



COLLATERAL DAMAGE

**The Psychological Consequences
of America's War on Terrorism**

Edited by Paul R. Kimmel and Chris E. Stout

COLLATERAL DAMAGE
How the U.S. War on Terrorism
is Harming American Mental Health

*Edited by Paul R. Kimmel and
Chris E. Stout
Foreword by Philip G. Zimbardo*

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CHAPTER 8

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF THE VIRTUAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE IRAQ WAR: A POSTMODERN HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Ilene Serlin

Introduction

We usually describe the psychological impact of war is usually described in terms of trauma and loss. The media through which news of that shock and loss come is not generally considered a significant psychological influence. However, the war in Iraq introduced a new dimension in war reporting. With round-the-clock and repetitive coverage on major cable networks, the war entered the homes of most Americans at all times and in all places, public and private. The use of embedded reporters and lack of visible blood or death gave the news coverage an immediate and sanitized quality. Minimizing the horrors of the war began inside the White House, where the president's communications advisers devised a strategy to encourage supportive news coverage of the fight against terrorism after September 11, 2001. The idea, they explained to reporters at the time, was to counter charges of U.S. imperialism by generating accounts of the liberation and rebuilding of Afghanistan and Iraq ("Under Bush Administration," 2005). Scenes were staged and reporters were both observers and participants, blurring lines between reality and fantasy. War scenes were repeated in a continuous loop of fragmented images without a coherent narrative or chance to digest them.

The last of the generation of news anchors like Peter Jennings and Dan Rather, who gave Americans a sense of trustworthy coverage and reality, is disappearing. In their place, some of the reporters of the war



in Iraq were hired from private advertising agencies. Government agencies also produced news reports that used actors like Karen Ryan to conduct “interviews” with senior administration officials with prescribed questions and answers and no critiques. The changing stories about why we should be in the war, the use of advertising to spin and manipulate reality, and multiple perspectives of this war are characteristic of the shifting realities of a postmodern world in which things are not what they seem (Gergen, 1991; Laing, 1965).

Very little is known about the impact of this new media coverage on the imagination and psyche of Americans. How can we understand impact of the government’s unique coverage of the war on terrorism on Americans and what it means to be human? The goal of this chapter is to examine the new role of the media and its impact on psychological issues such as personal integrity, identity, sense of security, reality, trust, and fear.

The impact of the media is explored through interviews with three subjects who were experiencing psychological distress at the beginning of the war in Iraq. I compare their symptoms with reports from the media at that time and suggest how psychologists can better understand the influence of environmental and cultural factors such as media and politics on the psyches of their clients. I recommend that, when appropriate, psychologists be trained to identify and work with such stressors.

The three case histories illustrate psychological themes that emerged during the days preceding and following the beginning of the war in Iraq. Three veterans in psychotherapy with me were interviewed using the narrative/archival research method (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; McAdams, 1995; Sarbin, 1986; Surlin, 2005). They were Vietnam War veterans who experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress and depression as the war in Iraq began. I interviewed them twice: once at the beginning of the war and again one year later. I asked open-ended questions about their symptoms and experiences. Since the war was so immediate, it was already present in our sessions. For example, one veteran who was late to a session because an antiwar demonstration blocked the streets came in expressing anger and frustration about the war.

The interviews were coded, and names were changed to protect confidentiality. I read the interviews once to get a general sense of the session, then several times more until clusters of words and phrases relevant to the veterans’ psychological health emerged. Phrases that occurred many times were identified in bold type and

studied for patterns. These words, phrases, and patterns showed significant amounts of the following symptoms in response to the media coverage of the war: cynicism, distrust, fear, breakdown of reality testing, helplessness/hopelessness, and paranoia. I compare these symptoms with themes from daily newspaper reports in this chapter. Understanding the impact of the media on these veterans will help prepare health professionals to address the current effects of the media's coverage of the Iraq War on American veterans' post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the effects of future political events on more general issues of mental health.

The Postmodern War: A Perspective from Humanistic Psychology

Why is this a postmodern war? The coverage of the Iraq War is different from past wars in that it mixes the roles of spectator and participant, objective and subjective. This coverage introduces spin and advertising to sell the war on terrorism. Images of the war serve political purposes through an appeal to American values such as the Rumsfeld doctrine that speed and efficiency wins victories over our enemies. Other images show changing rationales for the war in Iraq, decisions marked by unilateralism and secrecy and a sanitized high-technological relationship among combatants. The irony, as noted by Frank Rich, television critic of the *New York Times*, is that: "Conservatives, who supposedly deplore post-modernism, are now welcoming in a brave new world in which it's a given that there can be non-empirical reality in news, only the reality you want to hear (or they want you to hear)" (Rich, 2005a).

The administration is spinning reality to consciously manage perception. The chief Pentagon spokesperson, Lawrence Di Rita, was quoted as saying, "In the battle of perception management . . . our job is not perception management, but to counter the enemy's perception management." A secret program by Rumsfeld called Information Operations Roadmap was set up to "advance the goal of information operations as a core military competency" (Shanker & Schmitt, 2004). Putting journalists on the administration payroll and hiring an outside public relations firm to create an enemies list of ranking news organizations based on their support for administration policies was documented in the July 2002 Downing Street memos published in the *London Sunday Times* on May 1, 2005. These memos describe how

Tony Blair learned about White House efforts to change what was called “the great Watergate cover-up of 2005” (Rich, 2005b). Even the weather reports, used to prove that global warming was not happening, were false. Records from the Environmental Protection Agency show that the Bush administration paid the Weather Channel \$40,000 to produce videos about climate change (“Weather Channel,” 2005). President Bush told a reporter: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality” (Danner, 2005, p. 53).

How does this creation of arbitrary realities affect the psyche? Most basic to the psyche are existential values of security, identity, truth, integrity, and meaning (Bruner, 1986; Bugental, 1989; Frankl, 1959; May, 1975; Murray, 1938). Some people living in a created postmodern reality may experience disorientation, changed identities (deRivera & Sarbin, 1998; Smith, 2002; Turkle, 1995), and an inability to trust their perceptions (Goldberg, 2000). They may feel dehumanized and not know who they are (Fromm, 1941; Serlin, 1995, 2002; Serlin & Cannon, 2004; Shafer, 1992). They may experience a form of disembodiment unique to the age of cyberspace. Philosopher Herbert Dreyfus observed: “It is easy to see the attraction of completing human evolution by leaving behind the animal bodies in which our linguistic and cultural identities are now imprisoned. Who wouldn’t wish to become a disembodied being who could be anywhere in the universe and make backup copies of himself to avoid injury and death?” (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 4). In his book, *On the Internet*, Dreyfus warned: “we should remain open to the possibility that, when we enter cyberspace and leave behind our animal-shaped, emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves, and thereby gain a remarkable new freedom never before available to human beings, we might, at the same time, necessarily lose some of our crucial capacities: our ability to make sense of things so as to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, our sense of the seriousness of success and failure that is necessary for learning, and our need to get a maximum grip on the world that gives us our sense of the reality of things” (Dreyfus, 2001, pp. 6–7).

Philosopher David Abrams notes the absence of relationship in a world that leaves out the senses: “Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still *need* that which is other than ourselves and our own creations. The simple premise of this book is that we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human” (p. ix). Finally, linguist George Lakoff supports

the importance of embodied experience to make sense of the world. He describes three main tenets of cognitive science as: “The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 3). Even rationality requires embodiment, “Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience. . . . Reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 4). Thus, we need contact with the world of experience even to reason well.

The experience of dehumanization from created reality may present psychological symptoms of anxiety, depression, loss of identity, derealization, and depersonalization. These are what humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow called metapathologies (Maslow, 1962) that distort the most fundamental sense of what it means to be human. Coping with these stresses may require a new understanding of what it means to be human that can help us develop a new kind of resiliency (Antonovsky, 1979; Maddi, 1994).

To better understand the stressors created by the war in Iraq, let’s listen to the words of the veterans in the following case stories. Their actual words are in quotation marks, and words that describe psychological symptoms are in bold type. Words from media reports from the war later in the chapter are also in bold type to identify similar themes and experiences to which these veterans were exposed.

Case Vignettes

Frank 2003

Frank reports sleep disturbances, early morning awakenings. He asks what triggers these symptoms again. What Frank fears the most is **losing control**, not being able to control his emotions, especially anger, in public. He remembers experiencing surges of anger during the Vietnam War, pounding the table if something didn’t come out right. What is he **angry** about now? He is angry that “20 year olds are dying,” angry at “the government and society for putting us through this. All that killing and maiming; for what?” At his discharge in 1969, Frank came back and didn’t fit into society. He has had a **jaded** view of society ever since. He is **bitter**. The “anger and resentment” he feels now is about war’s **depersonalization**: “We’re facing the human part now.” Frank finds it “distressing to take the human part out of war. The Germans had the perfect machine—but it was the people

who were behind those machines who stopped fighting. In Vietnam there was no purpose to being there.” He remembers “a suspected Viet Cong, a young woman, shot through the pelvis—the faces of the enemy. An old man shot through the lungs.” It “felt **unreal**.” He “didn’t feel fear; it seemed a cliché.” The message he heard “loud and clear” was: “**The individual is expendable**.” At this point, he feels that his life and thoughts are very different from those of “most people,” bringing him “**isolation and loneliness**.” The war in Iraq brought back these thoughts because, “like the Vietcong, because they’re Iraqi their lives are not worth as much. And we don’t understand why they don’t like us. It seems that we are **repeating all the same things over again**. All of this is hyperbole.”

Memories return. Frank writes:

We’re in Danang Harbor. Beautiful deep blue water—I watch the sun come up—small Vietnamese fishing boats silhouetted against the rising sun. It’s now 10 A.M.—I watch as the life—small, funny looking boat with square bow plowing its way toward the ship—seems out of place in this beautiful harbor. It pulls alongside and there arranged in neat rows—15 body bags. Everyone on deck stops what they’re doing and stares. One by one they hoist them onto the deck. Now they’re lined up on the deck—I walk up to one of the bags to check the tag—unable to identify neatly typed name. Bags are hoisted down to the morgue—Next!!! . . . Next. After four years—you’re done—thanks. After four years of college, you’re given a diploma and you have years of wonderful memories; memories that will be shared for many years. After four years of service, you’re given a discharge and a head full of **memories that may not be shared**. You’ve been **trained not to feel**, yet every day those feelings of mourning are with you; those memories of the dead, dying and the suffering. And now after all these years—the feelings grow more intense.

He has been **numb** and now images and feelings tumble back.

Frank 2005

In a follow-up interview in 2005, Frank said:

Neither of us can remember how long the war has been going. . . . it has been a success because of the election . . . all public relations. They report the dead, but none of the wounded. Some of them are going to be paraplegic, but no one knows how many. It will be staggering. . . . They learned from the war in Vietnam that you cannot let reporters go anywhere they want, like in the famous photo that turned public opinion against Vietnam.

Frank was angry that the war was “no longer on people’s minds,” that there were “two values—American life and Iraqi life—no wonder they hate us.” He knew from his own experience returning from Vietnam that:

You’re not the same person you were when you left. People who are the closest—wives and husbands—will notice it the most. . . . How do you tell someone you’ve been close to, tender with, that you’ve killed someone? . . . The glory isn’t there—it all seems so hollow . . . all this seems **unreal** . . . it’s a new reality. . . . You’ll find yourself **isolated**—there’s no one to turn to. You’ll be **overwhelmed** by thoughts of the past year, yet if you try to explain these thoughts and feelings, you’ll be met with stares of disbelief, which will make you withdraw from your friends and family even more. By now you’ll find all the happiness and joy you felt when you first returned turn to **disappointment** and even **anger**. . . . I’ve become very **jaded**; there are more people in Washington whose reputations are at stake. It brought democracy to Iraq, yes, but who paid?

Frank recommended:

Now’s the time to reach out and find someone to talk to. Don’t bury yourself into your past. Force yourself to talk about your experiences. Find someone you can trust. Most of all, don’t expect people to fully understand what you’ve been through. You’ve been through one of the most personal journeys that few people experience. Talk about it. Don’t withdraw, that makes things worse. Trust people.

He found it “helpful talking about it in sessions” because it brought “some perspective.” “It helps me understand my own feelings about it.” As a photographer and birdwatcher, Frank found it healing to “get absorbed” in nature and “create healing images” to counteract those in the media.

Commentary

Frank struggles deeply with the **lack of meaning** in his life, and he sees life as somewhat **surreal and absurd**. He saw that “through war how **human life has so much less value . . . war changes the meaning of life.**” As the war in Iraq triggered memories of a past war, psychotherapy enabled him to talk and work through his anger and cynicism. He describes himself as currently “being more open” to life and its daily pleasures. By confronting his mortality and aloneness, he became less dependent on authority and more self-reliant. He chose to live, and affirmed his own set of values that now anchor and guide him.

Mike 2003

Mike's dramatic response in 2003 to the media coverage of the war in Iraq illustrated its impact:

The whole thing is orchestrated by some very professional people. Shock and awe showed the superiority of the American forces over selected shots, while destruction was being rained on Iraq. It was almost cartoonish—it avoided showing anyone being directly killed. It was like a theatrical production. It was good theatrics when Bush spoke from the aircraft carrier. I almost threw up. . . . He is master of the art of television; he has embedded people everywhere (**cynicism**). There is someone somewhere in the White House who cranks out these things. The aims of the war changed from being about chemical and biological weapons to freeing the Iraqis, similar to the military in Vietnam. They are blaming the looters and there is always a finger being pointed at someone else. There is not a single word that I believe [**distrust**].

It's **woken me from my lethargy**. . . . Makes me feel a little **ashamed** of being American. I am **fearful** of foreign travel—there is now a vast unknown about your own personal future that pops up. Where is the next target? What's going to happen? [**insecurity**] People will believe what they see because it's on television" [**reality**].

As the evidence pyramids, I am more than ever convinced that the Bush administration is the most **corrupt**, inept political machine *ever* constructed! I am quickly becoming quite **fearful** of the known and unknown **conspiracies** being concocted at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

Mike 2005

Two years later, Mike remained bitter. He said: "As far as the war is concerned, it is highly predictable. . . . Bush has no concept of the average person. He is out of touch with the common, everyday person Those airplanes that crashed the World Trade Towers were a disaster, but now what they've done is to create a whole new business on airport security, like in the *Wag the Dog* movie." He was afraid: "We have now the right to invade any country. Bush is issuing warnings to China, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq." He thinks that we need "someone to **hate**; brings back the problem of the Jews in Germany."

Mike was still distrustful of the government: "They have a lot of hidden agendas, I don't know what they are. . . . The insurgents are getting worse, it was supposed to be over in a year. We don't want

it to end—we are making lots of money.” There will be “more of the same in the future, if not worse, because they will be very desperate to maintain the ideology and Shell, Texaco, Phillips are all lined up behind this country waiting for oil to drip in.” So are “Bechtel, the construction companies.” He reports that his own anger is less: “Day by day I’m getting used to the same song and dance. I have much fewer years ahead of me than behind. I’ve even thought of Iraq—what would I do? Nothing.” He reports a feeling of **helplessness** and **meaninglessness**: “My only complaint is I’m a U.S. citizen sitting here with nothing to do except complain and I don’t like to complain.”

Commentary

As the war and media coverage intensified, so did Mike’s symptoms of **depression**, **anger**, **fear**, and **hopelessness**. His report was noteworthy for its expression of **distrust** of the media and the government and feelings of **paranoia** and **powerlessness**. Bringing the political discussion into the therapeutic conversation, however, allowed him to release some of his fear and anger. Therapeutically, it validated his sense of himself as an intelligent human being whose voice mattered.

Charles 2003

Charles focused on the effects of the media coverage and reported feeling **angry**, **distrustful**, and **depressed**. He noted:

CNN is almost like the world’s news. Everyone tends to watch. What I thought was one of the more **surreal** things was the video phones—everything had a green tint to it. All you’d see at the beginning were explosions in the distance, an eerie color green; a lot of faraway shots; really a **video game**—“Ooh, we blew that up”—almost as though all the other video games prepared us for this.

I turned off a lot. I guess with my age and experience I was very **cynical** about it anyway. But everyone has the urge to know what’s going on, so I turned it on anyway. Then I noticed that they kept **repeating** things, so I just changed the channels. During Vietnam we saw reporters talking to people—here I saw mostly reporters talking to other reporters and faraway shots. The female journalists looked like Barbie dolls talking with other journalists about how they felt about being bombed. They were so young, wearing desert fatigues and eye make-up. I was looking to see on their faces little smudges of phony dirt [**link between cynicism, crisis of faith, and depression**].

It was such a packaged deal. Remember when Bush flew on the aircraft carrier, did they go to Laci Person the day after? It's even scarier if that is such a staged thing. Here is our leader-in-chief in his costume, grand finale and here's Laci Peterson. It made the whole thing seem like a movie. . . . To me what's **scary** is that it all seems like a huge election ploy. Because 60 GIs have been killed since Bush landed on the enemy carrier—when Bush was questioned about those killed, he said “Bring 'em on.” The whole John Wayne attitude, none of his kids got killed. It is pretty easy to say things sitting on a couch in Washington. Every time I read in the paper that someone was killed I feel a **pain in my stomach**. I think that's a **desensitization**.

All this stuff around 9/11—CNN, the creation of Homeland Security, orange alerts—doesn't feel **real**. Feels like a political smokescreen. I think the **fear**, threat, is real—but this doesn't help us feel more **secure**. It's a joke—red alert, blue alert—I still have to get on the bus and go to work in the morning. . . . I think my **fear** is that the people in power are using this in such a **cynical** way for their own goals that they are putting us in danger. They're really interested in their political agenda, they're **exploiting** it in ways that don't seem to be helpful for that. . . . It makes me become a combination of **jaded** and **apathetic**. Put me in a bubble and leave me the hell alone! When did the word “**spin**” come into our lexicon? It is not “**lying**” anymore.

Commentary

Charles's statements also showed symptoms of **paranoia**, **fear**, and **depersonalization** as psychological responses to war trauma. These symptoms appeared in his workplace and home environment. He used psychotherapy to sort through and reality-test his daily experiences. Psychotherapy gave him a safe place to explore his response to the media coverage and develop his own understanding of the political situation and his place in the world.

Media Reports

Media stories from 2003 supported the themes expressed by Frank, Mike, and Charles about truth, reality, trust, fear, and depersonalization.

Truth and Lies

The Associated Press noted that, even in March, 2003, the administration knew of **lies**:

A key piece of evidence linking Iraq to a nuclear weapons program appears to have been fabricated, the United Nations' chief

nuclear inspector said Friday in a report that called into question U.S. and British claims about Iraq's secret nuclear ambitions It was deemed "not authentic" after careful scrutiny by U.N. and independent experts, Mohamed El Baradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), told the U.N. Security Council (Kole, 2003).

The *Wall Street Journal* commented:

Victoria Clarke should take a bow. By embedding more than 500 journalists among U.S. troops, the assistant secretary of defense of public affairs has revolutionized media coverage of war. But has any of this improved our **understanding** of what's really happening in Iraq? As both a consumer and a purveyor of war coverage over the last week, I doubt it. The **fog of war** seems as thick as ever—maybe thicker . . . the last Gulf War also was characterized by saturation coverage and a drought of real information . . . there's the key point. The military's goal is not to inform the public; it's to win the war and if a little **disinformation** can help along the way, so be it. . . . Aeschylus is credited with saying: "**In war, truth is the first casualty.**" Much has changed in this war, but that still holds (Murray, 2003).

In fact, the whole basis for the war was shown to be shaky. On October 3, 2003, the Bush administration's chief investigator told Congress that, after "searching for nearly six months, U.S. forces and CIA experts have found no chemical or biological weapons in Iraq" (Priest and Pincus, 2003). Since that time, however, the trend toward manufactured infotainment has grown. The *New York Times* reported that a growing number of young people were going to film school to learn how to influence public policy—where the "gruesome execution videos that have surfaced in the Middle East are perhaps only the most extreme face of a complex sort of post-literacy in which cinematic visuals and filmic narrative have become commonplace" (Van Ness, 2005).

Blurring the line between reality and reality television shows, a \$200 million partnership between the Army and the private Army Historical Foundation plans to build a museum and entertainment complex two miles south of the Pentagon to show what the life of a soldier is like. In an article called "Friends' and Enemies: The War as Situation Comedy," we learn that Bochco, who created *L.A. Law* and *NYPD Blue*, plans another pilot series about Iraq ("Friends and Enemies," 2005). "Real" celebrities such as Bobby Brown and Paris Hilton's mother are playing themselves in fictionalized "reality shows" (Rich, 2005c, p. 12).

Psychological and Physical Health

In 2003, the *San Francisco Chronicle* was already warning readers about the toll on their mental health:

For nearly a week now, the war in Iraq has played on as background noise in countless living rooms across America. . . . But while the constant exposure to the television war—tuned in as we dress for work, get children ready for school and sit down for meals—is keeping us informed, it may also be taking a subtle but real toll on our health. . . . Studies show regular **television exposure to traumatic events can increase risk for stress and depression** and it can even **weaken our immune systems**. Doctors think excessive war viewing before bedtime can cause stress-induced night-time snacking and interfere with sleep. Even young children who seem oblivious to events on the screen may suffer ill effects simply as a result of leaving the television on throughout the day. It's a time of life when kids are really organizing their ability to think forward in time. . . . If the television is going on in the background with competing language, it's quite possible that it **disrupts what may be a very important developmental process** (Torassa, 2003).

The effect of **depression and stress** was noted in San Francisco. "Staff at adolescent psychiatric unit at St. Mary's Medical Center in SF is seeing an upsurge in calls and requests for admission; in some cases, those feelings are exacerbating or triggering physical symptoms and mental anguish" (Torassa, 2003).

Ironically, new therapies being developed to treat post-traumatic stress disorder use the same technologies of virtual reality that contribute to that stress in the first place. One such new therapy is called tech therapy. It uses virtual reality scenes of conflict and biofeedback through video to help soldiers fight post-traumatic stress disorder (Zimmerman, 2005). A "virtual Fallujah" is being used at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego. This virtual reality was created at the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California and uses part of the Full Spectrum Warrior that was originally created to train soldiers for combat. Five million dollars was recently added to the Institute's new PTSD programs as a result of the war in Iraq.

Real and Surreal

Media coverage of the war also confirmed some viewers' **lost sense of reality**. By March 14, 2003, the *New York Times* was reporting:

And more people than you would think—including a fair number of people in the Treasury Department, the State Department and, yes, the

Pentagon, don't just question the competence of Mr. Bush and his inner circle; they believe that American's leadership has **lost touch with reality** . . . at this point it is clear that deposing Saddam has become an **obsession, detached from any real rationale** . . . what really has the insiders panicked, however, is the irresponsibility of Mr. Bush and his team with their almost childish unwillingness to face up to problems that they don't feel like dealing with right now . . . the administration's eerie passivity in the face of a stalling economy and an exploding budget deficit: **reality** isn't allowed to intrude on the obsession with long-run tax cuts (Krugman, 2003).

Commenting on the news spin **a week later**, the *New York Times* said:

So far the **war itself is selling** like beer on a troopship, thanks in part to compelling news accounts from reporters bunking with frontline units. . . . Like the most sophisticated Madison Avenue marketers, Pentagon planners have also reached out to diverse outlets where public opinion is shaped, by including reporters from MTV, Rolling Stone, People magazine and Men's Health, and foreign journalists running the gamut from Al Jazeera, the Arabic-language television channel, to Russia's Itar-Tass news agency (Purdum and Rutenberg, 2003)

The *San Francisco Chronicle* echoed Michael Moore's words at the Academy awards: "**We live in fictitious times**" (Wellman, 2003).

The war has been clearly manipulated for political gain. For example, the heroic photos of George Bush **declaring victory in Iraq** were used to sell the war and bring him re-election at the same time. By April 1, 2003, the *New York Times* was already calculating the effect of media coverage on Bush's re-election: "Some Republicans in Washington were clearly jittery about the course and conduct of a war whose outcome they argued was pivotal to Mr. Bush's re-election next year" (Nagourney and Sanger, 2003). Bush's expectations were **unrealistic** and repeated the same mistakes made by previous invaders of Iraq. "And despite evidence that most Iraqis have not welcomed American forces, Mr. Bush cast himself as the country's liberator, telling Iraqis, 'We are coming with a mighty force to end the reign of your oppressors'" (Nagourney and Sanger, 2003). While Bush described his own progress as "brilliant," Saddam Hussein was describing the war as Operation Iraqi Freedom and the "mother of all battles." Heroic images were staged: a fake turkey was supplied by Halliburton for a surprise visit by the president to the troops for Thanksgiving. Bush landed

on the carrier U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* to the theme from *Top Gun*. Jessica Lynch, who was mythologized as a war heroine, turned out to not have fired a shot. War reporting turned into infotainment. The media glorified war, while sanitizing its depiction.

In March 2003, descriptions in the *New York Times* sounded like Frank's memory:

This is like "Real World Iraq." In the opening moments of the war, 24-hour cable news shows and network newscasts seemed almost drunk with their access, filling television screens with astonishing images. The mushroom clouds rising from bombed government buildings in Baghdad were shown over and over, as were the tableaux of a marine tearing down a poster of Saddam Hussein surrounded by a handful of cheering Iraqi villagers. . . . What they generally did not see in the first phase of the invasion of Iraq were very many Iraqis Refugee camps, a staple of war reporting in other conflicts, paled next to the images of high-tech weaponry blazing in real time . . . television also has a way of freeze-framing **the deceptive beauty of war**—the red and gold of burning government buildings along the Tigris river was almost painterly, like a sunset by Sisley (Stanley, 2003).

Trust and Distrust

The *New York Times* noted: "Where American TV news falls down, without question, is the almost complete lack of anti-war voices or 'in-studio' experts. With paid military advisors dominating maps and thrilling anchors with their battle analysis, there's apparently no room for dissent" (Iovine, 2004). **Paranoia** was justified, as the United States changed its former friends like Saddam Hussein into enemies:

Washington's policy traces an even longer, more shrouded and fateful history. Forty years ago, the Central Intelligence Agency, under President John F. Kennedy, conducted its own regime change in Baghdad, carried out in collaboration with Saddam Hussein. . . . Washington immediately befriended the successor regime. . . . the United States also sent arms to the new regime, weapons later used against the same Kurdish insurgents the United States had backed against Kassem and then abandoned. Soon Western corporations like Mobil, Bechtel and British Petroleum were doing business with Baghdad (Morris, 2003).

The *New York Times* noted the relationship of **secrecy** to **trust**:

While the public was preoccupied with the war, Bush signed an executive order making it easier for government agencies to keep documents classified . . . a reminder that this White House is obsessed with

secrecy. . . . The **value of human life** was **reduced** with the explicit use of assassination. Assassination approved in this war has committed the United States for the first time to public, personalized, open-ended warfare in the classic mode of Middle Eastern violence—an eye for an eye, a life for a life . . . the Bush administration still shrinks from using the word “assassination” and much of the public continues to oppose it as both dangerous and wrong (Powers, 2003).

Fears and warnings about **retaliation** showed: “the Blair government unleashed a witch hunt against the BBC and anyone in the Blair administration who might have been a source for the news agency’s reporting” (Scheer, 2003). Peter Arnett was dismissed for telling an Iraqi interviewer that the coalition battle plans had failed.

Existential Responsibility

Psychological health means **taking responsibility for one’s actions** and not projecting it as blame for others. The army manipulated stories about the cost of the war on individual lives, glorifying the deaths of soldiers. For example, Pat Tillman was reported to have died being “gunned down by enemy fire while leading a charge to protect his men,” when in fact he was killed by friendly fire by members of his own platoon. His mother said in an interview in the *Washington Post*: “The military let him down . . . the administration let him down. It was a sign of disrespect” (Tucker, 2005).

Summary and Conclusions

Media reports of the war in Iraq have had a significant impact on the mental health of three veterans who were in psychotherapy with me. Themes that emerged from their reports and narratives that were related to the postmodern war media reports were **truth and lies, psychological and physical health, reality and the surreal, trust and distrust, and existential responsibility**. Although their symptoms could have been primarily due to post-traumatic stress, their comments closely paralleled reports in the media and pointed to a strong link between the two.

The fact that I was their therapist and interviewer could potentially have biased the results; however, the validity of data from semi-structured interviews depends on the establishment of trust and a safe place in which participants can access nuanced and deeply felt private experiences. In this case, the subjects were already experiencing

and expressing their symptoms. The sudden appearance and intensity of their symptoms was remarkable, as I began gathering descriptions of their experiences. This chapter has documented those experiences and analyzed them for themes relevant to understanding the impact of television and newspaper coverage of the war in Iraq on the psychological health of Vietnam veterans.

These clinical implications suggest that current assessments of mental health in veterans should include the impact of media coverage of the war. I found that talking about these media portrayals and their impact has beneficial therapeutic effects. Health care professionals can be sensitized to the therapeutic response to this impact through appropriate psychological training and supervision.

Recommendations

Psychologists should be trained to identify and work with these symptoms of depersonalization, derealization, distrust, and existential fears. This training should include:

1. *A recognition of the effect of external forces such as politics or the media on their clients.* Psychologists are often trained to see psychological events as intrapsychic or rooted in family issues. Instead, cultural factors such as politics and the media have a strong influence and interact with pre-existing conditions, psychological vulnerabilities, and resiliencies.
2. *Allowing clients to talk about this effect in the therapy session.* Clients may need to express, cathart, understand, or struggle with this effect in the session, and often the chance to debrief is in itself healing. Therapists should be trained to work with strong emotions without trying to resolve or fix them. Although the outcome orientation of many managed care companies may push therapists to time-limited treatment goals, symptoms of this intensity might require an in-depth or existential approach.
3. *Clinical assessment* that is focused on the usual symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety and also on the unusual existential ones symptoms such as cynicism, paranoia, lack of meaning and purpose, reality, multiple realities and the surreal, identity coherence and identity confusion, and truth and distrust. Clinical assessment should take a thorough client history that looks at patterns and the presence and etiology of such symptoms and identifies particular vulnerabilities that war veterans might have.
4. *Treatment that is contextual and proactive.* Given threats to the basic integrity and sense of security of war veterans, therapists can help

build their clients' resiliency. Healing means providing a safe and caring environment, learning to trust, and finding meaning in the everyday. Healing helps clients become more visible and find their own voices. To do this, they face the existential challenges of mortality, aloneness, play, creativity, suffering, and transcendence.

5. *Research that expands the understanding of PTSD and related conditions.* Psychologists should study the effects of current political and news practices such as embedded reporters and infotainment on the psychological health of veterans with much larger samples and randomized control groups.

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