New Nonfiction by Adrian Bonenberger: “An Alternate View of Moral Injury”

An Alternate View of Moral Injury

Introductory note: I originally composed this essay between

2022-23. I've gone back and forth about publishing it; it's true, I stand by everything I've written, but I'm certain that many people won't like reading it. It is certain to damage or even destroy my reputation in certain circles. Let it be so. When I saw Donald Trump's remarks on the utility of subjecting Liz Cheney to combat on October 31st, 2024, I realized that the misperception that an individual's experience of combat was absolute or had some absolute value needed to be checked. Here is the essay as I wrote it originally.

For some years now, I've wrestled with an uncomfortable truth. It occurred to me for the first time in Ukraine, in 2016, where I encountered it confronting my experiences at war in Afghanistan in conversation with veterans of Ukraine's war of self-defense against Russia. At first, the truth shocked me. Later, my recollection of the revelation nagged at me while I read certain articles or watched televised or cinematic depictions of war that emphasized its various negative consequences.

A War on the Rocks essay brought the matter home and inspired me to write this piece, which I hope will illuminate the issue for the public. The WoTR essay is titled "Moral Injury, Afghanistan, and the Path Toward Recovery." It claims that most or maybe all the veterans of the US war in Afghanistan suffer from moral injury.

In the standard definition of moral injury, a person's morality (and therefore their self) becomes injured by doing or seeing things that conflict with their idea of right and wrong. Distinct from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), moral injury affects *or should* affect everyone good who participated in the evil of war. If you are an essentially good person, then doing things in war that would be bad or wrong outside war ought to fill you with revulsion, and damage you.

Grim consequences lay in store for veterans who avoid therapy

or treatment for this condition; harder to employ, more susceptible to radicalization and extremism (political, ideological, religious, whatever), divorce at higher rates, more likely to traumatize their children with uncontrolled outbursts, suicide at dramatically higher rates.

It's undeniable that some epidemic afflicts veterans of war – not only in Afghanistan, but all wars. The stakes are high. This affliction corresponds with violence of all stripes. It's important to confront and accept difficult truths, both for individuals, and as a civilization. And the veterans affected by it, whatever "it" is, have for the most part endured in silence.

And where you have victims, there must be aggressors, criminals. "The American government and the Department of Defense should be more candid in acknowledging the failure of America's war in Afghanistan" says the WOTR essay, channeling anger about what the United States was doing in Afghanistan and why.

As someone who has written often and critically about the outcome of the war in Afghanistan, one might think I'd be enthusiastic about DoD or the Biden Administration issuing some formal apology. That's not how I see it; in fact, the USA could have done little differently in Afghanistan save to get out earlier and in a more organized way. The evacuation of Afghanistan was an unparalleled calamity; rather than hand wringing over words, I'd prefer to see the current administration do more to help Afghan allies who languish in terrible conditions. Besides, the decision to leave was itself a kind of implicit endorsement of the idea that the time had come for Afghanistan to stand on its own. I supported that idea at the time. Should the US apologize for ending its occupation of Afghanistan? I don't think so.

By far the most interesting discussion – one that I've been having with friends and combat veterans since the thought

occurred to me in 2016 – is what to do about PTSD versus moral injury versus whatever we call a soldier who doesn't experience either. The casual conversations I've heard about people who suffer psychological or "moral" wounds in war conflate different forms of injury. Sometimes I think that enthusiastic and well-meaning crusaders mistake both injuries' origin and location.

A brief caveat before continuing, here: this essay discusses the experience of troops in war. While it could be expanded to include non-combat veterans, or civilians indirectly exposed to war, this would risk widening the scope of the essay to the whole of human experience, a theme so broad that only the wisest and most ambitious thinker would dare consider it. I am not such a thinker, nor is this already (with apologies, dear reader) sprawling essay even a hundredth of what would be necessary to explore PTSD and moral injury outside the relatively narrow scope of war.

The world of so-called moral injury consists of PTSD as extreme response to some form or forms of trauma, and the aforementioned "moral injury" (feelings of grief, trauma, or betrayal connected to service). The soldier so injured has been compelled by circumstance or authority to do something in war that violates their code of ethics, from an order that leads to a friend being hurt or killed, to a badly planned or executed operation in which the wrong people (usually civilians, often children) are hurt or killed, and everything in between. War is filled with such hazards; they are nearly impossible to avoid. When a soldier or officer falls afoul of one of these calamitous moments through their actions or decisions, the harm they see or do causes them (and those around them) distress, and the memory of the act also causes distress.

Some cannot escape the memory. It could be observing a crime, such as rape or torture, or it could be shooting or stabbing an enemy soldier. It could be watching helplessly as a line of

refugees is expelled from their homes. It could be exile; unwilling to potentially expose oneself to moral hazard, the soldier is sent far from their unit to a larger base, away from danger, and in so doing abandon their comrades to that risk instead. One can easily imagine this type of thing, and the nightmares it would cause over a lifetime to a decent person. Doubly so during a war of conquest, an unjust war. Surely, as I write, some Russian soldiers are in the process of being "morally injured" by their horrible and evil government and also by their own complicity in the crime of attacking a peaceful country that offered their own nation no threat or insult.

What is the distinction between PTSD and moral injury? PTSD is a diagnosable and physiologically distinct injury. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 7% of veterans develop PTSD, mostly in war. Physiologically and psychologically, the experience of war is so damaging to them, they can no longer function correctly within society without some form of treatment. Authority figures fill them with an instinctual fear and disgust. Bureaucratic incompetence, which many people take in stride as part of the cost of doing business in a civilized world, becomes to a combat veteran suffering from PTSD an active threat to be avoided at all costs. People suffering from PTSD know what happens when you give folks great power then bury their accountability for that power behind walls of hierarchy: nothing. Maybe the platoon leader will get thrown under the bus for ordering you to shoot at a motorcycle, maybe you'll get demoted. Maybe he'll get pardoned by the President. It's all the same shit; shit that the person suffering from PTSD has to relive through nightmares and debilitating, unjustified feelings of fear, horror, and shame.

These are casualties of war. There are ways to treat PTSD that help with its symptoms, but it is not currently within medicine's power to cure it. Some cases resolve on their own over time, such that victims can live whole and healthy lives.

Others linger. In a few cases, usually when addiction disorders are involved, and along with the PTSD going untreated, war comes to define a life's course, often tragically.

Because of its physical characteristics – medical imaging detects differences between groups of people who have PTSD and healthy controls– PTSD occupies one sphere, the objectively verifiable.

Moral injury occupies another, more subjective sphere. People who suffer from moral injury feel troubled by what happened to them, or by what they did, but there is no sign of trauma that a doctor can identify. Their diagnosis lies in the realm of philosophy and perhaps religion.

What is the number of people who see themselves as affected by this subjective diagnosis we call moral injury? It's difficult to say; solid numbers are hard to come by. Anecdotally I'd say the number of people who are troubled by their experience of war (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Vietnam, or WWII) *because it made them feel complicit in something awful* is somewhere between 20-30%. My source for this is innumerable conversations with veterans from different services and countries in a variety of contexts. Many (what does that *mean*? Seven or eight in ten, the remainder left over from those identifying as harmed?) will say that while war was difficult, they are at present largely untroubled by what they did.

A quick caveat here: because this is anecdotal, when I say 20-30% are or were troubled by their experiences in war, I've necessarily wrapped that 7% who have PTSD in with those who have moral injury. Not everyone who has moral injury has PTSD, but everyone with PTSD has been morally injured. Therefore the total number of people who find the experience of war so damaging and troubling that it defines their experience is (as far as I can tell) somewhere around 20-30%. I'm eager to see the results of VA studies hoping to better understand the

prevalence of moral injury, as well as how they define it, and suspect that the number will be higher for some wars, and lower for others.

Maybe – best guess – somewhere between a quarter and a third of all veterans feel overall that war was a bad experience for them, either because it physically injured their brains, or they felt and feel awful about what they did or saw during war.

This leaves two thirds to three quarters of combat veterans. People who don't feel betrayed by their country (perhaps, in some extraordinary cases, such as the Wehrmacht in WWII, which was adjacent to unthinkable horrors and directly complicit in some of them, one might find lower numbers – even then, perhaps not, just take a look at veterans of the South's Confederate Army), or that they did anything wrong in war. Have they been morally injured? You can tell them they were, and while they may nod and smile if you are an authority figure or friend or family, in the company of other combat veterans, they will tell the truth – not only were they untroubled by the experience, but they were *proud* of it.

Here is the plain truth: many combat veterans derive some pleasure or satisfaction from doing things in war that are considered bad or wrong outside of it (killing, hurting other people, destroying buildings with fire or those weapons that produce fire). Killing the enemy fills most soldiers with a savage glee in the moment. It may trouble the conscience afterward, particularly once the soldier has returned to civilization. These troubling thoughts are the product of healthy and uninjured moral instinct, but it doesn't trouble the soul. On a biological level, for most veterans of combat, *there is nothing wrong with killing enemy soldiers or destroying their positions or equipment or even the people who are nearby during war*.

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Let’s sit with that for a moment. I want people to consider it on its terms. The claim is not “you have justified a thing after you did it because it was a bad thing to do, and you felt bad, but life must go on.” No, the claim is “it felt good and just to kill the enemy, and I was only troubled in any way upon considering what the reactions of others might be first that I did the killing, and second, that I enjoyed it,” plus perhaps “those civilians who were hurt or killed as a result of combat – that was someone else’s fault, not my own.”

The most popular version of war is one told by a traumatized combat veteran – typically a relative or friend – that goes something like “I got lucky and killed the enemy before he killed me, but maybe he was the lucky one because I have to live with the guilt.” In this version of war, everyone feels guilty about what they had to do in war save perhaps for the psychopaths, or the wretches who were unhinged by the experience.

This version of war is echoed in mainstream movies, prestige television dramas, and even video games. Its claim – that the majority of US soldiers are suffering from moral injury, betrayed by a country that sent them to a foolish war in Iraq or kept them in a pointless occupation of Afghanistan – is the one with which most people are familiar. But it cannot be true; either the war was bad and people are outraged about it (in which case, they aren’t morally injured; rather, they feel a justifiable sense of outrage, their morality is behaving correctly) or the war was bad but was not perceived by soldiers as such at the moment – only when they arrived home and were essentially told that they ought to feel bad about it, by friends, by literature, and by cinema – in which case, the moral injury does not exist within the veteran but is a kind of mutable social construct that comes into being or vanishes depending on the veteran’s surroundings.

On Killing, by Dave Grossman, is the most significant and popular book to forward the claim that the default setting for

most people is against killing. According to Grossman, people must be trained to overcome an innate resistance to killing for any reason. Something like “thou shalt not kill” but as a concept hardwired into humans, which must be overcome. The book bases its arguments on a dubious WWII-era study (sadly, irreproducible) that concluded that only 15-20% of soldiers fired at humans in combat during WWII. In any particular engagement, 80-85% of the soldiers were shooting at nothing, or not shooting at all. Somewhat famously, swapping out human-shaped targets for bullseye targets and training them to fire at those human silhouette targets popping up at different distances is said to have increased soldiers’ rate of engagement in Vietnam to nearly 90%.

The study raises many questions, such as: how reluctant were soldiers to fight Germans or Italians versus Japanese; how did soldiers feel about *killing* rather than shooting; and, most importantly, if there was a deep and essential aversion to killing in humans, how was 2 ½ months of training including a week of shooting at human-shaped pop-up targets at a range able to bring the number of effective soldiers from 15% to 90%?

An uncomfortable answer is that Grossman’s book on the subject of killing and the study on which it was based both miss something fundamental: that the majority of soldiers have no problem killing an enemy who is trying to kill them or the context in which surviving that occurs (a context that sometimes includes damaging or destroying civilian property and life). Indeed, the majority feel pleased with themselves at the time, and mostly afterwards as well. Killing isn’t a problem in war (in fact, it’s an advantage), but the existence of that truth does become a problem when those combat veterans return to civilization. *This return* creates a new kind of moral injury – to civilization, to morality, by the combat veterans who carry knowledge or self-awareness like an infection or an unspoken accusation.

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This social component of moral injury is reflected by literature and movies about Vietnam and WWI, and tells a very specific type of story about war, authored by people with refined sensibilities who did not enjoy war for an audience with refined sensibilities. Veteran-writers (and artists, and filmmakers) are more likely to be a part of this 20-30% of people who suffer from PTSD or moral injury. Certainly in my experience, this is the case. And they (we) have struggled to explain what was distinct about Iraq and Afghanistan from Vietnam. This was not the case when it came to finding a distinction between Vietnam and Korea, or Korea and WWII, or WWII and WWI; on the contrary, those distinctions were straightforward for all involved (some had been involved in at least two of those wars), and for the most part came down to technological advances.

One constant of war is that there are soldiers who are troubled by what they do and see or injured as a result of enemy action (shelling, bombing). And the soldiers who are troubled by these things are greatly troubled; it's not something they could easily accept or stand. Consider: Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller (both of whom were injured, morally, by their wartime service) each wrote extraordinary novels that are routinely referred to as among the best literary works of the 20th century. And *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five* are about how useless and absurd their experiences were… in World War II, fighting the Nazis. Only a fool or a Nazi would argue that fighting the Nazis was a mistake, that fighting against the Nazis was a just and justifiable activity might as well be a Voight-Kampff test for political sanity. If one does not understand the necessity of stopping Nazi Germany, one is not *sane* in an important sense, or one does not understand the Nazi project sufficiently well to see why doing so was necessary.

It is just as easy to imagine Vonnegut and Heller in Vietnam, a very different war, and a war that history has proven to have been a massive folly and waste in every sense (many knew this at the time, too). The details would have been different in their books, but the themes would have been the same: corruption, an out-of-control military industrial complex, the futility and tragedy of sending children to die. They could have written these books about Iraq and Afghanistan, too, or any of the smaller (though no less consequential to the civilians who experienced them) brushfires in the Global War on Terror.

Slaughterhouse Five and *Catch-22* aren't the only great books about war. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is an incredible portrait of war. *The Battle of Malden*, too, is a story – in poem form – about a battle (at Malden) that draws very different conclusions about what goes into a war (fear, obligation), and what comes out from it (honor, fame).

And another story about war – *The Iliad* – has more to it than Ajax's madness, or the wrath of Achilles. There's Diomedes, who becomes so inflamed by combat that after wounding Aeneus, he wounds *Aphrodite*, and attacks Apollo when that god descends to rebuke him. Later, Diomedes wounds Ares. To the Greeks, Diomedes was as important as Achilles – but his berserker rage and the cultural context in which it exists is basically incomprehensible to the modern reader, and as a character he's largely forgotten, overshadowed. Modern audiences prefer Hektor seeing his son recoil from his frightening helmet, and they prefer Achilles exacting revenge on Hektor for killing Patroclus, and reveling in that vengeance (as the reader or listener revels with him).

Western civilization has come to see war as an evil, and true wars of necessity have become increasingly rare (at least, until recently). As a result we've lost touch with one of the most obvious and fundamental elements of war as it is experienced by soldiers. Our literature and art of war have

been the literature and art of a minority of war's participants.

One reason for this is that it is more important to storytellers to explain that war hurt them than it is for those who had a "good" experience of war to explain that to anyone. This is analogous to the phenomenon in which there are more negative reviews online than there are positive reviews; one is likelier to act out of a sense of injustice or rage than contentment or happiness.

Another reason is that war is universally awful and evil from the perspective of civilians. As fewer and fewer people serve, fewer and fewer civilians are veterans, and fewer of those non-veteran civilians have any basis for understanding war as it occurs to the people fighting in it. They are therefore most likely to enjoy stories that are sensible to them from the perspective of a victim, or someone who has been injured or exploited. There is little market for Diomedes' tale – some hundreds of thousands or millions of people across the world.

As war and the experience of war ebbs from social consciousness, its opposite, peace, flows. I believe that this is one of the sources of moral injury and explains why and how it is becoming more widespread in the military and among veterans. People today go to war expecting the rules of peace to apply and are surprised and outraged to learn that they do not.

Here it is important to note that war is evil – occasionally necessary (such as Ukraine's noble and vital defense of its borders against an invading Russia, or the Allies' war against Nazi Germany) but always and unquestionably evil. *Whether a person's experience of it is pleasant or unpleasant is irrelevant to that fact*.

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In civilization, the good feelings that one enjoyed while

fighting during war get offloaded to spaces that feel comfortable to an audience that would be unreceptive to a more honest but otherwise troubling account. Frameworks are created to hold such conversations; myths constructed, and built, passively but energetically. The conventional explanation for why people emerge from war with positive associations becomes either that in war people get a sense of purpose that they lack elsewhere (the reason for the war), or that (per Sebastian Junger's *Tribe*) even in the absence of a unifying purpose behind a particular war, there is a strong sense of meaning inherent to living inside a small group of peers. This sense of meaning and purpose can easily be found in a military unit.

There is something to this. Nearly everyone agrees that a "good" in war is the sense of camaraderie one builds under extreme adversity; doubly so when part of a good unit filled with good people (and a majority of people are decent or from a moral perspective overall "good," otherwise civilization would not be possible). Having been in a "company of heroes," one finds oneself seeking to recreate those conditions, either as a leader or as a subordinate – the memory of that moment stays with you always and is real; it is as true an experience as a person is apt to encounter in the world, the template for all the great myths and legends. King Arthur and his knights of the round table, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

While we extract good to redeem the unmitigated disaster that is war – the almost unimaginable scope of destruction and evil war entails – there is a taboo that resists most efforts to overcome it. This taboo is one of society's most powerful, a basic precondition for civilization: the taboo against murder. No culture views this act as tolerable; it is incompatible with modern civilization, and people who murder face stiff penalties and social opprobrium. For premeditated murder, planning to kill another person "in cold blood," the legal

system reserves its harshest punishments. It has been this way for millennia; we can tell that this is the case from the remnants of ancient legal codes such as that of Hammurabi. The sixth commandment retrieved by Moses from God instructs in the original Hebrew that “you shall not murder” (not “you shall not kill”).

But in war all you do is meditate about ways to kill your enemy; you dedicate most of your time and attention to figuring out ways to do that, while they’re doing the same to you.

War is bad, killing is bad, but killing in war is necessary – moreover, as many combat veterans will tell you, killing or wounding one’s enemies in war feels good. Killing and wounding civilians and destroying their possessions – collateral damage – isn’t good, but, for most people, is understandable, tolerable. The combat veterans who are fine with killing or hurting their enemies do not experience moral injury in war, or injury at all; for them, the experience is good or at least just. But these combat veterans do experience moral injury in another space: returning home, where they are encouraged to view themselves as wicked or flawed by civilizations in which killing and wounding people is a major (and useful) taboo.

Killing enemy soldiers in war is experienced as a good by the individual (at least, most of them), but those same individuals understand, regardless of their background, that such an act is, strictly speaking, bad or evil – and that they must be bad or evil for having experienced pleasure from the act. The way combat veterans deal with this is to talk with each other.

If in conversation a combat veteran explains that they did not take pleasure in killing the enemy, one no longer brings up the subject with them; these make up the relatively small group or subset of combat veterans who suffer from the experience, and combat veterans are not interested in

perpetuating their anguish. The matter is let to drop.

The rest of the veterans talk and reassure each other both that (1) they are not crazy, and (2) they are not evil; they are decent people. Killing in war, after all, is ok, regardless of whether one derived pleasure from the act or not; it is killing in civilization, in peace that is forbidden. Moreover, usually the reason one kills in war is to prevent killing in one's own civilization; certainly, that is why Ukrainians are carrying arms against the Russians invading and occupying their land.

Here, I believe, is the crux of the problem with how moral injury is understood or discussed. The vast majority of the writing and thinking public whose views they reflect, assume a priori that killing likely fills a person with horror and anger; that murder is in addition to being a civilizational taboo, a *human* taboo. It is not!

I don't think civilization depends on those things both being true; it's certainly the case that if murder was permissible, that civilization as we know it would not be possible. In rural Afghanistan, for example, where certain types of killing are permitted (*badal*, or revenge, permits killing in response to a person or tribe's honor being imputed, for example, but also offers compensation as a suitable replacement for blood), a town looks like a medieval fortification in part because one must constantly worry about 6-10 men from some other tribe attacking you over a disagreement – something trivial and recent, or maybe something older, something from a century ago or more. The amount of energy and anxiety that goes into this rather than any other productive activity including sleep is a brake against progress. And even they have formal social constraints on murder.

Precisely because killing one's enemies *feels* like a good and satisfying way to adjudicate disputes, civilization needs to take it in hand; every society, no matter how small or

undeveloped, does so. It is the first thing a society must do to secure its existence: resolving disagreements through peaceable and satisfying mechanisms (such as, in rural Afghanistan, the practice of resolving *badal* through monetary compensation).

There is a tension here. Every civilization is made up of a majority of people who would prefer not to make war, who in war develop PTSD or become outraged at their nation for putting them in a position where they have to violate their ethical code, and a minority of people who are fine with combat. If it were any other way, logically, countries would spend more time waging wars against each other. In the past, when civilization was less influential than it is now, this was the case; war was far more common, and the minority of people who enjoyed it wielded more power. But the costs and stakes for modern war are so high that few are willing to bear it save in truly extraordinary circumstances. In a just country people are willing to bear that cost if they must in a necessary war of self-defense, or against a truly wicked and chaotic enemy, such as Nazi Germany or Putin's Russia. They serve in a military during times of great peril, and do so understanding that it is preferable that they bear the cost of service (intuiting from their reading, studies, and stories from relatives who served that the cost will be great). Meanwhile, the minority of people in civilization who enjoy war or are ok with it (who are the majority of people in the military) join or stay because they for their part intuit that it could or would be a good thing to do; they've read or heard stories from combat veterans about the thrill of conquering one's hated enemies, and seek out combat. Without their numbers or excitement at the prospect of war, it's difficult to imagine any military attracting the numbers or energy needed to win. Whereas in civilization, a majority of people are formally and firmly opposed to war, in a professional all-volunteer military, the majority of people are trained and encouraged to be in favor of it.

This explains the prevalence of stories about and around moral injury from WWI and Vietnam, and their relative absence from WWII. As discussed earlier, Vonnegut, a prolific author, happened to be caught in one of the few unequivocally immoral acts of the second World War on the Allied side – the British firebombing of Dresden. On the other hand, Heller happened to be one of the people doing that type of bombing.

Is the current recruiting crisis facing the U.S. military tied to perceptions of moral injury and PTSD and the futility of serving honorably? Absent a clear and true understanding of what service means, what happens in the military – what happens in battle – it is impossible to say for certain, one way or another. The widespread expectation that a person will inevitably be morally injured or develop PTSD can't *help*. Not everyone who serves is dealt moral wounds. I think the majority of people who serve grow from the experience.

Both because it does not occur to the type of person who thrives without the instinct for blood, and because civilization has robust traditions and laws in place to discourage fighting and killing, it becomes difficult or even impossible to face this truth that war exposes, which is that decent, law-abiding, and mentally well-adjusted citizens could accept or even enjoy killing other humans under the right circumstances. *This* is the true threat to civilization, *this* is the rich soil in which political or religious radicalization thrives. And this is why combat veterans are so prone to those specific forms of radicalization. Not viewing things dispassionately and on their own terms, civilization creates a moral hierarchy, in which the combat veteran who feels little or (if they're being honest with themselves) no shame for their behavior in war is at the bottom, and the wounded or traumatized or betrayed veteran is near or at the top, along with the good civilians whose hands are clean from blood.

This truth, exposed by war, comes into conflict with one a lie

that is essential to civilization: that war is not pleasurable to anyone, and makes everyone crazy. The majority of soldiers who have killed an enemy fighter or destroyed an enemy position or fortification with artillery fire or bombs know the truth (that savage destruction is pleasurable) like they know a spoon is a spoon, it is as obvious as the cloudless midday sky is blue – and radical political groups use that truth like a crowbar, to pry otherwise stable and useful combat veterans away from their societies. The fascists and Nazis infamously had the most success with this tactic, deliberately targeting the many combat veterans of WWI to form political organizations dedicated to the idea that *war* was the highest truth. They took it a step further – in fact, this is one of the reasons the Nazis needed to be opposed so violently and at all costs – their project was to invert the moral order that exists in civilization where murder and fighting are at the bottom and peace on the top. Nazi Germany aimed to elevate killing to the highest form of good, in order to usher in a brave new future. Repudiating their vision of things paradoxically required the most bravery and death in war that the world had ever seen. It ended with the United States dropping two atomic bombs on Japan.

Those atomic bombs are important, and not enough gets said about them. The second bomb – why even mention the first, when you can look at the *second* – was dropped on Nagasaki. The city, an important center for the production of ships and naval armaments, was not even the day's primary target. That was a city called Kokura. Obscured by clouds and smoke from fires that resulted from the firebombing of a *third* city, Kokura was spared when the bombers couldn't drop their payload on target. They flew on to Nagasaki (incidentally, then the most Christian city in Japan, owing to its having been provisionally open to sixteenth century Dutch and Portuguese traders and the missionaries who accompanied them). There, the US bombers dropped an atomic bomb that killed between 60-80k people. WWII ended (depending on who you talk to, and what

sources you read, partially or entirely as the result of that second atomic bomb) hours later.

Most people I know (and everyone from my grandparents' generation who lived through those times– even the socialist-leaning people, such as my father's father and his wife) believed or at least acted as though they believed that the US was basically justified in ending WWII the way it did. What of those 60-80k who died, or the 150k in Hiroshima before? These were overwhelmingly civilians. Dozens or hundreds of *soldiers* were killed in Nagasaki; thousands in Hiroshima. Everyone else was relatively speaking a noncombatant, whether they were at home preparing a meal, or – a distinction that was important four years into a war that had dragged on for various participants in some form since 1937, though we do not observe it now – in a munitions factory pouring gunpowder into tank or aircraft bullets.

So, when we talk about "collateral damage," and the psychic damage it entails, we have to take into account the bombing of cities we did during World War II, and especially those bombed almost as an afterthought with atomic weapons. Collateral damage, like moral injury, is and should be a great concern to any civilized person, in or outside war, but we must account for the fact that the US erased hundreds of thousands of Japanese people, and, more relevantly to the essay, most people are essentially fine with that. People may rue it in the abstract, or when they think in concrete terms about the death of, say, a Japanese child – that the US dropped these atomic bombs – but there isn't enough energy behind the few who deeply care about such matters to even force the US to formally *apologize* for dropping the bombs. Why should it? Most people –Japanese and American – understand that the single greatest incident of collateral damage in military history, the dropping of the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, was at worst understandable, and at best necessary (I'd draw the line at "good" and hope others would, too).

Don't take my word for this. None other than Paul Fussell, author of *The Great War and Modern Memory* (among others) and renowned for his criticism of war and warmaking, wrote upon consideration of the event's anniversary: "Thank God for The Atomic Bomb." Whether you agree with Fussell or not – hardly a warmonger, again, and likely among that 20-30% who'd describe themselves as morally injured if writing today – it's at least worth considering that the closer one gets to the possibility of dying in Japan, the happier one is that the war was concluded before you got there.

If dropping atomic bombs on Japan to force its surrender is something most people at the time believed was necessary, and almost nobody today gives much thought to it, it shouldn't be hard to understand why most or at least many soldiers are, while troubled by the collateral damage they see or cause in war, able to go on with their lives after. When it occurs in a war that a soldier sees as unjust or unnecessary, the troubling but comprehensible ability to rationalize away "collateral damage" diminishes in proportion to the injustice and wickedness of the war and the deeds the soldier does while in service. Instead, the soldier is wracked with feelings of guilt, impotence, rage, and betrayal – moral injury.

When peaceful nations and civilizations cannot admit the truth of war, the truth about *themselves*, for the majority of war's direct and indirect participants – that the killing there felt fine, and also that there's nothing wrong with killing feeling or being fine in a *necessary* war – they create a terrible hazard for their country and culture. In seeking to preserve a pristine account of human morality within civilization (murder or deliberate and unsanctioned killing is bad), they help lay the groundwork for unscrupulous agents of chaos to seize upon combat veterans, and set them against what becomes to them a hypocritical and even evil system – a system capable of waging war and countenancing killing, but not capable of seeing it clearly.

The “betrayal,” then, is not the United States government or Department of Defense refusing to take responsibility for the failure in Afghanistan. While it may be true that such a project would be useful for some soldiers – maybe it would help treat PTSD and moral injury, maybe it wouldn’t (anything that undermines an individual’s sense of agency over their life is psychologically harmful, it’s difficult to see how in the United States specifically, and its modern day all-volunteer military, such a remark would truly help the individual) – what the majority of combat veterans and citizens would really like to hear from their country is that *what we did in Afghanistan was fine*.

Underlining instead that the war in Afghanistan was a failure in order to help salve the outraged or disappointed few, one inevitably imposes moral injury on those people who did not experience much or any to begin with, or who have processed it and moved forward with their lives – a majority of combat veterans. For my part, while it’s clear that the occupation of Afghanistan was carried out largely under false pretenses – I blame the generals and to a certain extent the battalion commanders – I’m not sure who would or should own that series of bad or lazy decisions. The presidents who permitted it to continue (Bush, Obama, Trump)? Their top generals? The evacuation of Afghanistan was botched by the State Department. Would that apology be The Secretary of State at the time – Blinken?

To the critic who might say that such an apology or explanation might be owed Afghans, I would say that this too is a dangerous self-deception. Those people who wanted victory the most in Afghanistan, the Taliban, achieved it, and the Taliban don’t need America’s apology, they earned their victory honestly, they won, the victor has truth in their hand. For the Afghans who are upset that their country fell, rather than looking to America for an apology (with the possible exception of Afghan soldiers who have been given no

path to safety once their government fell), they should look instead to those brave countrymen of theirs who lie in the ground, now – and to those leaders of theirs at the time who failed to organize an effective defense, or empower the non-state volunteer organizations that are critical to helping prosecute a successful war of defense when the state itself is weak (as was certainly the case in Afghanistan).

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Back to the problem of moral injury, which is really a problem of how to bring combat veterans back into society after war. To recap, there are (1) veterans suffering from diagnosable PTSD, which can be treated (7%); (2) veterans suffering from a sense of outrage or betrayal toward their country for putting them in a position to do things they hated or which caused avoidable harm to innocents (13-23%); (3) veterans who for the most part enjoyed their time in the military, feel good about having dispatched vile and wicked enemies or directly and actively participated in dispatching them – a difficult and praiseworthy thing! – and only wish that they could share this without feeling like outcasts (70-79%) and (4) psychopaths who enjoy killing (less than 1%, though overrepresented in combat arms for understandable reasons). These last two groups (3, 4) views collateral damage as just that – damage that was outside what was intended, and therefore, beneath consideration for them, personally.

We know how to treat PTSD effectively. Efforts are afoot to discover ways of treating the moral injury felt by certain veterans (usually and most understandably veterans of combat) which, assuming the treatment won't then leave the remainder of soldiers radicalized, is good and useful. How, then, to help the majority of veterans, who know a terrible truth that has been obscured from people living in peace and civilization – that killing can be a joyful act, that leaves one with a lifelong sense of confidence and pride or at least is basically untroubling? How further to do this in a way that

does not undermine or damage the peaceful people on whose behalf these combat veterans did their killing? Answering these questions will help guide more of the correct people into the military and keep out people who probably ought not to serve (those who are physiologically predisposed to PTSD, for example, as well as psychopaths whose affinity for murder will lead them to kill when killing is unnecessary) and whose writing and movies end up presenting a flawed and incomplete portrait of war. It ought also to help solve the military's recruiting woes, reducing *uncertainty* around how a person's service will be seen and experienced. Wondering if you could pull the trigger and kill someone who is an enemy of your civilization? Worried a commander might send you to kill the wrong person, accidentally? You are probably better served applying to college or graduate school than joining the infantry.

There is an excellent blog post about this phenomenon that a friend suggested to me, written by Bret Devereaux, PhD, the author of ACOUP. I recommend that one read the post in full. In it, Devereaux, one of my favorite historians, examines what he describes as the curious phenomenon of pro-war medieval poetry through the lens of an 11th-12th century Occidental poet and nobleman. The poet-knight enjoys war unreservedly; Devereaux says this could be partly because war, for the armored poet in question, is objectively safer than for most of the other people taking part in it at that time (the unarmored and poorly equipped peasant conscripts). Perhaps this was the case for American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as well, with their advanced body armor and night vision; their jets, helicopters, and artillery? In any event, Devereaux concedes at the end of his post that the poet is sincere in his attitudes toward war, and that it likely reflected a widespread cultural sentiment active at the time, rather than the idiosyncrasies of a deranged individual.

Unlike fascists or aristocratic warrior-poets, I don't think

the answer is to create a code in which killing is elevated to a good in our civilization. To begin with, this would do great harm. It is, moreover, unnecessary – the majority of combat veterans, as I mentioned earlier, already *know* what they did was good, this does not require endorsement from a culture or government – neither apology nor applause is needed. This is a characteristic of truth, all who see it know it for what it is (whether they like or hate that truth is another matter).

What is the solution? A well-funded and capably staffed Veterans Affairs is a good start. For PTSD: continue exploring treatment and therapy. For moral injury: gauge the true extent of the problem across wars (I suspect that unjust wars such as Vietnam or fruitless wars such as WWI will have a higher amount of moral injury than those that are seen as just or necessary, such as WWII). For the rest of the soldiers who fought in wars and don't see much or anything wrong with what they did: local spaces for community are still the best answer. American Legion and VFW are and should be good places for soldiers to meet and talk free from the judgment or guilt that can be levied by those who never served or fought against those who did. It seemed for a couple decades while GWOT was in full swing that there was an essay a week or so about how returning veterans didn't like being asked whether they'd killed anyone, so it's fair to assume that's still not a great conversation-starter. But for curious civilians who want to go the extra mile anyway, find a way to create space for honest conversations with friends and relatives. Few combat veterans have ever been given permission by anyone besides each other to have those discussions.

Also, stop with the fiction that an individual's experience of war – positive or negative – should determine one's own attitude toward it. War is always evil, though sometimes necessary. Regardless of how one came out the other side.

Finally, simply admit that every war is not horrible for everyone. If one believes, as I do, that truth is the basis

for human progress, an acknowledgement of fact – rather than a rhetorically hollow and ultimately meaningless grand gesture of the sort that gets most countries into war in the first place – is the real hope for healing a kind of injustice that exists for most combat veterans. “Tell me about the war” free from implicit judgement has the advantage, too, of being something anyone can ask, whether of a friend, acquaintance, or relative. Try; it might just work.

Each Soldier a Thread

The violence that reached our shores left me at a loss—every attempt to conceptualize these tragedies failed to capture the emotions moving me. I tried to make sense of San Bernardino and Orlando by writing, but after a dozen drafts I realized that failure is at the heart of my shock and sorrow. We bore witness as attacks ravaged Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey. I watched each attack unfold, felt each death defeat me. We fought for Afghanistan, for America, but it was for nothing.

My friends that served in Iraq echoed similar sentiments in the spring of 2014 when Daesh captured swathes of Iraq and Syria. They watched everything they struggled for fall apart.

It was a cruel turn to watch ISIS flags fluttering from American Humvees. We were warriors in the world's most powerful military, but most of us were helpless to act. More than six thousand of our brothers and sisters died, more than fifty thousand wounded—what will their legacy be?

Like many of my brothers and sisters that served in Iraq and Afghanistan, I poured my heart and soul into this war. I knew we were fighting an uphill battle when I joined, but I thought if we fought for the Afghan people, maybe the terrorism they faced wouldn't come home with me. I failed. I remember reading a Washington Post article about my area of operations—the Jalrez Valley in Wardak Province—mere months after we returned home in the fall of 2011. When we arrived, two girls' schools thrived just outside our outpost, our Afghan counterparts enjoyed good relations with the locals, and many local villagers helped us fight the Taliban shadow government. One girls' school is ruined now, the other beset by drive-bys and bombings. The article said Jalrez was named "the Valley of Death." My Afghan comrades—with whom I broke bread and bled alongside—despair that the population threw their lot in with the Taliban. The valley is theirs now, how long until they seize the province? The nation?

The day after Orlando was warm and sunny—the summer felt garish and irreverent against my frustration. I tried to explain to a civilian colleague what I felt, and she asked me how I could feel responsible for the attack. She said it seemed so removed from my deployment in 2010. Many of us were brought up in the military schooled in counterinsurgency, which taught us that what the "strategic corporal" did on the ground impacted the whole war. Indeed, leaders on the local level like Colonel H.R. McMaster influenced national policy. I learned that war is not just red and blue symbols on a map, but a complex and entangled system that includes every one of us. Each raid, each dollar, each soldier a thread in a web. It connects a rifle to a villager, a villager to a valley, a

valley to a nation—each strand leading to another variable, another effect. What implications did losing Jalrez have on the war? I can't pretend to know what Omar Mateen thought of the war on his family's country, but if it was mine I would be full of rage and sorrow. I can't say where those feelings would take me, and maybe that's why I can't make Omar into the enemy no matter how hard I try. Every attempt to understand his decisions dropped me into a void. I told my colleague that I couldn't draw a line from Jalrez to a mass murder, only that I felt responsible.

In a society so divorced from the implications of war and foreign policy, veterans not only bear the physical and emotional costs of war, but shoulder the moral responsibility as well. Only during the Global War on Terror has the term "moral injury" entered into the lexicon of mental health and trauma. One need only look to the International NGO Safety Organization or Team Rubicon to see veterans' commitment to duty and social responsibility. If one thing can be said of veterans it is our need to act, but there's something else driving us. In the words of Chris Hedges, war is a force that gives us meaning. Danger makes life simple—survival supplants wardrobe choices and cocktail selections. There is a singularity of purpose and a definition of clarity I have found nowhere else. It joins us irrevocably. Sebastian Junger's new book Tribe examines the bonds that come from collective hardship in wartime—one woman in the book, Nidzara Ahmetasevic, was evacuated from Bosnia only to make a harrowing return trip back to Sarajevo because it was too hard to keep going while her family suffered. "We were the happiest," she told Junger. "And we laughed more."

Like her, I miss much of my war. My brother, an active duty Infantry Sergeant and OEF vet, says he wishes he was back in Afghanistan. He holds out hope for another deployment, another opportunity to get back into the fight. The thought terrifies me, I don't know what I would do if I lost my little brother.

At the same time, another part of me wishes I could go back with him. War gave me camaraderie and meaning, but it was an addiction. Karl Marlantes called combat the crack cocaine of adrenaline highs, with crack cocaine consequences.

I look at the attacks at home and abroad, and I wonder if the source of my despair isn't the tragedy of each event, but a yearning for combat. We said we were in Afghanistan to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, but when fighting season came I savored the fighting. It came to eclipse the desire to build infrastructure, capacity, and governance in Afghanistan. It even eclipsed the beauty of the little girls that welcomed us into their schools. I lost Jalrez because I was too intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder and the power of calling Apache gunships to raze the valley. I kept the Afghans I was supposed to serve at rifle's length out of fear, alienating them. When I came home I tried to pay penance for my blood lust by working for veterans non-profits and by working with refugees to the U.S. I thought if I could save enough lives, make a big enough difference, then I could eventually make up for leaving Jalrez in chaos. For a while I told myself I was doing good work, making a difference. Then a car would backfire or the neighbors would set off a string of firecrackers—I would break into a sweat, my glands taking me out of reality and back into the fight. After that the pathways addicted to adrenaline reactivated like reopened wounds, a bitter reminder of internal war between my compassion and savagery.

After Orlando, it feels as if there may be no way of erasing my guilt because we brought home the dualism we took to war. In many ways, the contradiction of duty and conscience against violence and war reflects the contradictions in our national narrative. When we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, we said it was to liberate the oppressed. At first that held true: many Afghans and Iraqis welcomed us, welcomed the opportunity we appeared to herald—though our collective desire for revenge

colored the decision to engage in both wars. The product is the despair of a failed enterprise of our own making. We say that all men are created equal, but black Americans are still murdered with impunity. We call for an end to violence in Iraq and Syria, but our only action is to drop bombs. We brought other things home—our police forces mutated into paramilitary organizations, our xenophobia morphed into something that politicians actively encourage to win elections with. Perhaps this will be the legacy of the war on terror that so many of us veterans and countless more civilians suffered for.

My good friend and confidant Kristen is a fellow vet, a Florida native, and identifies as part of the LGBTQ community. In the days following Orlando, she said,

“I fought for them. For the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. And it’s come to this.” Her tears fell.

I projected all my guilt, all my failure onto those words. In my head, I listed people I left behind in Afghanistan, the people that have to live with my mistakes. My guilt was immobilizing me into inaction, another failure. Kristen said something else.

“Why aren’t we celebrating the resilience of gay communities? Why aren’t we celebrating the lives of the people of color killed in this hate crime?”

I despair because I am complicit. We all are, yet despair and failure alone cannot define us. We must take ownership of our wars and their effects to face the future. We saw the consequences of war because we answered the call. For us, duty doesn’t end when we take off the uniform. We must share our experiences lest we leave the nation deaf and blind. Tomorrow, we build. Leading voices like Phil Klay, call on veterans to make art for the urgent cause of cultivating a more responsible body politic. Our definition of community must shift from the brotherhood of warriors to include voters,

fighters, and victims of these conflicts. Then, we avenge the victims of these hate crimes, these terror attacks.

Then, when we fight it won’t be for nothing.