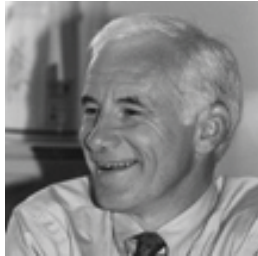


## What it Really Means to Support Our Troops



**By Bobby Muller**

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### In Brief

**“Despite the commonly repeated rhetoric in our country, we are not supporting our troops and their families.”**

- Bobby Muller

The most important lesson the United States should learn from our Iraq experience is this: *U.S. military success is dependent upon the health of our military.*

When our country spends the better part of a trillion dollars per year on “defense,” how is it possible that it takes two months for a soldier who has just come home from Iraq to get an appointment with a mental health professional? How is it possible that our military still re-deploys troops who are suffering from traumatic brain injuries?

Despite the commonly repeated rhetoric in our country, we are not supporting our troops and their families. When our troops agreed to join our military, they did so with the understanding that their honorable service and willingness to sacrifice would be respected. They believed our military leaders who told them that our people are our most important asset. Unfortunately, their trust has been dishonored.

The preventable costs of our war in Iraq are many. Most prominent among them is the incredible rate of psychological trauma experienced by troops who have deployed there, as well as the long-term damage done to their families. Our military has been used in a cavalier manner in Iraq; our military leaders have not lived up to their commitment to lead our forces in an honorable way; our deployment policies have been abusive; the long-term damage – in broken lives and societal ills – will not be fully apparent for years.

Even using the Department of Defense’s inadequate post-combat mental health screening techniques (basically, self reporting), our country is already witnessing rates of combat-related psychological trauma comparable to the highest rates for Vietnam veterans.

According to the Department of Defense's Task Force on Mental Health, which released its final report in June 2007, 49 percent of members of the Guard and Reserve are experiencing post-combat psychological problems, 38 percent of members of the Army, and 31 percent of Marines.

There are numerous reasons we find ourselves in this situation, among them: a large inhospitable battlefield (nothing like the "cakewalk" conditions some predicted); an inadequate number of mental health professionals in theater as well as at the home bases of troops; inadequate training for many of those professionals; multiple deployments of hundreds of thousands of service members, many with inadequate dwell (reset) time; much heavier use of the Guard and Reserves than expected; and the shockingly pervasive problem of stigmatizing mental health injuries within our military, despite efforts of some commanders to counter this.

As this incomplete list makes clear, there are many steps that must be taken to stop compounding the wounds of war of those who are still in our military – as well as those who are willing to join despite six plus years of combat and the considerable likelihood of combat continuing for years more. These problems are so large that they demand a broad-ranging national conversation about how to repair the damage done, as well as how to ensure that we do not put our fighting men and women in an impossibly difficult situation again.

Never again should we wage war without taking steps to prevent long-term damage to such a high percentage of our troops. If we can accomplish this, then we will truly support our troops.

*Bobby Muller is the President of Veterans for America (VFA), an organization devoted to addressing the causes, conduct, and consequences of war. Mr. Muller served as a combat infantry officer in the U.S. Marines from 1968 to 1969. While leading a patrol in Vietnam, he was shot in the chest and paralyzed. Witnessing first-hand the Veterans Administration's inadequate treatment of wounded veterans, he founded the Vietnam Veterans of America in 1978 and later the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (which was renamed the Veterans for America). Mr. Muller led the first delegations of American veterans to Vietnam and Cambodia in the early 1980s. In 1991, he co-founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Since the beginning of our wars Afghanistan and Iraq, Mr. Muller has worked tirelessly to repair the social contract between the American people, the U.S. Government, and the men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. His efforts focus on veterans suffering from the signature wounds of our current wars – post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries – receive the treatment they need.*

#### *What is IRAQ: Lessons Learned?*

Five years into the Iraq war, Americans are left groping for answers. Are we safer? Can America's image be repaired? What are the lasting implications for our Constitution? Historians will spend decades examining this conflict, its causes, its conduct, and its consequences, but those left to grapple with the immediate policy implications must do so without the benefit of the perspective that time can often provide. What lessons should we draw from Iraq today so that we, as a nation, learn from this painful experience? Iraq: Lessons Learned is an initiative to begin answering those questions. The American Security Project asked some of the nation's best minds—military, policy, academic, political, business, religious, media and community—to ponder this question and provide insights from which we can all benefit.