
Social Burdens, Individual Men: The Draft, Drug Use, and PTSD in The Things They Carried

Watching friends die, being shot at, and dealing with the fact that death is looming around every is a reality for soldiers regardless of what side they are fighting on. Vietnam was an extremely controversial war, and much of the nation was opposed to the United States getting involved in the first place. Many veterans of the Vietnam war suffer from PTSD because of how brutal the war was, and since many people fighting in it were drafted into it. In "The Things They Carried" written by Tim O'Brien readers are given insight into the lives of soldiers fighting in the Vietnam war. Many of the characters from "The Things They Carried" struggled to come to grips with the reality they were in, instead imagined fantasy scenarios, such as the companies Lieutenant Jimmy Cross who is constantly fantasizing about a girl named Martha back home. Jimmy Cross's infatuation with Martha causes him to neglect his men and as a result while walking back to camp Ted Lavender is shot and killed instantly, some of his fellow soldiers watch this unfold (O'Brien 482-495). Knowing what these soldiers are thinking about, or even what they carry with them physically like drugs to maintain an addiction or something mental like a distrust of white men shows a great deal about their character and how war has affected them. Learning about how much of an effect the war has on these people raises a question, does being drafted into a war negatively affect a person's mental health? Being drafted into a war negatively affects a person's mental health by, causing distrust in authority, increasing the chance of committing suicide even after the war, increasing the likelihood of PTSD, and encouraging low soldier morale. This argument helps the audience to understand "The Things They Carried".

Since Vietnam was such a controversial war many Americans didn't agree with in the first place, many whom were picked to go resisted it. Many students held strikes to protest the war and questioned why American involvement in it was even a smart decision, "It was during this period that the President announced plans for expanding the war into Cambodia. This announcement sparked student protests, and the Kent State and Jackson State killings added fuel to what had quickly become a nation-wide student strike," (Longino). At these protests against the government, people publicly burned their draft cards, and draft registrations, although this didn't change anything or keep them from going to war it was a politically statement and a plea for help. Men who could prove they were full time students were exempt from the war, but in 1971 this was changed, they could still be drafted but couldn't deploy until their semester was ended. With these new laws passed protests were at an all-time high as people drafted could potentially lose out on their higher education and their lives as it was known Vietnam had a high mortality rate. "Those who drew low numbers, making them more

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vulnerable to the draft, came to favor dovish positions more often and remained less stable in their position on the war than those who drew high numbers,” (Longino). Those who were drafted into the war were more likely to have their opinions about the US government changed, and take up resistance against the war. Those drafted didn’t trust their government anyone as they felt betrayed. Mentally this can be detrimental knowing you going to have to put your entire life on hold whether you’re in college or not to possible lose your life in a war for a government you may not even trust in affects soldier’s mental health negatively.

In “The Things They Carried” distrust in the government is something that is very present. Since many of the soldiers who fought in the war did so because they were drafted into it this is no surprise. In the company, it is known that Kiowa carries a distrust for the predominantly white U.S government, “As a hedge against bad times, however, Kiowa also carried his grandmother’s distrust of the white man, his grandfather’s old hunting hatchet. Necessity dictated, (483 O’Brien). Many people alike Kiowa began to show distrust in the U.S government and being forced to fight for an authoritative figure that one believes Isn’t looking out for the people’s best interest is extremely detrimental. Once a soldier went to Vietnam and saw the fighting conditions and the enemy they were fighting it solidified their distrust in the government even more so and losing faith in authority will make soldier who are forced to fight want to get out even more so and these on edge feelings can even put other around them at risk by not fulling complying with commanding officer’s orders. This shows the audience how losing trust in authority can have negative effects on a soldier’s mental health.

When soldiers return home from war even years after they can still be plagued by long term issues that developed because of the war. Being drafted and forced to fight also has many long term negative effects on a person’s mental health as well. Even after the war veterans returning home from Vietnam were more likely to commit suicide and had higher mortality rates than the average citizen. “Research on the effects of Vietnam military service suggests that Vietnam veterans experienced significantly higher mortality than the civilian population at large,” (Heerwig, Conley). These suicidal thoughts, because of things like PTSD and survivors guilt usually stay with these veterans throughout the course of their lives and tears down their mental state. Many are unable to return to civilian life and get a job and gradually lose their sanity because of the atrocities they witness in war after they were drafted. Even after time went on the general attitude towards being drafted into fighting in Vietnam stayed constant, “However, an exception is with the central variable itself- Vietnam attitude. Here, we use responses to the ‘mistake’ question because that was asked in each post lottery wave. The lottery effect on responses to the question about Vietnam being a mistake,” (Erikson, Stoker). Even after decades lottery the negative attitude towards the war is still prevalent in those who survived the war, these men forced to fight in a war they didn’t agree with still feel like it was a mistake to go there and are burdened with regret. This is another negative affect of being drafted and forced to fight in a war someone may have not been prepared for.

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Death is something that everyone has seen on television or in an action-packed movie. Soldiers quickly realize that Hollywood's glamorized portrayal of death is something completely fabricated and not an accurate representation. Watching a person die in real time haunts those who witness it for the rest of their lives long after they return from war. "They all carried ghosts," (O'Brien 486). Carrying "ghosts" is figurative for carrying the horrible things like watching friends die for the rest of their lives, like for example when Kiowa saw Ted get shot in the head, situations like this stay with these soldiers for the rest of their lives and are what bear down on them, and cause them to be more likely to try to commit suicide. Those drafted for the war and less prepared to witness this are even more so traumatized by it and reflect on the deaths of friends for the rest of their lives regretting the mistake of even going there in the first place. To avoid this mental strain it was common for some men to even self-inflict wounds on themselves, "By and large they carried these things inside, maintaining the mask of composure. They sneered at sick call. They spoke bitterly about guys who had found release by shooting off their own toes or fingers. Pussies, they'd say" (O'Brien). This immense mental strain is a huge burden and the increased likelihood for a person to take their own life is more evidence of how being forced to fight in war can affect a soldier's mental health negatively. After being drafted and being forced to fight in a dangerous war doesn't just stop affecting a person the second they get shipped back home. Witnessing all these atrocities causes a person to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, "PTSD develops from the experience of an overwhelming or traumatic event. Traumatic events that may cause PTSD are generally life-threatening events such as natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, floods), violent personal attacks (physical and sexual abuse, kidnapping, rape, violent crime), terrorist incidents (September 11), military combat, or accidents (plane, train, motor vehicle accidents)," (Shiromoto, Ronald). Traumatic events are a part of war and people drafted into it cannot do anything to avoid them. PTSD is especially common in Vietnam Veterans, "The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study in the 1980s, for instance, found that the lifetime incidence rate for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a disorder with symptoms that may persist up to 40 years after service, was over 30% in male Vietnam veterans," (Heerwig, Conley). For the rest of a person's life they can be haunted by the thoughts of dying friends, killing other people who may be forced to fight for their nation, and watching family mourn for fallen family members sticks with these people forever. PTSD while treatable isn't like a normal illness that can be treated and forgotten about, years of therapy can help but whether it can be cured or simply come to terms with is subjective. PTSD is another factor that negatively affects a drafted soldier's mental health. There are many traumatic events for a lot of O'Brien's characters and is where they become traumatized. Watching other people die is usually a big cause so the men try to label death as something else "They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they say. *Offed*, *Lit up*, *zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When

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someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and the destroy the reality of death itself," (O'Brien 492). This is a way the soldier's cope with death and try to make it lessen its impact on them. Unfortunately, sometimes death is not of an enemy they greased and justify with kill or be killed sometimes they're fellow service men are killed. This is seen when Lt Jimmy Cross is hearing the details of Ted's death "Kiowa explained how Lavender died, Lieutenant Cross found himself trembling. He tried not to cry. With his entrenching tool, which weighed five pounds, he began digging a hole in the earth. He felt shame. He hated himself. He loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was dead, and this was something he would have to carry in his stomach like a stone for the rest of the war," (O'Brien 490). As a result of fantasizing about Martha Lt. Cross feels he is to blame for the death of Ted and will carry the shame of letting a member of his company forever. When Cross found was thinking about it he was physically trembling and blaming himself, this is how PTSD negatively affects the mental health of a drafted soldier.

Low soldier moral doesn't seem like something horrible but it indeed is detrimental to a soldier's mental health. Since mostly young people were drafted they mostly opposed the war and after drafted were more likely to have lower overall moral. "Given our self-interest mechanism, those with the most at stake should respond the most strongly. Those who are most likely to be drafted—young people—should be especially opposed to a draft war," (Horowitz, Levensky 526). Drafting from the younger demographic opposed to the war cause the low moral epidemic, people who didn't want to fight in Vietnam fought like people who didn't want to fight in Vietnam. Some even went so far to flee the country or be imprisoned in order to avoid being drafted into the military, "They could elect to go to jail for up to five years. Some men entered the military, but later regretted it and chose to desert. Some men were unable to find deferments or could not face jail. Both of these groups were forced to go into exile and went into hiding all over the world, including underground in the United States. Canada and Sweden were the best places to go in order to avoid risk of arrest or extradition for violation of Selective Service or military laws," (Maxwell). The extent of what many drafted men were willing to do to get out of the war proves how much it lower their moral and deteriorated their mental health.

Drafted men who followed through with their military service did so to avoid the judgement of others. They feared being ridiculed for avoiding military service so had to follow through." They died so as not to die of embarrassment. They crawled into tunnels and wailed point and advanced under fire. Each morning, despite the unknowns they made their legs move. They endured." (O'Brien 492-493). With low morale and scared of ridicule the men endured the pain and suffering. The constant fear of showing others you were fearful devastated soldier moral since they didn't want to be label cowards. Even tasks the men carried out were depressing, "They moved like mules. By the daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it

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was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march,”(O’Brien 489). The endless march is what can drive a person with already low moral mad, constant fear of death, watching friends die, and never really gaining ground is physiologically detrimental. Therefore, low moral can negatively affect a soldier's mental health.

War is not for everyone some people are physically and mentally prepared for what may be thrown at them. Generally, people forced into it may not be as ready for it as those who volunteered. Drafting soldiers into the war has negatively affects their mental health by causing distrust in authority, increasing the likelihood of committing suicide, increasing the chance of developing PTSD, and causing low soldier's moral. Knowing these points help the audience to understand the actions of O'Brien's characters like why Kiowa carries distrust in the white man, or that Jimmy Cross is developing PTSD as a result of blaming himself for Ted Lavender's death. Although “The Things They Carried” isn't non fiction and the characters are made up, they represent real things that Tim O'Brien experienced in the war and carry a power message showing how the war affects those involved. Drafting people into a war should be something done as a last resort since it can be even more detrimental to those drafted, and soldiers with low moral may be doing more harm than good.

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