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Hero, Victim or Villain? The Public Image of the British Soldier and its Implications for Defense Policy

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INTRODUCTION

The image of the soldier in British popular culture has traditionally fluctuated between three stereotypes: the hero; the victim; and the villain. Throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these superficial and contradictory images co-existed in popular culture with the greater emphasis being placed on the soldier's heroism or depravity. Yet while the heroic image of the soldier is still a dominant stereotype today, the portrayal of the soldier as a victim has also become increasingly prevalent.²

This article aims to examine the persistence of the three stereotypes in contemporary British culture, assessing the extent to which the victim image is challenging or modifying that of the hero and the villain. It will argue that long-term changes to British social attitudes have influenced the way in which the soldier is represented. The increasing celebration of victimhood within British society and public disquiet over the use of force, coupled with the nature and objectives of conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, have ensured that the soldier is easily pigeonholed as a victim of poor strategy and underfunding of the Armed Forces. Ultimately, the rise of this "victim" image could impact on the Army's recruitment and retention, duty of care issues and the long-term public view on the future size and legitimacy of the Army itself. All these issues have serious implications for the formulation and execution of defense policy under the current coalition government and beyond.

THE SOLDIER AS HERO

Heroism has long been the province of the military. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century the violent actions of the warrior were celebrated through novels, comics, toys,

and games, promoting war as a legitimate and exciting as well as a selfless activity. Writing in 2000, Michael Paris claimed that, although heroic images were not drawn from Britain's contentious wars of decolonization, the "image of the warrior" remained "the most powerful heroic icon for boys and men."³ He certainly has a point. A poll undertaken for the British Army in March 2008 claimed that nine out of ten people thought that soldiers were heroes, compared with 58 percent of respondents who saw civilian public sector workers as heroes and 34 percent who attributed this quality to journalists.⁴

Moreover, there are hundreds of videos posted on YouTube, some officially inspired, some originating from the soldiers themselves, and some compiled by ordinary civilians, which have the celebration of the soldier's heroism at their heart. These types of videos, alongside television documentaries such as Ross Kemp's series following military units in Afghanistan, emphasize the heroic activities of those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, with an emphasis on action and engagement with insurgents.⁵ The term "hero", it seems, remains firmly attached to the British Army in the twenty-first century.

While the term "hero" continues to be used by a range of British media, an analysis of the portrayal of soldiers in the national press suggests that the heroic image of the soldier may be undergoing modification. In the last year alone, there were 238 articles that contained the words "soldier" and "hero" in the title. These articles could be divided into two key types: a traditional portrayal of the heroism of those who risked their lives to save others, and a less traditional depiction of heroes who were killed on active duty. There were few stories about military skill or the heroism involved in killing the enemy which were so prevalent in newspapers from an earlier age.⁶

The first, more traditional set of articles, refers to "heroes" who had saved others at great risk to themselves. These often featured medal winners who had performed acts of supreme bravery. Captain Wayne Owers who won the Queen's Gallantry Medal for his prolific bomb disposal work, which had allowed the success of many operations and saved innumerable lives, is one such example.⁷ This portrayal of heroism fits neatly with Joan Harvey's definition of the term in the *Journal of Risk Research*. She states that, "heroism is doing something that is courageous, may be hazardous to the person but which is intended to help others and saves lives."⁸ It is described as highly moral behavior. Indeed, heroism implies a moral superiority, and in saving others, these soldiers are deemed to have performed acts of moral worth.

The second category of heroes relates to individuals who have been wounded or died on active duty. In national newspapers, stories recounting the death and wounding of soldiers form the majority of articles relating to military heroism. The image is not necessarily the traditional view of the heroic warrior. Take this headline from the *Daily Record* in January 2010, it reads: "Bomb hero soldier is 108th victim: Tragedy on Hogmanay".⁹ It is similar to another headline appearing a few months later in the *Daily Mail*, "Afghan blast victim was a true hero say family and colleagues", and another in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* which read "Shaun died a hero; Taliban victim was trying to help fellow soldier."¹⁰

All these headlines carry a common theme: they simultaneously describe the dead as both heroes and victims and cast the death as a "tragedy".¹¹ This portrayal is directly related to the nature of the war being fought in Afghanistan. Those killed or wounded in war have traditionally been seen as heroes because they have made the supreme

sacrifice and given their lives in the service of others for the greater good.¹² As mentioned earlier, heroism implies a moral superiority, but if the cause for which the British military is fighting is in doubt, then this changes the public perception of the moral worth of the death. Those killed in action are still seen as heroes for their courage in sacrificing their lives. Yet, because the conflict in Afghanistan is seen as unwinnable and/or unnecessary by a majority of people in the UK, they are also seen as victims. They are seen as giving their lives for a dubious cause, and thus, the moral worth of the death is perceived as tainted.¹³

THE SOLDIER AS VICTIM

If the “victim-hero” image is prevalent in British popular culture, then so is the even more damaging public perception of the soldier as a victim. There were 169 articles in the national press in the last year with the words “victim” and “soldier” in the title. While this represents a considerably fewer number than the “heroism” cohort, it is still a significant number of articles.¹⁴ These news items, and other forms of cultural transmission, including the work of war artists and television documentaries, portray members of the armed forces as victims for a variety of reasons.

First, as mentioned above, there is the war in Afghanistan itself. Its purpose, nature, and the tactics of the enemy are all questioned by the British public. The public’s disquiet over the reasons for fighting has already been considered, but the nature of the war is also seen as problematic. The improvised explosive device, often the weapon of choice of the Taliban, is portrayed as a cowardly weapon, and service-personnel as “victims” of these roadside bombs, or as “victims” of the Taliban themselves. For example, in October 2008, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* ran the following headline: “Vigil tribute to tragic soldier: troops remember bomb blast victim colleague.”¹⁵ To be described as a “victim” of a bomb, or of their enemy, hits at the professional image of the British Armed Forces. Military professionals take on a commitment of unlimited liability when they join the forces. This means that they accept that they could be killed in the course of their duties in the service of their country.¹⁶ For newspapers to describe soldiers killed as “victims”, therefore, devalues the commitment they made when they joined the British Army and undermines the moral basis of soldiering.

Some newspapers go further. The Scottish *Sunday Herald*, for example, launched a Christmas charity campaign in 2009 to raise money both for Oxfam and the Erskine Edinburgh home for the rehabilitation of wounded veterans.¹⁷ In doing so, they explained that the war in Afghanistan had many “victims” and thus equated the dispossessed civilian population with wounded soldiers in Britain’s Armed Forces. The message being sent was clear; the war in Afghanistan is generating vast numbers of victims and the military is not immune. However, in war, soldiers and civilians are subject to different rules and have different levels of protection under the Geneva Convention. Indeed, there is an assumption that the moral authority to bear arms and take life is conferred on warriors precisely because they place their own lives at risk during a war.¹⁸ Here, by treating both soldiers and civilians in the Afghan conflict as equivalent, the newspaper undermined the professional code of the soldier, which self-consciously sets the soldier and civilian apart.

Second, there is the issue of equipment and governmental support for the soldier. Members of the armed forces have been portrayed by politicians, a wide range of media, personal blogs and chat sites, as lacking practical support from the government, which has been accused of failing to fund and deliver the appropriate equipment for the conflict. There have been allegations of inadequate numbers and types of vehicles, too few helicopters and poor maintenance of aircraft.¹⁹ Some of these allegations have originated inside the armed forces themselves.²⁰ The Continuous Attitude Survey, published in March 2010, suggested that only one third of Service personnel felt valued, only 35 percent were happy with the standard of major equipment, and only 33 percent were happy with the amount of equipment provided.²¹ These allegations have been mirrored by Coroners' reports and the testimony of families criticizing the government after the death or wounding of their family members.²² In particular, over the past seven years, the deaths of a significant proportion of Service personnel have been perceived by a wide range of commentators as attributable to inadequate equipment. As a result, soldiers have also been portrayed as victims of a government prepared to trade lives for cost-savings.²³

Finally, there is the issue of the aftermath of conflict, its effects on the individual, and the post-service help expected for veterans. Here, popular culture has tackled a key theme of psychological injury, which casts the veteran as a victim. Psychological injury as a result of wartime experience has been part of popular consciousness since the First World War, but for the majority of the twentieth century the British public remained ambivalent about the diagnosis. While those suffering from war trauma were not exactly branded cowards, neither were they lauded as heroes.²⁴ The American experience of Vietnam can be seen as a turning point in Western attitudes towards war trauma. By the 1980s, a new diagnostic classification of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had been introduced to explain the behavior of the stereotypical Vietnam veteran who was perceived to be alienated and dangerously unpredictable.²⁵ It has been argued that this new diagnosis helped to legitimate a soldier's right to public help and sympathy.²⁶

What Simon Wessely has termed the "rise of the trauma culture" in Britain can be partially attributed to the raised profile of "war trauma" after Vietnam, and to a shift in Western societal values over the past 30 years from those which applauded self-restraint to those which promoted self expression.²⁷ This culture has made a diagnosis of PTSD, in particular, more socially acceptable and greater popular sympathy towards traumatized veterans can be identified in the 1990s. However, the portrayal of soldiers as routinely suffering from psychological injury is a more recent phenomenon.

It is perhaps the mark of this cultural shift that the war artist, Arabella Dorman, chose to harness her art to "evoke the emotions and psychological impact of war" rather than to depict the "physical horror" of war.²⁸ After spending time in Afghanistan she explained that "The riflemen are so young, they are babies who have seen more than most adults. In every face you see the same furrowed brow, the look that goes through you to what they've seen before."²⁹ There is now an expectation that soldiers will be psychologically damaged by war.

Newspapers perpetuate this image with headlines such as "Battle Scarred; 750 troops get trauma stress in 3 months",³⁰ and recent documentaries have had the subject

of the traumatized service person at their heart. Chief among these was the *Dispatches* program, "Battle Scarred." Broadcast on 7 September 2009, this program graphically told the story of four veterans who returned from Iraq and Afghanistan as changed people. It dealt with issues of excessive alcohol consumption, suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the breakdown of family relationships, attributing their occurrence to the stress of war.³¹

These are all familiar themes, which are also addressed by newspapers, magazines and, recently, museums. The Conflicts of Interest exhibition at the National Army Museum has a section entitled "At Home" which tackles issues surrounding mental illness and its potential consequences of crime and homelessness for ex-soldiers.³² Reaching a different audience, the women's weekly magazine, *Take a Break*, has given voice to those families also suffering the psychological consequences of the war by printing their anguished letters. Letters have included one from a grandmother who wrote to her favorite grandson who had changed out of all recognition due to PTSD, while others have dealt with domestic violence and husbands unable to cope with their memories. There is an acknowledgement that it is the family as a whole that can be traumatized by the effects of war.³³

The majority of these articles portray the veteran or soldier and their families as victims of wartime experience, but they also often show them as victims of government or Ministry of Defence callousness. Like the documentaries, many of the articles complain that little medical help has been provided for these types of casualties who, it is argued, are discharged from the military and left to fend for themselves.³⁴ It is a theme that has been taken up by a number of charities and campaign groups. The Royal British Legion and Combat Stress, a charity which supports and treats service personnel who are suffering from psychological wounds, have both elevated the issue of psychological casualties in the public consciousness. As part of their 2007 "Honour the Covenant" campaign, the Royal British Legion began to push for better access to veterans' mental health services, while Combat Stress has also begun a high profile appeal for donations, backed by the Prince of Wales.³⁵

It is the convergence of two long-term trends that have led to the portrayal of the soldier as a victim by such a variety of diverse interest groups. The first is the trend in British society towards celebrating victimhood.³⁶ Frank Furedi has suggested that Britain is becoming a nation of victims. He sees a fractured society in which the actions of individuals are not valued and "suffering is one of the few experiences with which everyone can feel comfortable."³⁷ To be a victim is no longer necessarily seen in a negative light. Thus, portraying soldiers as victims can be interpreted as an attempt to normalize and understand their experience.

It can be argued that this view of soldiers becomes convenient for another reason too. By viewing soldiers as victims, their agency is removed. They become "objects rather than subjects of their destiny."³⁸ The British public's increasing unease with the use of force, and their particular distaste for the deployments first in Iraq and latterly in Afghanistan, make it more palatable to view soldiers as passive victims rather than perpetrators of violence.³⁹ This, in turn, makes it easier for the British public and its media to show support for their soldiers while simultaneously condemning the job they are required to do.

SOLDIER AS VILLAIN

The rise of the soldier-victim image has also helped to modify the old stereotype of the soldier as a villain. In the early twentieth century the ordinary soldier was frequently characterized as “the scum of the earth.” He was perceived to possess dubious morals, indulging in alcoholism, brawling and frequenting brothels, and often excluded from theaters and hotels when in uniform.⁴⁰ This image was modified slightly over the century, but newspapers continued to carry negative stories about soldiers perpetrating crime, fighting with the local population, and abusing alcohol.⁴¹ While the soldier is still occasionally subjected to exclusions from shops and hotels today, it is the civilians who receive the ire of the press for victimizing the soldier.⁴²

It is still possible to find damaging stories about poor behavior of soldiers off duty, but that behavior is often attributed to war trauma.⁴³ For example, take a *Daily Mirror* article from 2008 about a Lance Corporal who, on return from Afghanistan, participated in a drunken night out which ended in a brawl and being charged with assault. The article was sympathetic to the soldier, highlighting his exemplary war record and his difficulties in adjusting to life back in the UK.⁴⁴ Similarly, an article that reported drug taking in the Army in 2007 argued that it was rife, in part, because “the stresses of warfare are turning many young recruits towards illegal substances.” The article was far from condemnatory; rather, the soldiers were seen as victims of circumstance.⁴⁵

Conversely, newspapers have also carried damning reports of brutality perpetrated on prisoners under the care of the British Army. Although there had clearly been coverage of British Army abuses in Northern Ireland, the recent abuse scandals emerging out of the Iraq conflict have cast the British Army in the role of the villain. Quite what this does to the image of the soldier is arguable. The media debate over where responsibility for the abuse lies has largely avoided blaming the ordinary soldier. There have been claims that the soldiers were scapegoats, with investigations designed to relieve scrutiny of the original decision to intervene in Iraq. Others have accused the Army of being institutionally responsible for the abuse of civilians, suggesting that the Army has obscured the magnitude of the problem.⁴⁶

It is the latter view that the British television film, “The Mark of Cain”, sought to portray.⁴⁷ According to the writer, the film had been inspired by reports of British soldiers committing atrocities in Iraq in 2003. He explained that the film sought to understand why and how soldiers became abusive rather than simply condemning individuals.⁴⁸ At the heart of the film was an exploration of the limits of moral courage as the two central “squaddie” characters were torn between conforming to peer pressure by contributing to the brutalization of Iraqi detainees and reporting the abuse. Ultimately, however, the squaddies were seen as victims of a bullying Army culture, which closes ranks to cover up crimes.

Thus, the image of the Army as an institution has not escaped unscathed. The ongoing Baha Mousa Public Inquiry, investigating the death of an Iraqi civilian who died in Iraq in 2003, has kept the issue of British Army abuse in the newspapers.⁴⁹ It has heard a range of incriminating evidence about the use of inhumane conditioning techniques, the video evidence of which was broadcast on television news and has a permanent home on YouTube.⁵⁰

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that these negative images of the British Army have generated some public hostility towards soldiers. Individual soldiers returning from Iraq in 2007–2008 complained that they had been tarred with the abusive image of the Army portrayed in the media.⁵¹ For other groups in Britain it is the overall nature and objectives of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that influences their image of the Army. A very small minority protested during homecoming parades in Luton in March 2009 and a proposed but ultimately aborted protest in Wootton Bassett was to be led by Anjem Choudary of Islam4UK, although this, in itself, appeared to be more a protest against the conflict in Afghanistan than a direct attack on the behavior of the armed forces.⁵²

Overall, reporting of detainee abuse does not yet seem to have had a lasting impact on the image of the soldier, with polls indicating that the British soldier is still respected and admired, at least in the abstract.⁵³ Indeed, the rise of the soldier-victim image may have helped to mitigate the effects of some of the more negative reports of soldier behavior emanating from Iraq. As an organization, the British Army cannot afford to be complacent about this, but it is the implications of the soldier's growing victim status that will potentially have the greatest impact on policy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The first area in which the image of the soldier as victim has the potential to impact is that of Britain's long-term strategic vision. The victimized image of the soldier is bound up both with the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan and the British public's unease with the role of the armed forces. As was argued earlier, when the majority of the population does not support the conflict, it is difficult for the public to avoid viewing the death and injury of soldiers as a waste.⁵⁴ The more deaths and injuries there are, the greater the sense of waste and the more futile the war seems.

A poll conducted in 2009 for the National Army Museum showed that 70 percent of the British public felt that the primary function of the British Army was defense of home territory, suggesting that only if the nation is perceived to be in direct physical danger will the deaths of soldiers be deemed morally acceptable.⁵⁵ While this attitude can have an immediate impact on the morale of military personnel and their families in the short term, at least until the withdrawal of British troops in 2015, it could also have longer-term implications, constraining the ability of the British government to use its armed forces overseas in the future.

Second, there is the perennial issue of recruitment and retention. During a recession, the Army does not suffer from a lack of recruits. In 2009, there was a 25 percent rise in the number of recruits enlisted in the British Army, largely due to the poor economic climate. With the Army also shedding 7,000 posts over the next five years, the victim image of the soldier does not appear to be a challenge to full recruitment.⁵⁶ However, recessions do not last forever and the Army needs to consider other reasons why young people join up. Research has shown that it is often the promise of an adventurous and challenging occupation that draws the best recruits.⁵⁷

If the image of the soldier is skewed further towards that of a psychologically damaged and under-supported victim, whose unique, professional code is undermined, then suddenly the Army becomes less attractive to young people looking for an exciting

and fulfilling career. Indeed, this is a real possibility given that in 2006–2007, when the British economy was more buoyant, negative images of the British Army, arising from the intervention in Iraq, had a damaging effect on the opinions and decision-making of potential recruits and their parents.⁵⁸

Having left the Army, the soldier-victim image can continue to cast a shadow over veterans attempting to gain employment. While the Army values that soldiers have internalized during their service should be attractive to potential employers, they are often obscured by the popular portrayal of the soldier as a victim. Nicholas Harrison, head of an organization which finds employment for disabled veterans explains, “I do fear that the slight media overkill stories about homeless former personnel or those suffering from alcohol related problems or who have been in prison are allowing the public to believe that the majority of people who have served . . . are incapable of clothing and feeding themselves and will all suffer from anger management issues and take to the bottle.”⁵⁹ For most soldiers, the Army is not a job for life and the Army relies on a steady turnover of personnel. If the soldier-victim image increasingly deters employers from taking on veterans after their service, then a period serving in the Army becomes a less attractive prospect for young people, and again, recruitment may be affected.

Once the recession has diminished, the victim image also has the potential to impact on retention by undermining the basis of the Army’s professional code. As discussed earlier, when joining the Army, soldiers accept that they may have to suspend certain rights and privileges enjoyed by civilians for the duration of their service and sign up to a professional code of conduct which venerates selfless commitment, self-reliance, discipline, and loyalty.⁶⁰ If soldiers continue to be viewed as victims, then the sacrifices they make and risks they take as part of their job, including the risk to their lives, are devalued. As recruits have recently been citing a desire to serve, to “do their bit”, alongside economic motives for joining the Army, in the longer term, this devaluation of their profession has the potential to affect their motivation and continued willingness to serve.⁶¹

There are soldiers who have embraced the victim image because of the political advantages it confers. David Green argues that victimhood is a status sought in British society precisely because of the preferential treatment and compensation it can bring.⁶² The Army is not immune from civilian trends and the victim image is not necessarily externally imposed on soldiers; it is also generated within the Army itself. Many of the news stories relating to equipment shortage, poor accommodation, and inadequate psychiatric care have originated from serving soldiers and veterans of all ranks and their families. This trend has had consequences both for the Army as an institution and for the government.

As Anthony Forster and Tim Edmunds have argued, traditional military command structures have been circumvented by legal and societal demands over the past decade, creating internal governance challenges for the military.⁶³ The acceptance of victim status by elements of the Army has the potential to both fuel and legitimize this trend. Adopting the mantle of victimhood helps to justify challenges to authority, and encourages soldiers to appeal to sources outside their chain of command in an attempt to effect change.

The astute exploitation of victim status by soldiers and their charitable and media supporters has also had significant implications for government. In response to the increasing portrayal of soldiers as victims of government policy, the Brown administration commissioned a cross-governmental service command paper in 2008, which put forward a package of measures to diminish disadvantages suffered by military personnel and their families and to improve the help available to the wounded.⁶⁴ The coalition government has signaled its intention to build on current improvements and address the key issues generating images of victimhood. David Cameron has spoken of the need to “create an atmosphere in which we, as a nation, back, revere and support our military”, while in practical terms, an Armed Forces Covenant Task Force, headed by Professor Hew Strachan, has been commissioned to “identify innovative answers to the most difficult problems facing serving and former service personnel.”⁶⁵

While improvements in Army welfare provision and equipment, coupled with the planned withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan by 2015, may help to mitigate the rise of the soldier-victim image in the medium term, the image appears set to stay. British society’s cult of the victim, together with persistent public unease over the use of force will ensure its longevity.

NOTES

1. The analysis, opinions and conclusions expressed or implied in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Joint Services Command & Staff College, the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence or any other government agency.
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11. The victim-hero image is not solely confined to the newspapers but also propagated by the wider news media and charitable organizations. For example, the hugely successful "Help for Heroes" charity and television documentaries including the Bafta award-winning *Wounded*, which followed two severely injured soldiers as they courageously battled to survive and rehabilitate, utilize this image. Help for Heroes, http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/?gclid=CMmF2ZK2_aQCFU1h4wodbCcagg (accessed 26 September 2010); *Wounded*, BBC1, 23 September 2009. See also, Strachan, "British Society and Armed Forces Day", p. 1.
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 13. For further discussion of this theme see Helen McCartney, "The Military Covenant and the Civil-military Contract in Britain", *International Affairs*, Vol. 86 No. 2, 2010, p. 424; Brian Brady, "Afghanistan: A Conspiracy of Silence", *Independent on Sunday*, 18 April 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/afghanistan-a-conspiracy-of-silence-1947857.html> (accessed 18th April 2010).
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