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## The myth and reality of war

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I do not know Sgt. Daniel Cotnoir, 33, of Lawrence, Mass., a man named "Marine of the Year" last month for his service in Iraq. I do not know whether he was disturbed before he went to war. I do not know whether he went to war because it satisfied a thirst for violence or whether he discovered this thirst around him in Iraq. But I do know that he and tens of thousands of other veterans are bringing the war in Iraq home.

Cotnoir fired a shotgun at a crowd of noisy club-goers two weeks ago, slightly wounding two of them. He is now charged with attempted murder. Alexandra Weida, a psychologist who evaluated Cotnoir after the incident, told the Associated Press, "I question whether he was completely reality-based when he made his decision."

War is a plague that can spread outward from the killing fields to tear apart individuals, families, communities and finally nations. The longer the war goes on in Iraq, the deadlier our infection will be. And unlike most of the soldiers and Marines sent to Vietnam, those in Iraq are often traumatized and then shipped back a few months later to be traumatized again.

Of the troops returning from Iraq, 17 percent met the criteria for mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, according to a study published last year by Walter Reed Hospital. Many of these men and women, including those who get pushed back into the cauldron over and over, are facing emotional turmoil and in some cases, for those unable to cope, a death sentence. That is the message Cotnoir and his 12-gauge shotgun gave to us in Lawrence. It is a message we had better start to hear.

There are times when wars have to be fought - to ensure our own survival or halt campaigns of genocide or protect weaker nations that are invaded and occupied by tyrants, such as Kuwait was before the Persian Gulf War. But war always brings with it a host of physical, emotional and social ills.

War, it must be recognized, even for those who support the conflict in Iraq, distorts and damages those sent to fight it. No one walks away from prolonged exposure to such violence unscathed, although not all come back disturbed. Our leaders mask the reality of war with abstract words of honor, duty, glory and the ultimate sacrifice. These words, obscene and empty in the midst of combat, hide the fact that war is venal, brutal, disgusting.

I saw that in the wars I covered over 20 years, from El Salvador to Bosnia and Kosovo. A mounting number of the more than 140,000 soldiers and Marines in Iraq today will come back and confront memories, buried deep within the subconscious, that will jerk them awake at night. They will lie there, hearts pounding, trying to remember what it was that caused such terror. They will stumble through the morning carrying a shock and horror that on the face of it is imaginary, but in reality is part of the awful load of cement-like despair they haul around every hour of every day.

The world will hold minefields of stimulants they will fervently seek to avoid. Smells, sounds, traveling over bridges, the whoosh of a helicopter, will thrust them back to Iraq, back to the darkest regions of their hearts, regions they wish did not exist.

Life, on some days, will be a simple battle to stay upright, to cope with memories and traumas that are unexplainable, probably unimaginable, to those seated across from them at the breakfast table. Families will watch these veterans fall silent, see the thousand-yard stare, know they have again lost these men and women.

When those veterans return from this vast underworld, they will pick up and go on. If it becomes too much, they will take Zolof or Paxil. If they cannot cope, maybe after years of anguish they will blow their brains out with drugs, alcohol or a gun. War does this to you. It destroys part of you. You live maimed. If you are not able to live maimed, you check out.

Modern industrial warfare, with its powerful weapons, speed and range, creates a reality that can shatter the lines between sanity and madness. It creates a world where the moral order is turned upside down. The normal impulses to preserve and conserve life are replaced with destructive urges to destroy life.

The landscapes are almost hallucinogenic; fighters confront visions of carnage and suffering and destruction that are

horrible, yet also deeply alluring and intoxicating. The noise is deafening. The fear and stench thrust combatants into a world unlike any they have experienced. The thrill of violence and the God-like power to take a life appeals to the darkest currents that run inside all of us.

In short, war redefines our moral universe. Killing and glory become synonymous. This corruption is so profound that it cannot be washed away with a flight home. For many, war creates a new way of being.

Here, at home, behind the empty chatter and bombast of patriotic talk, there is a yawning indifference among many about what is really happening in Iraq. The hollow language of abstractions and cliches, used by the war makers and often aped by those in the media, allows much of the nation to feel good about war.

But it is also a way of muzzling the voices of those returning from Iraq if they attempt to tell us the truth about war. And when these men and women do find the moral courage to speak, they often find that many turn away in disgust or attack them for shattering the bubble. The myth of war - that we are righteous and our nation is always good - is too enjoyable, and too profitable, to be easily punctured by reality.

When the noisy club-goers woke up Cotnoir and his family, I suspect he was as dead to their humanity as he probably was to the humanity of most Iraqis. Now he is being vilified. But it is we who are guilty, guilty for sending him and tens of thousands of others to a war that did not have to be fought, guilty for turning away from the truth of war to wallow in myth, guilty because we create killers, and when they come home maimed and broken, we condemn them.

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*Chris Hedges is the author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning" and "What Every Person Should Know About War," which includes an exploration of post-traumatic stress disorder.*