attacks on 9/11, respectively.

Trish Wood takes an entirely different approach than Minear and Holyfield in *What Was Asked of Us*, and the result is equally as different. Unlike them, aside from an overall introduction and brief chapter introductions, Wood does not interpret the interviews in her work at all. Instead, she provides what appears to be an unvarnished compilation of the actual words as they were stated by those who said them, allowing the reader to interpret for themselves. “These veterans do not share a single view of the war they fought,” she writes. “They have different opinions about the wisdom of the initial invasion,” she adds, noting that a very small number stated frustration with the failure to locate weapons of mass destruction, and a higher number were proud of the good they were able to do for the Iraqi people.

More important than the background and perspectives of the participants is how Wood presented the trauma they may have experienced and how that impacted them. She states that “most veterans in this book will say they were changed in some way by their war experience.” But at the same time, she seems to address the hero and victim narratives directly by stating that only some are “struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder,” and that none “asks for recognition” beyond being understood.

Eschewing these narratives as gross generalizations, readers can easily find evidence of an emerging notion of personal growth not unlike that described by General Mattis. Personal growth as a theme is not as convenient as the broad and comfortable hero and victim narratives because it does not necessarily align with political worldviews, it does not provide easy shorthand, and it requires deeper investment by the listener. For these same reasons, identifying the theme of personal growth as one of many possible responses to combat experience allows those who served to understand their experience on their own terms and not on the terms of the broader civilian society.

The emerging theme of personal growth from difficult and traumatic experiences begins with the idea that many in Wood’s book saw their wartime experience not as something that harmed them or made them better than their peers, but rather served as an edifying experience in their lives. Sometimes that edification came in the form of simply serving something greater than one’s self, and even being willing to die in that service, and sometimes it is a rite of passage that is facilitated by hardships encountered in combat and its aftermath. Similarly, they do not dwell on being victims of their experiences or being entitled to services because they volunteered.

Like the other authors, Wood includes a section on why the participants joined the military. Adrian Jones and Dominick King joined the Marines because family members had also served. King admits to romanticizing combat as a “time where the best of you can shine forth,” even though his actual experience was more difficult. For Toby Winn and his twin brother, joining the Marine Corps was the only thing they ever wanted to be because of Marines were tasked with the most difficult missions.

Maria Kimble and Jason Smithers joined to change the trajectory of their upbringing. “My father was an alcoholic,” Kimble says, adding, “and I think other people like me joined the military to escape and start a new life.” Similarly, Smithers explains, “I joined the Marines to better myself and prove to everybody that I wouldn’t be in trouble like the rest of my family, like going to jail, things like that.”

Jeff Englehart joined the Army after 9/11 because he was in a “dead-end job” and was “desperate to get out of the United States and travel.” While he admits that he was “trying to get [his] life in order,” he rejects the idea that he joined “to be a man.” Similarly, Garrett Reppenhausen describes difficulties stemming from his father’s military regimentation and discipline in his upbringing, as well as some things that he brought on himself: “I was twenty years old, I had three jobs, I was a high school dropout, I had a child from a girlfriend that I wasn’t married to and I was paying child support, I owned a house and a car but I had to file for bankruptcy, and I was in a dead-end town and a dead-end situation.” Eventually, he realized that “standing around in bars talking shit about the government wasn’t getting me anywhere.”

While other authors and editors have focused on using the oral history format to delve into the politics of service members who are against the war or who were conscientious objectors, including Larry Minear, Wood’s transcriptions show very little focus on the politics of the invasion of Iraq or the broader war. There are statements for and against the war, but most of those interviewed focused on their experiences in combat and what they meant to them individually. As young men and women who had survived things that most of their peers had not, they tended to speak about these experiences in ways that many their age could not, they were transformative, and in a culture that values individuality so greatly, they were unique.

One way that these ideas of combat experiences facilitating personal transition and the rarity of those experiences when compared to the broader civilian society comes through was in discussions of the loss of innocence. Although a loss of

innocence often broadly aligns with the victim narrative, many interviewed in Wood's book discuss the concept with more complexity and nuance. For some, the loss of innocence they experienced was the catalyst for deep and substantial personal growth, and at the same time it was normal, not anything that made them either a hero or a victim.

Jason Smithers states his position clearly: "I don't think I lost anything. I think I gained something." Showing one of the real values of the oral history format, Paul Rodriguez seems to be working through his feelings on the pages of Wood's book: "I'm not going to say I lost my compassion. But... I've lost my... you know, Adam and Eve lost their innocence when they ate the apple; there was no turning back." Dominick King admits that the war had an impact on him. "I am changed... It's not that, that I've changed in a negative way," he says, "I just can't relate with the average college kid anymore." And Daniel Cotnoir says, "no one wants to lose their innocence, but I wouldn't take mine back."

The loss of innocence theme was also discussed in a less explicit way, namely, through participants discussing their experiences in terms of a rite of passage into adulthood. Garrett Reppenhagen addresses the issue directly when he states that some of the people that he served with "were excited about [being in combat for the first time] because they felt like they went through some rite of passage." Although Reppenhagen rejects the idea that he was experiencing the same personally, others were more open to the idea. "The youngest guys, the single guys, absolutely wanted to go into Iraq," Michael Soprano says in his interview. The difficult and traumatic experiences that others guarantee will result in insurmountable stress disorder were actually the ones in which Adrian Cavazos found hard earned growth. Referring to a time when one of his fellow soldiers was killed, he says, "at that moment it changed everything for us, and we became hard because we were still young and innocent and just new cherries, if you will, and after that had happened we had become different soldiers."

But even though they endured violent and traumatic experiences, they do not define themselves as heroes. "It's funny who ends up being awarded the medals in wartime," Justin LeHew says. "It isn't the guy you expect it is going to be," which he describes as "the best leader," "the guy that everybody thinks is gung ho," or the one who "everybody would say is the guy who would win the Medal of Honor." In his experience, the hero turned out to be "the kid who basically scored just enough to get into the military," but who stepped up when he had to.

Adrian Cavazos gets to the heart of loss of innocence and heroism when he describes his reaction to the deaths of his two friends, Rincon and Creighton.

Referring to Rincon, he says, “he was young and he didn’t know a lot about parties and about drinking and he was very innocent,” so they treated him “like a little brother.” Creighton had been his best friend and they had known each other before the military. “We were young,” he says, but in death he remembers his friends not as innocent or as youngsters, but as men who should be remembered for their sacrifice. “Those men—they died,” he says. “They died fighting for us. Isn’t that better than dying in a car accident or falling in a plane crash or getting hit by a drunk driver?” Relating their deaths to himself, he says, “if I’m going to die, let me do it serving my country or let me do it doing something heroic, something where they can say, he died doing something for someone else, not something selfish or not in some freak accident.”

In fact, many participants in Wood’s book describe a similar comfort with the possibility of their own death, though they do so in almost explicitly mundane terms. Jason Neely says that he had “pretty much I resigned [himself] to dying,” and that he “was cool with it.” Michael Soprano, Neeley’s friend, has memories of a corresponding realization: “I remember talking to my friend Neely and saying, ‘You know I just know that I’m going to die. I just know it.’” Joseph Hatcher explains that he preferred to be the one to take the risk instead of others in his unit. “I loved the guys—well, most of the guys—I served with... I was glad it was me on the back instead of them. It was the worst Humvee we had and, to my knowledge, probably one of the worst Humvees there, I’m glad it was me and not them.” Referring to participating in funerals for young Marines away from the Iraqi theater, Joseph Darling explains it more globally, explaining that laying his fellow Marines to rest stateside made him feel like he should be back in Iraq serving with them. “If I died, I died,” he says. “That’s my job. That’s a big part of why I joined.”

Just as they discussed their willingness to die in the service of something bigger than themselves without seeing themselves as heroes, they also never described themselves as victims. While some admitted to having some difficulties processing their experiences, the few who addressed the stress of their traumatic experiences tended to reject that they had been impacted at all. Michael Soprano says, “It didn’t really affect me that much,” about a horrific scene he had just described, while others were more explicit in their thoughts and feelings about the things that others would assume to be traumatic.

Mario Mihaucich says that he actually thought there was something wrong with him because he did not have any “bad thoughts” about his combat experience. “Maybe I really was a cold, heartless son of a bitch or something,” he says. “I don’t have nightmares. I have memories, but I can talk about them.” In fact, beyond being a

negative, he sees some real positives in his experiences. “I thought it was the greatest thing that ever happened to me, and I think about all the people that live day to day and never do anything significant,” he says. “I did something significant, and I feel good about that,” no matter what the politics of the war will be in the future. Even so, he does recognize that it is complex. “What war isn’t psychologically taxing?” he asks. “I think some people just don’t know how to process it.”

Joseph Hatcher, who was one of the few to openly oppose the war in Iraq, asks rhetorically, “am I allowed to like it? Am I allowed to enjoy that endorphin rush?” Even though he was against the war, he does not feel guilty but justified for his actions there. “The people I shot at knew the risks they were taking,” he says, but primarily he admits that he has not really been able to process his experiences yet.

Others tend to agree in their interviews, but even in doing so they betray a degree of conflict in how they view their experiences. “I haven’t struggled to cope with society or anything,” Matthew Winn, Toby Winn’s twin brother says. “I’m drinking. I’m not drinking too much... I still jump every now and then if I hear a loud bang or something... But I think it’s getting better.” Dominick King says that he usually does not tell others about what he did in Iraq because he does not want them to interpret his experience through their perspectives. “I was picking up dead bodies,” he says. “I don’t want to think of myself as a victim. I want to think of myself as somebody who’s actually privileged to have a role in something that’s changed the lives of so many people.” But it is still complex for him. “When I first got back, I felt lucky to... to have a story that no one else does,” he says. “But then there was also the resentment for me having to bear this whole burden for everyone else back home who, you know, just wants to go to school and get drunk and party.”

Through quotes like these, those interviewed in *What Was Asked of Us* show that their combat experiences do not reflect easy narratives of heroism and victimhood. They are complex, personal, evolving, and cannot be forced into broad political and cultural narratives, including a narrative of personal growth. Perhaps none interviewed expresses this complexity better than Travis Williams when discussing the death of his brothers, his survival, and the choice he was faced with: “I can drink myself into the ground and turn into fucking nothing or I can take this experience and build off of it and tell the story. I can honor their memory through living my life better because of that, instead of going the route of ‘somebody owes me something.’” In fact, he did feel this entitlement initially. “I thought people should fucking feel sorry for me and if I want to drink, then that’s what I’m going to do, but I realize that nobody owes me anything and it was my choice to go to Iraq and what happened, happened.” By listening more intently instead of interpreting the

experiences of others, the nation might be able to accomplish the understanding and appreciation that country music writers, political commentators, and others claim to want.

CALEB S. CAGE is a graduate of the United States Military Academy, West Point, and a veteran of the Iraq War. He is the co-author of the book, *The Gods of Diyala: Transfer of Command in Iraq* (Texas A&M, 2008), about his time as a platoon leader, and his essays and fiction have appeared in *War, Literature, & the Arts*, *Red Rock Review*, *High Country News*, *Small Wars Journal*, and various other publications and anthologies. He currently writes a monthly column for *The Rumpus* called “War Narratives” about how the wars are presented and understood through fiction and nonfiction.