

FIGHTING A WAR CREATED AT HOME: HOW STEREOTYPES AND STIGMA HINDER AMERICA'S VETERANS

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Identifying the Problem of Stigma & Stereotypes

Nearly a month ago, I was talking with a psychologist about the work the Department of Veterans Affairs is doing to empower veterans on college campuses, and she said: "You know, down at So-and-So University, they hired a veteran to run the veterans' programs there!" She leaned in and said, "And he has PTSD." The way she said it wasn't in the spirit of recognition of the school for realizing the potential of that young man, but was instead in astonishment and shock at the idea of putting a veteran in such a position where he would be exposed to other veterans.

Every day, we talk about the stigma and stereotypes attached to veterans. The problem is, we stop with the words *stereotype* or *stigma* and do not go so far as to break down the various perceptions associated with them. We do not try to search out where these stereotypes come from or how the stigma associated with veterans was created. As a result, we cannot effectively address the problem of veteran stigma because we do not understand it.

Exploring Veteran Stereotypes & Stigma

There is a general perception that veterans are all old or "more experienced" men who wear hats and march in parades – there are, of course, many who fit this description but also many young veterans who never par-

ticipate in these events. There is also the notion that most veterans have been wounded or injured from their experience in combat – there are some who fit this description as well, but they represent a small percentage of those who have served. Finally, there is the belief that all veterans have posttraumatic stress (PTS) or traumatic brain injuries (TBI) – there are a number who fit this description as well, but even for them, such labels do not define who they are as individuals. Although a veteran's military service may have a great impact on his or her life, it does not encompass everything he or she is as a person. Neither the experience in a long-ago war, nor the physical wounds from combat, nor PTS or TBI define a veteran for who he or she is as a person.

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There are, I believe, two major contributing factors to these veteran stereotypes: 1) the way that veterans are portrayed by the press and by non-profit organizations, and 2) the public's resulting emotional response to this depiction of

veterans. As an exercise, think to the last time you saw a positive description of a veteran in the news or in a non-profit organization advertisement. To be honest, with one exception, I can't. However, other veterans and I – who are surrounded by this demographic every day – can attest that successful veterans are exactly who we see, every day. I see veterans at *very* young ages taking on *very* senior roles in the government, business, and non-profit sectors, who are fascinatingly successful.

Fighting Stigma and Stereotypes with Success Stories

Take for example, the story of Rodrigo Garcia. Rodrigo graduated high school on the Southside of Chicago and upon graduation enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. After

three combat deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, Rodrigo married his high school sweetheart and the young couple had a little girl. While building his family, he also graduated with his undergraduate degree and M.B.A. Summa Cum Laude from the University of Illinois-Chicago in under three-and-a-half-years – all while working part time to pay the cost of tuition that the Montgomery G.I. Bill did not cover and while volunteering for Student Veterans of America, for which he now chairs the board. Today, he serves on three additional non-profit boards, has started two companies, and owns four investment properties. Last week Rodrigo was appointed by the Governor of the State of Illinois to be the Assistant Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, where he helps manage over 1,200 employees and a \$120 million budget. At 29 years old Rodrigo may very well be the youngest person in the Department's history to hold that position.

When the country talks about veterans returning from war, Rodrigo is the first name that comes to my mind. Unfortunately, this is not even close to what the average American perceives a veteran to be. This is because the story of a successful veteran is not as good for ratings or fundraising as a veteran who has slipped through every crack in the system and is not able to care for him or herself. This is because the primary thing that Americans see on the news or in non-profit advertisements is veterans with catastrophic disabilities, without showing their incredible talents, abilities, or successes. As result, many Americans perceive the depictions of veterans from television to be representative of all veterans and do not see them as capable, empowered, and brilliant individuals.

A few months ago, I was talking with a friend on the phone who was nearly killed by a roadside bomb attack on his Humvee in Iraq in 2003. We had met a few months earlier and we were talking because he wanted to learn more about how to get involved in helping his brothers and sisters who have served. Throughout our conversations, we discussed the perceptions that people have of veterans and how he didn't like people portraying us as broken or defining him by his injuries alone. At the end of our conversation, he said he had something that might be

coming up but couldn't talk about it. He just said I'd know it if it happened.

Less than a month later I was running on the treadmill while watching *Entertainment Tonight* at my local gym when my friend J.R. Martinez was announced as a contestant on ABC's *Dancing With the Stars*. Upon first glance, someone might see J.R. and his scars and think that he is just another Iraq war veteran with a disability – and thereby place him within a misunderstood stereotype that is so common today. But after watching the show for even one episode, you realize how absolutely incredible J.R. is and you completely forget about his injuries. The other contestants whine, complain, and talk about quitting as they practice their dance routines, but J.R. always maintains a great attitude – that if he hasn't done something right, he'll practice and work hard until it is perfect.

For J.R., quitting is not an option. He wasn't trained to do that. And while he may be a little too busy with his current project to volunteer for a non-profit as he had planned, he may very well be doing far greater a service to all veterans by representing us so well on prime-time television. He is showing the country what a veteran truly is – a hard-working, determined, smart, and passionate *individual*.

Re-thinking How We Think About Veterans

So, we know there is the problem with stigma. We know that part of the solution is telling the success stories and showing the country, and other veterans, who we are and what we are capable of. But how do we empower veterans in their communities?

I would argue their place for empowerment and involvement is on college campuses in student veteran organizations like Student Veterans of America and in their communities with organizations like the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Veterans, and the Disabled American Veterans. These organizations, and many others like them, collectively own over a billion dollars worth of infrastructure throughout the country and possess decades of experience in supporting each other and the veterans they represent. These organizations are built on the idea of camaraderie, family, and em-

powerment and are looking for veterans of this generation to attend their meetings, take on leadership positions, and help build their organizations for future generations.

The public's misperceptions about veterans will not be easily defeated, but the more stories that America hears about veterans like J.R., Rodrigo, and others like them who are empowered, passionate, and dedicated to making a difference, the more others will follow suit and together tear down the stigma that is currently plaguing us. If we succeed in empowering veterans to use their strengths to help themselves in their community organizations, and if we portray them as a group of capable and determined individuals, we may provide them the honor they have earned.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Derek Blumke is an Air Force veteran who served in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and is the co-founder of Student Veterans of America. He now works at the Department of Veterans Affairs where he is the Director of the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership Initiative, VITAL Initiative.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR) or collaborating agencies and funders.

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