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Dismantling the Tribe: How Post-War Isolationism Prolongs PTSD in American Veterans

In *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, author Sebastian Junger explores the overall detachment of contemporary society. Junger observed feeling alienated upon his return to the United States after a journalism tour in Afghanistan. He is not alone. Many military veterans divulge feeling victimized and unnecessary after tours overseas. The collective isolationism promoted by civilians, the American government, and employers collectively prolong PTSD in veterans at one of the highest rates in the world (Junger 87). Disunity leads military personnel to cultivate a sense of nihilism regarding contemporary society, thus increasing isolation at home and worsening PTSD. Likewise, the government's treatment of returning military members can increase mental illness rates. Excessive bureaucratic entitlement programs may raise feelings of victimization among veterans, pressuring many into unwarranted roles of helplessness and worsening PTSD symptoms. Employers, too, contribute to heightened PTSD levels. Often employing the "Veteran's trope," depicting ex-combatants as traumatized, cold-hearted, and short-tempered, employers tend to evade hiring servicemen. This dangerous misattribution directly denies veterans the usefulness and productivity the military ensures.

In a country as patriotic as America, one would expect veterans to have the smoothest path toward reintegration in the world. However, as Sebastian Junger soberingly notes in *Tribe*, "...many modern societies are exactly the opposite: hierarchical and alienating" (101).

Americans often show up to support veterans on holidays like Veterans Day and Fourth of July,

waving small cloth flags and displaying bumper stickers that read “we support the troops.” But where is that patriotic sentiment when Veterans Affairs clinics are in shambles, uncleanly, and spreading disease (Zezima)? Where is the unwavering support when PTSD rates are growing as vets are isolating themselves from a cold, unwelcoming society? Americans must step up and formulate an accepting, pro-human society, even when it is difficult for them to do so.

One of the most challenging cultural shifts a veteran must experience is arguably returning to the United States after an active combat mission. Brotherhood, unity, and teamwork are left behind and replaced with an uncaring, isolated society. A life of independence, an afterthought for civilians, represents a cultural code-switch many veterans struggle to make. Code-switching is the practice of altering one’s typical behavior or appearance to adapt to a different cultural standard. For those suffering from mental health conditions, especially PTSD, social estrangement intensifies their illness. Although global stigmas surrounding mental illness have vastly improved in the 21st Century, many families are uncomfortable confronting or caring for mentally ill vets. This divide between both parties often isolates veterans who may feel that a blissfully naïve society cannot understand their hardships. Living in a culture that is wary of destigmatizing PTSD on an individual level, many veterans often turn to isolationism as a means of overcoming culture shock.

In *Tribe*, Junger describes how social isolation worsens PTSD symptoms. Complementarily, the evidence presented in a study conducted by Matthew Price et al. in 2018 defines how engaging in social interaction improves mental health severity. The study followed 123 combat veterans experiencing PTSD symptoms as they talked with licensed therapists over several months. Data shows that “elevated social support was associated with greater reductions in PTSD symptoms during treatment” (Price et al.). When organizations like the United States

Department of Veterans Affairs provide military members with effective individualized care, PTSD rates are improved. The study also suggested that "...adding social skills training to exposure treatment...reduces PTSD symptoms" (Price et al.). Instead of contributing to the anti-human society mentioned in *Tribe*, American institutions can implement and encourage reintegration programs. Such programs could guide the cultural switch between military and noncombatant life while also providing adequate mental health services to veterans who need them.

The benefits of social interaction on the severity of mental illness symptoms are not limited to PTSD. An additional study done for the Veterans Affairs department by Alan R. Teo et al., published in 2018, found similar data surrounding veteran depression and suicide rates. Teo used the Adult Social Relationship Scales, measuring statistics such as perceived social support and loneliness levels in a questionnaire format. Veterans that had been experiencing depression symptoms took this test. The result "adds support to the direct relevance of loneliness to the health of patients" (Teo et al.). The veterans who reported being least lonely, with healthy familial and peer relationships, had higher rates of improvement and less severe symptoms of depression.

Being present for the veterans in one's family and community is imperative to reintegrative success. Although civilians can never fully understand the difficulties of the cultural switching veterans experience, socially supportive environments improve mental health symptoms for veterans. Visibility training systems and community engagement with reintegration initiatives go beyond "reflexively thanking someone for their service..." (Junger 98). American society may never understand vets like Israel, a country with low PTSD rates and high percentages of military service. Israel maintains a high level of social resilience, a concept

that societies intricately connected to war can provide more specialized care for veterans (Junger 102). Since much of the Israeli population served and fought in their homeland, they have the best understanding of veterans' struggles. The American public may not have this advantage, but they will always positively impact veterans' mental health.

According to Junger, disability payouts can also worsen PTSD rates in vets. Active combat is seen less in modern warfare than in World War II or Vietnam. There are fewer casualties and traumatic total-war experiences in the 21st Century. However, "today's vets claim three times the number of disabilities that Vietnam vets did," despite less active combat and warmer cultural attitudes toward the military (Junger 88). In an interview with Task & Purpose, Junger notes that PTSD is a short-term, treatable illness. By providing life-long disability payments for a usually temporary condition such as PTSD, the United States government forces vets into a victimized position, "...incentivizing a view of veterans as psychologically incapacitated" (Lineham). When vets filed for disability in the past, they had to tell the Veterans Administration what accident likely caused their PTSD. Since 2010, declaring incidents is no longer required. Since then, Junger additionally presents that the "self-reporting of PTSD by veterans has been found to lead to a misdiagnosis rate as high as 50 percent" (88). Such troubling societal factors, such as victimization and alienation, exemplify these trends.

The United States Government has often misappropriated incredible amounts of disability funds. The Congressional Budget Office reports that in 2017, Veterans Affairs benefits programs cost nearly \$187 billion. If, as Junger claims, 50 percent of PTSD reports are misdiagnoses, just how much of this \$187 billion was distributed incorrectly? According to Steven Beynon of Stars & Stripes, the "...Veterans Benefits Administration made nearly \$311,000 in improper payments to beneficiaries..." in a single Veteran Affairs office in 2020. This error can have severe impacts

on veterans suffering from life-threatening physical and psychological maladies. Even with \$187 billion in federal funding, Veterans Affairs clinics are often underfunded and have a history of terrifying scandals. In 2014, according to a report by author Katie Zezima, hundreds of veterans died due to unsanitary conditions and medical malpractice at Veterans Affairs hospitals across the country. In Phoenix, Arizona, "...officials falsified reports...hiding the amount of time that veterans had to wait for medical appointments" (Zezima). An untrustworthy track record and miles of red tape have already tarnished the department's reputation. The government unintentionally denies life-or-death monetary support to vets with legitimate medical needs when it misappropriates funds. Those individuals may not be able to survive or afford to pay for medical bills without such benefits. A defrauded system creates an imbalance, denying the suffering and dying adequate medical care.

One cannot blame returning vets for filing such claims. Having served their country and sacrificed their civilian privileges, they deserve recognition and repayment. Disability funding should be available to veterans who need it, but they should not feel coerced into a state of victimhood because of it. However, excessive bureaucratic entitlement programs can sometimes make veterans feel that way – an unexpected result of the government's helpful hand. Military culture teaches veterans to be resilient and respectable. When they return to the United States, a society devoid of compassion greets them with empty monetary benefits. These behaviors directly contradict combat cultural norms, as Junger describes, because for vets, "...the passivity of victimhood can get them killed" (102). According to a study by Mark Duggan for Stanford University, more disability payments can even damage veteran employment levels. Subsidies seem to be devoid of honest compassion, offered so those who give them can manipulate the

play to benefit their public image. This empty offering only deepens the divide between the culture of returning military members and American civilians.

What veterans truly deserve are meaningful opportunities that can uplift them and actively encourage reintegration. Government initiatives, such as the VA Mission Act, vigorously challenge stagnant bureaucratic legislation that does little to bolster the military community. The law, presented in 2018 by Georgia Senator Johnny Isakson, actively encourages private medical facilities to expand their care to veterans. This proposal, named the Veterans Community Care Program, cuts miles of red tape associated with the VA system and provides vets private healthcare options. Additionally, community programs to make job training and military-oriented mental health facilities more accessible would be extremely helpful to societal recuperation. Socializing among a mixture of reintegrated vets and civilians will ease the transition for young military retirees. As Sebastian Junger cautions in *Tribe*, "lifelong disability payments for a disorder like PTSD...risks turning veterans into a victim class that is entirely dependent on the government for their livelihood" (101). Actively compassionate, devolved civic programs would serve veterans much better than the ineffective administrative procedures of antiquity.

In *Tribe*, Sebastian Junger indicates that jobs are imperative for returning vets. Securing a job and working is "a highly therapeutic thing" for veterans after arduous deployments (Junger 103). Although job-seeking initiatives for veteran reintegration could be a success, wary employers often promote the isolation that worsens PTSD rates in military communities. Unwelcome effects of veteran stereotypes often cause this caution. One major typecast surrounding the military community is obscurely known as the Veteran's Trope. This image portrays veterans as damaged, irritable, bitter, and overcome by PTSD (Ryan). This dangerous

trope is often used in various media, such as in films like *Forrest Gump*, *Rambo*, and *Shooter*, and can convince employers that veterans are violent and unable to function in society, negatively impacting veteran job accessibility.

Veteran unemployment rates have fluctuated since the Vietnam War era but have stayed low. An analysis of ex-combatant unemployment rates throughout the Vietnam War by Kathryn R. Gover and Beverly J. McEaddy details that, although young vets were getting hired at an increasing rate, overall veteran unemployment was high. In the latter half of 1974, returning veterans aged 20 to 24 years old were unemployed at a rate of 9.8 percent, versus 7.7 percent of civilians in the same age group (Gover & McEaddy 19). The total percentage of ex-military unemployment in Gover and McEaddy's assessment, measuring only those aged 20 to 34, was 5.0 percent in the same biannual period (19).

Even in a post-Vietnam War era, American veterans are still suffering from job discrimination and scant employment opportunities. A 2016 study by Mary Keeling, Sara Kintzle, and Carl A. Castro explores just how challenging the modern workforce is for veterans now. "...Approximately 53% of post-9/11 veterans face a period of unemployment initially upon discharge," a rate comparatively worse than Vietnam War levels (Keeling et al. 63). The study describes a clear correlation between mental illnesses like PTSD and poor employment rates. Veterans who participated "...reported negative support service experiences led to employment barriers" (Keeling et al. 66). These participants identified that communication impediments, such as working under those who do not understand their mental illness, were key barriers to employment. Lastly, many participants experienced "...perceived employer stigma and discrimination" (Keeling et al. 65). This employer attitude makes it difficult for young vets to find meaningful entry-level employment after service, intensifying the unemployment gap.

In *Tribe*, Junger explains that “...veterans need to feel that they’re just as necessary and productive back in society as they were on the battlefield” (102). Training corporations to overcome unwarranted stigmas, such as the Veteran’s Trope, will help our vets feel less like outliers in noncombatant society. When businesses are encouraged to hire incoming military members, isolation rates will drop, and the population will seem less anti-human. PTSD symptoms will improve. Reintegration will be successful.

American society is failing its veterans in many ways. In *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, author Sebastian Junger amplifies the mistreatment faced by modern vets in many facets of noncombatant life. Civilians often treat vets as if they are different – alienating and isolating them from daily activities. The government’s often ineffective bureaucratic policies victimize veterans, “one way that soldiers are never allowed to see themselves during deployment...” (Junger 101). Instead of actively fighting for the people who fought for America’s freedom, the government passively throws disability payouts at veterans and hopes for silence. Many employers, over-absorbed in characteristic falsehoods and public image concerns, refuse to hire ex-servicemembers. These incessantly demoralizing factors only isolate veterans further, letting loneliness prevail and allowing our heroes to succumb to mental illnesses like PTSD. American veterans deserve more. By improving America’s social resilience, we can help them preserve their honor.

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