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The Friends Asylum and Civil War Era Notions of Post Traumatic Stress

The post-WWII era in America marked the beginning of the behemoth of the American military as the defensive arm of a major world power. After coming to the aid of the Allied Forces in 1941 and helping to end the war in 1945—while incurring comparatively few human losses and avoiding combat altogether on the US mainland—America emerged as a world superpower. The victory marked a shift from the perceived pointlessness and disappointment of America's involvement in WWI, and would juxtapose the failure of the Vietnam War three decades later.[1]

The failure of WWI and Vietnam warrants their depictions in film and literature as absurd, and allows the exploration of mental wounds incurred by soldiers as a further critique of these wars. But, in the case of WWII and, especially, the Civil War—wars which both exist in the popular consciousness as necessary wars (necessary to end fascism and nazism, and to end slavery)—representations focus more on the glory of war. This focus on glory dominates popular portrayals of the Civil War, thus making authors and scholars less inclined to highlight instances of symptoms akin to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Civil War veterans. They either fear questioning the validity of the Civil War, or do not even consider that such reactions existed among Civil War soldiers. Indeed, according to Brian Bradshaw, "[o]ne group of historians believe that PTSD is timeless, and another group of historians argue that PTSD is a social construct" which acts as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy: the medical community claims that PTSD exists, which then prompts people to appear claiming that they have PTSD.[2] I will argue

[1] Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II*, Second edition., The American Moment. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).
[2] Brian S Bradshaw, "'Peace Had Its Defeats,'" 73.

that PTSD is indeed timeless, that soldiers returning home from the Civil War, while they were not "allowed" to feel and discuss psychological trauma the way Vietnam Veterans were, they suffered similarly.

Denying that Civil War veterans could have experienced PTSD in a similar way to Vietnam veterans completely ignores facts which support the opposite conclusion. We must remember that the Civil War remains the bloodiest war in American history. More than ten times as many Americans died in the Civil War than in the Vietnam War (620,000 compared to 58,000). Furthermore, these figures do not account for the differences in overall populations at the time, which makes the death toll of the Civil War even more astounding. Considering the sheer number of dead in the aftermath of the Civil War, it is hard to imagine that there were not widespread cases of survivors suffering from trauma. Soldiers in the Civil War witnessed slaughter on a scale unprecedented in American history, and were faced with awful conditions off the battlefield that often proved more deadly than combat itself.[3] In addition, many soldiers found themselves fighting alongside family members and friends from their hometowns, and witnessing the death of their comrades could prove profoundly traumatic.

Contrastly, during and after the Vietnam War, publicized atrocities carried out by the US military, and the existence of various counterculture movements, created an environment which warranted criticism of the US government as architects of the Vietnam War. Amid this anti-war social climate, soldiers became doubly victimized: they were forced to carry out the evil orders of the US military, and were further betrayed when they returned home to unappreciative civilians angry about the war.[4] PTSD then emerged as a legitimate and defined medical condition to explain the reaction of Vietnam Veterans to this victimization, and to the horror of war in

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[3] Eric T. Dean, *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 47–54.
[4] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 7–8.

general. Yet, as Eric Dean argues, in the decades after Vietnam, the suffering endured by the Vietnam Veteran took on mythological proportions. Years after the end of the war, cities held parades welcoming home "Viet Vets," each one claiming to do so for the first time; news outlets invented statistics of mass unemployment and astronomical suicide rates for Vietnam Veterans; and PTSD emerged as a catch-all term to describe symptoms following any traumatic event, not just war.[5] Thus, the Vietnam and Civil Wars can be thought of as exemplifying two extremes: the overcompensation of Vietnam in the creation of PTSD culture, and the almost total denial of post-combat psychological wounds during the Civil War era in historical literature.

While common conceptions of the Civil War omit the mental suffering incurred by soldiers during and after the war, there did exist a notion of psychological trauma at the time. Contemporaries debated the question of whether Civil War Veterans should receive pensions upon being discharged for reasons other than physical wounds. The acknowledgement that soldiers could be discharged under the pretenses of something other than a physical wound (or poor behavior) itself implied the existence of something akin to PTSD—a mental condition that made it impossible for soldiers to continue their service. Then President of the US Sanitary Commission in 1862 said, "'The right to a pension should not rest exclusively on *visible wounds*. *Broken constitutions* or impaired vigor, traceable unmistakably to military service should entitle [veterans] to a pension.'"[6] Early on there existed a notion that wounds could be invisible, and that those suffering from invisible or mental wounds should receive care just as one would receive medical care for a broken arm or amputated limb.

The existence of these conceptions of psychological trauma at the time confirm Miller Somerville's claim that "'historians have pinpointed WWI as the watershed of military

[5] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 17–18, 23–25.
[6] Brian S Bradshaw, "'Peace Had Its Defeats': Researching Civil War Veterans, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Insanity," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1998)* 113, no. 3–4 (2020): 67–93, 69.

psychological casualties, and in doing so have given short shrift to nineteenth-century soldiers, minimizing or even ignoring their psychological suffering.'"[7] Indeed, WWI marked the beginning of an era in which psychological wounds were not only recognized, but treated in rehabilitation facilities near the front or far away from battle as in the case of the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh.[8] But, this recognition did not necessarily imply a prior nonexistence of psychological wounds. In the 50 years that elapsed between the Civil War and WWI, the field of medicine made advances which allowed psychologists to have the proper tools and terminology to—albeit rudimentarily—diagnose and treat psychological trauma.[9]

In order to see the reality of PTSD-like symptoms among Civil War Veterans, we must look at the patients of mental hospitals—then known as insane asylums—at the time. Eric Dean focuses his research on patients of the Indiana State Mental Asylum, where there existed many patients suffering from mental wounds of the Civil War. A more unlikely site of evidence of people suffering from PTSD-like symptoms was in Philadelphia, at the Friends Hospital for the Insane. The Friends Hospital was a Quaker-run institution, and located in the Quaker-dense Philadelphia area. Because of its Quaker, anti-war roots, the Hospital admitted few if any soldiers as patients, though by the time of the Civil War, the Friends Hospital had begun admitting non-Quakers.[10] However, in pioneering a form of treatment called "Moral Treatment," the Quaker Hospital took an approach to curing mental wounds which supported the notion of mental wounds being traceable to specific, sometimes traumatic, events or physical conditions.[11]

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[7] Brian S Bradshaw, "'Peace Had Its Defeats,'" 72.
[8] Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (Great Britain: Plume, 1991). Though a partly fictionalized account, *Regeneration* includes much factual information on the Craiglockhart War Hospital and its director, Dr. W.H.R. Rivers. At the hospital, Rivers treated "shell-shocked" British soldiers and studied the psychological effects of war experience.
[9] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 43.
[10] Carol Benenson Perloff, *The Asylum: The History of Friends Hospital and the Quaker Contribution to Psychiatry* (Philadelphia: Friends Hospital, 1994).
[11] Perloff, *The Asylum*.

We must not discount the possibility that some of the young male patients at the Friends Asylum during the Civil War era were veterans suffering PTSD-like symptoms. Though we cannot certainly say that this was the case, the Hospital records do not provide enough information to conclude otherwise, either. One such possible case was 24 year old William Stabler of Maryland. Stabler was admitted to the Friends Asylum with mania on June 8, 1861, and was readmitted three more times over the next 11 years. Upon his first readmittance, the Hospital listed the cause of his mania as "excitement about war."[12] Again, the Friends Hospital records do not supply further information about the nature of Stabler's struggle with mania. Yet, the fact that the Hospital doctors listed "war" as a cause of his mental illness suggests that they recognized that war experience—or, at the very least, living through wartime—could cause lasting psychological distress. Perhaps like Stabler, many Quakers felt conflicted over their abhorrence towards slavery and their anti-war stance. A few Quakers felt that the Civil War's aim to end slavery blurred the line between abolition and peace, and chose to fight in the war.[13,14] While the number of enlisted Quakers in the Union Army was low, Quakers publicly expressed their support for President Abraham Lincoln and his war efforts. In a show of this support, students and faculty at Haverford College in Pennsylvania participated in a flag raising ceremony on May 1, 1861 in support of the Union Army. The ceremony concluded with "three times three [cheers] for the Union" army because of its abolitionist goals.[15]

An accurate portrayal of Civil War life free of romanticization will allow us to recognize the horrific reality of wartime as capable of causing lasting psychological trauma. By comparing

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[12] "Friends Hospital Admission Book Version 1, 1817–1885," 2022.
[13] Anthony Gigantino, "The Philadelphia Quakers in the Civil War," *The Histories* 4, no. 2 (March 18, 2019), https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol4/iss2/4, 24. Gigantino puts the exact number at 143, though other sources list a different figure, or say that it is impossible to list an exact number.
[14] Edward Needles Wright, "Conscientious Objectors in the Civil War" (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania press, 1931), 188. Wright concludes through his research on Quaker service in the Civil War that "there were a considerable number of Friends who engaged in military service."
[15] "A QUAKER COLLEGE ON THE WAR.," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1861, sec. Archives.

these scenes with conditions often found on the battlefields of WWI and the Vietnam War, we might conclude that Civil War soldiers suffered from "shell shock" or PTSD.

A common misconception of the Civil War is that the Victorian-era conflict was a "gentlemanly" war.[16] Dean describes how on the battlefield, "frenzy drove and impelled soldiers to commit acts of violence and cruelty towards their fellow men," which included men who were bayoneted, or who had "'their brains dashed out with the butt of a musket.'"[17] One can easily imagine how these grotesque and chaotic scenes mirrored those in WWI and Vietnam, where often the men killed could not see their assassins through either thick smoke or jungle foliage. Thus, the same feelings of helplessness which sometimes spurned shell shock or PTSD could have similarly affected Civil War Veterans. Part of the mythology of the Vietnam war which makes it so detested among Americans and understood as a catalyst for PTSD is its identification with the unspeakable atrocities committed by American troops on Vietnamese civilians. To be sure, the massacres of Vietnamese civilians by American artillery and chemical weapons did occur and merit outrage. Sometimes forgotten, however, is that American troops also carried out similar war crimes—considering the weapons at their disposal—during the Civil War.

Dean outlines several of these instances of acts of evil committed by Rebel and Union troops which surely weighed heavily on the consciences of some of those involved. In August of 1863, a group of Rebel soldiers under the command of William C. Quantrill fired upon well over 100 Union men and boys, killing 150 in cold blood. Common, too during the Civil War were guerilla warfare tactics characteristic of the Vietnam War 100 years later. Rebel guerillas known as "bushwackers" often picked off unsuspecting Union Men behind enemy lines in what were normally non-combat zones. The slave-holding rebel guerillas also "would single out and murder

[16] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 58.
[17] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 58–59.

African-American soldiers or shoot and kill Union troops out foraging."[18] The use of these guerilla tactics meant that Union soldiers were in a constant state of fear as the old "gentlemanly" rules of war no longer applied. African American soldiers in particular had to fear attacks because their Union allegiance and their race doubly offended Rebel bushwackers.

Union troops also committed barbarous acts off of the battlefield, sometimes in retaliation for Rebel guerilla attacks. The Union Army often destroyed civilian property used to harbor guerillas or even property in the vicinity of fallen Union soldiers. Union troops would torch entire groups of houses in Southern states, forcing their civilian inhabitants to flee. As Dean notes, such destruction traumatized civilians in the South who saw their homes destroyed, and added non-combatants to the list of those directly affected by the war.[19] During the Vietnam era, news media allowed Americans at home to witness in part the monstrosity of war, and thereby experience trauma or PTSD themselves merely by living through wartime. As with Vietnam, the horror of the Civil War had the ability to permeate beyond just the soldiers who engaged in combat, and perhaps did so to an even greater degree as a result of the Civil War taking place on American soil. We see this particularly in the case of the women nurses who cared daily for horribly wounded soldiers and often witnessed men succumb to these wounds. As Dean points out, American nurses in Vietnam suffered from PTSD as a result of their experiences tending to the severely wounded bodies of soldiers.[20] WWI also served as a watershed for literature on the traumatic experiences of women nurses in war, as well as the trauma of losing loved ones to the front lines.[21] The stories of nurses in WWI and American

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[18] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 60.
[19] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 61–62.
[20] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 78.
[21] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980). Brittain's memoir offers a perspective into her experience as a British Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, or VAD, during WWI. She details the trauma inherent to being a nurse, and suffers through the loss of her lover Roland and brother Edward to the war.

nurses in Vietnam help to shed light on the immense psychological toll the Civil War took on women nurses.

Another well-documented characteristic of warfare during the Civil War was the widespread practice of illegal executions. Confederates who captured African-Americans sometimes executed them on the spot. In retaliation for this and other Confederate atrocities such as the 1863 massacre of 150 Union men and boys, Union soldiers in some instances viciously killed captured Confederates thought to have engaged in these crimes. Dean's research proves that these brutish acts had a psychological effect on those who carried them out. Union executioner John Cundiff suffered bouts of insanity after the war because he feared that the friends or family members of the men he executed would hunt him down.[22] Apart from the execution of prisoners of war, there existed ritual executions of army deserters, a practice Dean highlights as "completely unthinkable" in the Vietnam era. Hundreds of deserters met the similar fate of being "shot to death by the military, and these executions were staged in ceremonies calculated to terrify the men remaining in the ranks."[23] Union and Confederate soldiers alike watched these exhibitions with utter revulsion, even thinking the sight to be worse than witnessing bloodshed on the battlefield. This pattern of executions, committed by both armies against prisoners of war and their own soldiers, contributed to creating a continuous atmosphere of fear for Civil War soldiers. Soldiers had to be wary of surprise attacks from the enemy, and paradoxically faced death by execution if they tried to escape possible death on the battlefield. This constant state of anxiety surely took a psychological toll on Civil War soldiers by conditioning them to always remain on alert for threats—a state of mind not suitable for civilian life after the war.

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[22] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 59, 61.
[23] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 68.

Those prisoners of war who escaped immediate execution faced abhorrent conditions in POW camps created starting in 1864. Dean describes the squalor in the camps in terms which liken them to the notorious POW camps in Japan during WWII and the forced labor camps of the Soviet Union. Many soldiers in the camps did not have to wait until after the war to experience PTSD-like symptoms as they would become insane while still imprisoned. Being a prisoner of war also added to feelings of helplessness and lack of control over one's fate as the Union and Confederate governments sometimes used POWs as bargaining chips to achieve political objectives.[24]

As Dean outlines, the reality of the Civil War as an "ungentlemanly," chaotic, gruesome, and lawless war primed Civil War veterans to experience PTSD-like symptoms in the months and years that followed their service. Dean asserts unequivocally that Civil War veterans did suffer from PTSD-like symptoms, and points to several cases of Civil War veterans in the Indiana State Mental Asylum. Yet, the question that remains not quite answered is whether doctors at the time recognized this suffering and linked it to a soldier's war experiences. The Friends Hospital admission book provides records which show that doctors at the time did indeed acknowledge a connection between physically or psychologically traumatic experiences and lasting psychological harm.

We briefly explored earlier the case of William Stabler, a man from Maryland who was first admitted to the Friends Asylum in 1861 at the age of 24 with mania. The Asylum listed the cause of his illness as "disappointment," and later labeled it a result of "excitement about war" when Stabler was readmitted in 1865. He was readmitted twice more in 1867 and 1872 with mania, though the Asylum listed no cause. In addition to Stabler, Edward Sharpless of Philadelphia (31) was admitted in 1862 with melancholia caused by anxiety, and was readmitted

[24] Dean, *Shook over Hell*, 82–84.

in 1869 again with melancholia, though caused by "remorse;" the Asylum admitted Thomas Hamilton (23) of New Jersey in 1863 with mania caused by "hardship and exposure;" James Hough of New York was admitted in 1863 with mania caused by "fever;" Philadelphian John Hartman (34) was admitted twice in 1867 with mania caused by paralysis; David B. Cotant of Pennsylvania (39) was also admitted with mania caused by paralysis in 1867; Amos Shoemaker (34), also of Pennsylvania, was admitted in 1868 with melancholia caused by "venereal excess;" in 1868 the Asylum admitted William Hedges (33) of Pennsylvania with melancholia caused by "self abuse;" James Murphy (22) was admitted in 1871 with mania caused by Typhoid Fever; Jacob Teas (45) was admitted twice in 1875 and 1876 with melancholia caused also by Typhoid Fever.[25]

Although the Hospital records do not not provide further details on each of these cases, they provide clues crucial to understanding medical thought during the Civil War era. Doctors saw "hardship and exposure"—something every soldier experienced living outside among the elements and through the heat and cold—as capable of causing "mania," or insanity in a patient. Civil War veterans suffered from a myriad of physical ailments such as general sickness or "fever," venereal disease, paralysis, and Typhoid Fever. Hospital records show that doctors pinpointed these physical conditions as causes for psychological distress. Notable, too, in the context of the many documented cases of self harm, attempted suicide, and death by suicide carried out by Vietnam veterans is the case of Hadges, who engaged in "self abuse." These records prove that Friends Asylum doctors saw physical or mental states which were common to Civil War soldiers as capable of causing insanity or "melancholia"—what we might call today depression. Using the terminology available to them, Friends Hospital doctors showed that they understood a cause and effect relationship between some sort of intense incident, trauma, or

[25] "Friends Hospital Admission Book Version 1, 1817–1885."

mental or physical state and continuous physiological damage that warranted being admitted to the Asylum. The absence of terms such as “weakness of the mind” or “poor moral character” to characterize the cause of a patient’s illness also imply that doctors believed that outside forces played a part in a patient's mental health, that their suffering was not merely the result of a lack of mental fortitude.

Doctors at the Friends Asylum took an uncommon approach to mental illness during the Civil War era in which they encouraged healing, not punishment, to cure psychological breakdown. While Dean’s research on the Civil War’s traumatic nature serves to show that Civil War Veterans experienced psychological distress in a similar way to sufferers of PTSD in the 1960s and 70s, the Friends Hospital records indicate that at least some doctors saw a connection between trauma and mental illness. These records thus challenge the notion that PTSD is a recent invention. Historians such as Dean can retroactively diagnose Civil War Veterans with something akin to PTSD by looking at their diaries and letters, but we can also say that doctors at the time were diagnosing mental illnesses caused by trauma, though, again, with limited terminology. Perhaps those historians mentioned earlier who see PTSD as “a social construct” are correct in saying that defining PTSD prompts an influx of cases of people who were supposedly not ill before. This does not mean, however, that those same people were not previously suffering, just that they had no “legitimate” or medicalized way to explain their illness. Indeed, the patients at the Friends Asylum during the Civil War era account for a small fraction of people suffering from trauma at the time. Many traumatized veterans, if they were institutionalized, likely ended up locked away in insane asylums poorly equipped to deal with mental illnesses. Over time, advances in mental health studies shed light on the many veterans suffering from “shell shock” and later PTSD. Yes, cases of mental illness increased, though not because the “invention” of

PTSD had somehow spawned traumatized people, but because doctors finally recognized the suffering caused by the traumatic nature of war.

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