



What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars by David Wood.

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*Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus
and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold on the Achaeans,
hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
of dogs, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished.¹*

* * *

Sunt lacrimae rerum: “There are the tears of the things [of war].” These gnomic words come from Vergil’s *Aeneid* (1.462), the supreme myth of war of the ancient Romans, in whose bellicose civilization Oswald Spengler at the end of World War I saw the ancient analog of American culture. They came to my mind as I read David Wood’s deeply felt account of sufferings endured by the volunteer soldiers who, without due reverence or proper recognition by their fellow citizens, have fought America’s “wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq. Wood, a Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent, has covered US soldiers in combat zones and the personal consequences of their service, short and long term, for three decades.

What Have We Done is filled with tales of bravery and everyman heroes (in the ancient Greek sense). Its author has eschewed diatribes, polemics, sermons, *cris de coeur*, self-help advice, and *New York Times*-style editorial jeremiads. He concentrates instead on the actual sacrifices and experiences of the mostly young men and women dispatched to bring armed force to bear in the name of the American people in far-off places at the behest of three successive presidents, with or without direct congressional authorization.

Wood shows American civilians the errors of their ways, without shaming them. To bring home the terrible damage done to the nation’s soldiers and Marines, he amplifies their voices and those of their caregivers—counselors, chaplains, psychologists, and psychiatrists—who speak to us directly of their physical and moral wounds. Wood’s readers will learn how Americans may at least lessen the severity of these injuries, since preventing them altogether is, frankly, impossible.

The author also clarifies the tragic consequences of Americans’ failure to choose their battles more wisely and cautiously and to better prepare their soldiers for their roles as, in effect, proxy killers. The tears of things in Iraq and Afghanistan, he argues, are shed when soldiers kill other human beings in the name of the American people. They are left to make sense of their actions and their stated justifications. There is no first-aid treatment for their moral injuries when their loved ones and fellow citizens back home say “thank you for your service,” but ignore the true reasons for their nation’s recourse to military power. In many of the soldiers’ tales, military training, command structure, learned behav-

1. *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1951) 1.1-5.

ioral practices, rules of engagement, on-the-spot and after-service counseling, and legal definitions of proper soldierly conduct do not satisfy the injunction “first do no harm.”

Wood draws heavily on the groundbreaking work of psychiatrist Jonathan Shay,² who realized that Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* presented with unflinching, graphic violence and human pathos (in the strict sense) the worst effects war can have on warriors. He believes that, as a consequence, ancient Greek and Roman warriors (and their families back home) were better equipped for the changes war would wreak on their hearts and minds.

In Vergil’s epic, the mythic hero Aeneas symbolizes the dutiful endurance of pain, suffering, and mayhem expected of the legionaries who, over the centuries, acquired and preserved the Roman empire by force of arms. In book 1 of the epic, having fled his conquered and burned home city of Troy, Aeneas has come to Carthage in north Africa (present-day Tunisia). There he discovers on the walls of a temple in the new city a sequence of paintings depicting the Trojan War, prompting his reflection that *lacrimae rerum* were shed in Carthage, too, for his lost city.

In the *Iliad*, Greek and Trojan warriors kill and are killed in countless grisly and macabre variations, their bodies sometimes left to rot and be eaten by roaming dogs and birds of prey. The heroes defile the corpses of dead opponents and pitilessly kill defeated enemies begging for mercy. The Greek soldiers who survived and their slain brothers in arms alike suffered such horrors, as their supreme hero Achilles declares forthrightly, *for no good reason*.³

Years later, Aeneas, most of whose relatives are dead or enslaved, weeps as he gazes upon the men who slew or captured them—Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Achilles. He weeps to see Priam, the king of Troy and distant kin of his own father Anchises, cut down by Achilles’s son Pyrrhus and left unmourned to be grotesquely mutilated by his own dogs. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, the sobbing Aeneas says, meaning “the things men go through in war are cause for weeping” or, as Wordsworth wrote, “tears to human suffering are due.”⁴ Americans have no *Aeneid*, nor *Iliad* nor *Odyssey*. Yet their “wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan surpass the Trojan War in length and senseless destruction of human life and leave their soldiers to grieve in their very souls. Wood presents his reader with “the dark truth of war.... We know, though we rarely acknowledge it, that war imposes terrible costs on human beings” who live and die in “the alternate moral universe” (11) of twenty-first-century conflicts. Many of the voices we hear in his narrative could be Aeneas’s.

What Have We Done, like ancient epics, is comprised of discrete episodes (chapters), but various characters recur through the chapters as they learn that

to be in war is to be exposed to moral injury. Almost all return with some sense of unease about what we’ve seen and done, about how well we and others have lived up to our own standards. Most of us are unprepared to disentangle the emotions of anger, sorrow, shame or remorse that can result. It is common, researchers say, for those who have experienced a moral wound to react with cynicism or bitterness; to distrust authority; to be more prone to anxiety, depression; perhaps to seek comfort in isolation or the self-medication of drugs, alcohol, overwork. Most common, to never talk about war.... The old signposts of morally acceptable behavior, the laws of war, the Geneva Conventions, the just war doctrine, seem increasingly irrelevant in a world of drone killings, the beheading of hostages, and the deliberate

2. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (NY: Atheneum, 1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (NY: Scribner, 2002).

3. *Iliad* 1.148–60, 9.400–409.

4. “Laodamia,” line 164.

massacre of schoolchildren by Islamist extremists. Traditional ideas about “victory” over these groups are obsolete. (9, 12)

Wood goes on to expose such illogical and ethically surreal doctrines as “preemptive warfare” and specious justifications for war like nonexistent Weapons of Mass Destruction, which neither our elected representatives nor we the people denounce. He quotes President Barack Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech (Dec. 2009), in which he asserted that “a non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms.” No suggestion here of the conditions that brought Hitler to power and emboldened him to escalate the use of military force, nor of the long and morally dubious arc of the American imperialism and global economic expansion that inspired al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and made it easy for them to recruit their followers. In short, no thinking outside the box.

It’s unlikely anyone in [Marine Company] Charlie One-Six had heard the president’s endorsement of war as a necessary, lesser evil. Had any of them recalled and repeated aloud the eloquent phrases about “morally justifiable” war in the desperation of their shallow, stony gully on that awful day in early 2010, he might have been greeted with hoots of derisive laughter. (101)

On that awful day, Lance Cpl. Joey Schiano, a seasoned combat veteran on his second deployment, fired a shoulder-launched assault weapon at Taliban gunmen inside a building. Unbeknownst to Schiano, the Taliban were using human shields, and his rocket killed women and children. His fellow Marine Chuck Newton remarked, “They didn’t outgun us or kill any of our guys, but they won the day by baiting us into killing civilians” (103).

Wood tracks Marine infantryman Nikki Rudolph throughout his narrative. During a long, exhausting firefight with Taliban insurgents, Nik “saw from the corner of his eye someone darting around the corner of an adobe wall spraying bullets from an assault rifle.” He instinctively swiveled his M4 carbine, tightened his finger on the trigger, identified his target (a twelve-year-old boy) and shot him dead. The Marines just picked up the boy’s weapon and continued tracking the insurgents. Back home in the United States, Rudolph came to grips with the realization that killing a young boy “violat[e]d the bedrock moral ideals we all hold” (8), despite its having been a “righteous action” in the heat of battle that protected his own life and those of his fellow Marines.

When Wood asked Rudolph some years later whether “moral injuries like killing a child heal over time,” he answered, “No.... It will all be there” (14). After three deployments, during which he experienced six IED blasts and a bullet wound, Nik, back at Camp Lejeune, sank “into a downward spiral” (22). When the Army’s group and individual counseling could not help him heal, he accepted an honorable discharge. He then felt isolated and haunted by the war. He deeply missed the fellow Marines for whom he had risked his life and sometimes seen killed in action. But his unresolved moral injury troubled him most.

In a variation on this theme, Sendio Martz’s Marine unit befriended a young Afghan boy who, it was later learned, set off a sixty-pound IED that killed and maimed many Marines. Wood comments that “Nothing in what the military teaches recruits about behavior in war instructs them to recognize, in the chaos and confusion, ‘what’s right’” (58). Such traumatic experiences destroy soldiers’ trust in others and in their own judgment, even after their service. As Sendio put it, “Even though you’re home you don’t feel at home. You don’t feel safe” (63).

Ironies abound. During the Second World War, seven of ten wounded soldiers survived. In the years since then, “astonishing advances in military trauma medicine” (80) increased that success rate to 93.4 percent in Afghanistan, despite concomitant advances in the lethality and variety of military weaponry. Yet, “[b]y 2011, the army’s medical community had acknowledged an ‘epidemic’ of *psycho-*

logical trauma, with a half-million troops diagnosed with symptoms common to PTSD and moral injury” (80; my emphasis).

As a consequence, the period 2006–2011 saw sobering increases in the use of prescribed opiates and other drugs, violent crimes in the ranks, soldier-on-soldier homicides, domestic violence cases in military families, and attempted, threatened, or actual suicides. In June 2013, the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center determined that diagnosed “adjustment reactions” were causing more psychiatric problems than traumatic amputations or blast injuries. “In short, the military was experiencing moral injury on a scale that was both massive and unrecognized outside a small circle of researchers” (82).

Fortunately, those few researchers together with innovative counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and open-minded chaplains have made headway. One of them, Presbyterian minister Maj. Doug Etter, learned that in the moral landscape of war in western Iraq where he was stationed in 2005, there were, facile bromides notwithstanding, “lots of atheists in the foxholes.” As Wood puts it, “the raw ugliness of violence, the relentless maiming and death of human beings, and the scale of destruction seem to deny the existence of the benevolent God of our childhoods.” Etter drew on his minister’s capacity for compassion to help these men “in a deep nonjudgmental way” (207).

Michael Castellana, a gay therapist, began “winning the trust of Marines” at Camp Pendleton in 2005; he wrote a treatment manual designed to assist in healing moral injuries, and tapped memories of his own horrible traumatic experiences to cultivate the art of “listening with validation, but accepting the weight of the person’s story” (237). Castellana emulated Navy psychiatrist Bill Nash, who “knows what it’s like to watch ... [his patients’] wracking sobs and feel their anger and fear and grief” (117). Both men learned there was “no way to unring that bell” (237). No flimsy excuses. No easy dismissals. No fixing of blame. Validation is key.

Another clinical and research psychologist, Shira Maguen, at the San Francisco VA medical center, focused on the “adverse mental health conditions and related psychosocial functioning related to killing in war” (154). She and other dedicated healers have helped soldiers achieve a measure of acceptance and self-forgiveness by understanding the contexts in which they had to kill. To paraphrase the first lines of the *Iliad*, “Yeah, that was fucked up.”

Read *What Have We Done*. Every single page.