

What Drives Iraq War Veterans to Suicide?

by Carl Osgood

What happens when young people already immersed in the video-game culture of murder and mayhem are inducted into the military and deployed into a real war?

The growing crisis of mental illness and suicide among veterans of the Iraq War is generally being treated as a number of individual cases brought on by traumatic experiences, and the inability, or refusal, of the Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs to appropriately deal with them. (The Army goes so far as to claim that most “personality disorders” are pre-existing conditions, and not at all the result of a soldier being in a combat zone.) But the growing addiction of youth to violent video games suggests another possibility. *EIR* has shown that the development of Internet social networking sites and mass-market homicidal video games is producing an entire generation of zombies, as evidenced by the massacre at Virginia Tech last Spring, and more recently, in Finland.¹

Reports are widespread of high rates of mental illness among veterans of the Iraq War. Some experts estimate that as many as one-third of the 1.5 million service members who have deployed to Iraq will suffer some sort of mental illness.

Veterans with mental illness, including those who are discharged for “misconduct” or “personality disorder” (28,000 soldiers since 2003), are obviously at higher risk of experiencing almost everything that can go wrong in a person’s life. Most often, they end up in the justice system; but suicide is also a great risk, including among veterans who have left the military with honorable discharges and the full range of benefits. There has been anecdotal evidence for some years that suicide was a major problem among veterans of the Iraq War, especially among reservists, but there was no indication of the magnitude of the problem until a CBS News report broadcast on Nov. 14.

CBS was unable to get definitive figures from the Pentagon or the Department of Veterans Affairs, so it turned to the states. The data provided by 45 states documented 6,256 suicides among veterans in 2005 alone, an average of 120 per week. Overall, veterans were twice as likely to commit suicide as non-veterans; those aged 20 to 24—i.e., veterans of

the Iraq and Afghanistan wars—were 2 to 4 times more likely to commit suicide as non-veterans from the same age group. Paul Sullivan, executive director of Veterans for Common Sense, called this an epidemic. Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) added that “we have really failed those who have served our country.”

Younger Vets at Risk

But the results of the CBS research should not have come as a surprise. Earlier data cited in a new report from the University of Michigan School of Public Health, published in the December 2007 *American Journal of Public Health*, shows that the prevalence of significant depressive symptoms among veterans is 31%, which is 2 to 5 times higher than in the general U.S. population. The Michigan study also found that the highest suicide rate was among younger veterans. The study suggests that “mental health professionals treating depressed veterans must be cognizant of these higher risks among younger veterans, who are perhaps particularly suffering from recent combat exposure. . . .” The study found the same result among depressed veterans with a diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder, indicating “that younger veterans may be a particularly high risk group. . . .”

At least one veterans advocate thinks that the CBS numbers may be low. David Pelkey, national director of American Combat Veterans of War, an organization of Vietnam vets that helps Marines at Camp Pendleton, Calif. work through their combat experiences, and himself a highly decorated Vietnam War combat veteran, described, in a Nov. 19 interview, how many young Marines take to the highways at high speed, on their motorcycles, in an effort to recapture the adrenaline rush of combat. He considers this suicidal behavior, even though, if a Marine dies in a motorcycle accident as a result of racing on the highway, it will not be recorded as a suicide. He noted that in one month alone, this year, there were some 40 motorcycle accidents involving Marines at Camp Pendleton. The reaction of the Marine Corps was to bring California State Highway Patrol officials onto the base to lecture Marines about motorcycle safety. “What they need to do is get to the core issue, which is the combat stress issue,” Pelkey said. “That’s what’s pushing the whole thing.”

One crucial difference between today’s generation of veterans and those of the Vietnam War is that, in the 1960s there were no video games. While methods of training soldiers to break down the natural resistance to killing another human being were already in place at the time of Vietnam, today’s young recruit is likely to have already killed hundreds of virtual “bad guys” in video games before he ever picks up a military-issued rifle for the first time. “If you’re continually around killing and destruction and stuff like that, it kind of singses your conscience a little bit,” says Pelkey.

Some might see that as a gross understatement.

1. See Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “From Milken & Enron to Perugia: ‘Extreme Events,’” *EIR*, Nov. 23, 2007; and “Is the Devil in Your Laptop?” *EIR*, Dec. 7, 2007. The two are combined in a LaRouche PAC pamphlet, “Is the Devil in Your Laptop?” Available at www.larouchepac.com.