

The Deficit Model and U.S. Veterans

Robert Williams

I am a college educated, middle class white male. Using most common descriptors, I am a member of the majority and have benefited from this membership my entire life. However this is not the complete story: I am also the member of a minority group that is determined by choice. I am a veteran. I served in 3rd Ranger Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment from February, 1987 to August, 1989. This minority status carries with it more federal and state protections than other demographic in the nation, yet this minority status also carries with it its own stereotypes as harmful as that of any other.

Over the years I have learned from movies, books, media reports and academia that, by virtue of my service alone, I was a damaged individual. That had I been exposed to the stress of prolonged combat I would have been destined for drug addiction, homelessness and suicide. Diverse entertainment media have portrayed veterans as potentially dangerous victims of PTSD incapable of controlling their actions, prone to alcoholism, depression, and unpredictable flashbacks. One needs to look no further than the Rambo movies to see the image of the damaged, drifter veteran avenging himself upon helpless civilians for their perceived misdeeds.

This stereotype of unpredictability and dangerousness has worked its way into academia as well, as demonstrated by a 2009 Penn State staff video portraying veterans as dangerous persons requiring heightened police watchfulness and counseling intervention. This video was ultimately withdrawn from Penn State's website, but the decision to create and distribute this training tool indicates pervasive support and belief in a veteran's hostility and potential aggressiveness towards civilians.

My own experiences with academia were not as demeaning, but also suggest a belief that veterans are, among other things, from the "lower social classes" and may be ill-suited for rigorous academic work. While attending a local university in the early nineties I had more than

one professor share their opinions during class regarding veterans and the military overall. Most were generally supportive, others offered comments which were not. One professor felt the military recruiters preyed upon and misled the poor, but at least provided an opportunity for them to advance into the middle class through the GI Bill. Another expressed the idea that those exposed to combat were more likely to struggle in higher education settings. I am not sure of the second professor's evidence, but I wish I had pointed out the military service of Socrates before he became known as a philosopher. Perhaps he meant less inclined to pursue higher education, but just from personal experience, every veteran I know has taken advantage of the GI Bill. Amongst my four closest veteran friends there are three bachelor's degrees: two associate's degrees, and three master's degrees.

As to the first professor's comments, everyone I knew as an adolescent came from families connected the automotive industry. We were raised in semi-rural suburbia and for all but one of us, we were raised in two parent homes. We were *not* poor; nor were we delinquents pressured into military service to avoid legal consequences or sustained economic privation. The recruiters did not steer us from less dangerous military jobs to the combat arms because of our hardscrabble upbringings. In my own situation, my recruiter *insisted* I take the GI Bill, though I had initially decided against it. I am forever thankful for his decision.

The stereotype of veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is prevalent in our culture, so much so that people have asked me how, as a vet, *I* have dealt with PTSD. I can say that as a peacetime veteran I have not experienced this hardship, nor have any of the veterans I know, and this includes those with combat experience. The only person I have met claiming to have PTSD was a pan handler in the Ann Arbor area who stated he was a veteran of a military unit conducting secret raids into the Soviet Union in the 1970's. As a veteran I will help other

veterans, but I ask simple questions any veteran would know the answer to. MOS and ETS are acronyms any veteran will know and be able to provide. In this instance, the haggard looking person claiming to be a disabled veteran of a non-existent conflict proved incapable of answering the questions and was ignorant of their meaning. The significance of this event is that this person presented himself as something he was not, and those without the ability to distinguish between a veteran and an imposter may form the opinion that all veterans are disabled pan handlers.

With the nation's current population at 311 million, and the veteran population at only a fraction of that at 22.7 million, many Americans—despite the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—may not know someone who has served. This fact, along with the persistent media stereotypes mentioned above, may serve to create lasting cultural assumptions about people in uniform. Yet data collected from the Veteran's Administration and Department of Labor in recent years indicates that veterans—on average—are less likely to be unemployed than their civilian peers, and even fewer by comparison live in poverty. Veterans are also less likely to be homeless: of the nearly twenty three million veterans, only 107,000 are homeless. Veterans tend to make more money and have higher education rates than civilian peers. At the very least, these data should complicate pervasive negative stereotypes of veterans in our society. While a single veteran living suffering from the ills of poverty or homelessness is one too many, there is nevertheless reason to question harmful, deficit-minded assumptions that continue to persist with regard to veterans...and their transitions back to civilian culture.

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