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Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers By Nancy Sherman

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Nancy Sherman's book *Afterwar* makes an important contribution to what it means for a nation to go to war in the twenty-first century. It emphasizes soldiers' struggles to reintegrate into society after returning from war and provides clear messages to multiple audiences in the critical areas of individual and collective responsibility, civil-military relations, and leadership. The book also has important lessons for individual soldiers, the public they serve, and the commanders and supervisors who have the best opportunity—and the greatest responsibility—to ensure the moral wounds associated with warfare are given the opportunity to heal.

Sherman builds on her previous works concerning how the “traditional” stoic ethos the military instills in its personnel prepares them well

for fighting in war, but at the expense of living well in peace. Stoicism's detachment from personal desire and its emphasis on responsibility has bred combatants who willfully accept extreme hardship and who are prepared to hold themselves accountable for events that may be beyond their control. While great for warfighting, these traits can interfere with their ability to handle the moral wounds with which they return.

Sherman describes a marine sergeant who was racked with guilt over the loss of two other marines in Afghanistan and, as a result, developed symptoms associated with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In both cases, the sergeant pointed to an act he could have performed but did not think of at the time. Here Sherman makes an important contribution to understanding moral injury in war. Generally speaking, moral injury occurs in the presence of grievous moral transgressions, whether committed by oneself or others, that "overwhelm one's sense of goodness and humanity." However, the striking thing about war is moral injury can occur even when the transgression is relatively trivial or, as in other cases Sherman describes, when one has done nothing wrong. This point suggests military leaders need to rethink what "command responsibility" means so soldiers can fight effectively without causing needless harm to themselves or those they lead.

Such injuries, Sherman argues, can also be exacerbated by soldiers' sense of justice for the cause for which they fight. Psychologically, it is easier to bear loss when tangible good results. In this regard, Sherman has a message for the public these soldiers nominally defend. In her excellent chapter, "Don't Just Tell Me Thank You," she discusses the gap in civil-military relations that has inexplicably widened even after more than a decade of war. Noting that less than one percent of the US population serves, Sherman aptly describes how well-intentioned expressions of gratitude by many of the 99 percent who do not serve creates resentment. This resentment arises because civilians are largely distanced from the cost of war and, as a result, the ubiquitous "thank you for your service" can seem too cheap to count as sharing any part of the burden. This distance further contributes to confusion among soldiers and civilians alike about why exactly we are at war. If civilians are not invested in the cause, we have only our leaders' words that it is both just and worthwhile. In today's cynical society, that word is often not enough.

Sherman's point is not that civilians should not express gratitude. As members of the public, they share enough responsibility for the war that they owe those who fight more than "thank you," if their sentiment is to be judged genuine. While Sherman offers a number of ways civilians can constructively bear this burden, she boils it down to this: "assurance from civilian and military leaders and, collectively, from a nation, that they (soldiers) are never just forces, never just an asset to be used (or preserved) instrumentally as a part of military necessity in achieving missions (and continuing the fight)." Civilians should be invested enough in the war effort to make their voices heard by electing leaders who will fight the right wars in the right ways, and who are held accountable when they do not.

Sherman also relates stories of women in combat zones who raised concerns to their commanding officers regarding sexual harassment.

Sherman's point is leaders should be especially sensitive where issues closely associated with identity—like sexuality—are involved.

The most important contribution of *Afterwar* is the lesson that the effective transition of soldiers back to society has to begin before the war starts. We need to pay attention to what we teach soldiers about responsibility, civilians about their duties, and leaders about how to build trust and hope in their subordinates to ensure they will be resilient in the face of adversity. While moral injury may be as unavoidable in war as physical injury, we have much to do before we fully realize our responsibilities to address it.