

The War At Home

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“Support Our Troops.” Over the past few years, I have read and heard these words repeatedly, plastered on banners and signs in large unrelenting fonts of all colors. Both the conservative and liberal political factions struggle to convince us of their conviction underlying those three simple words. But in reality, there is a gross and not altogether blatant hypocrisy in them. Though never a supporter of the current war in Iraq, I do believe in obligation, and more importantly, in honor.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has always had a tenuous budget, and the “War on Terror” has only made things worse. In the over-taxed clinics of VA hospitals across the country, it is easy for some returning soldiers to simply fall through the cracks. The sad truth is that for every soldier killed overseas, several more are injured; and these “heroes”, nevertheless, are considered “damaged goods” and are often discarded by the offices of the Veterans Affairs. I have seen those who many like to pretend do not exist: I have seen the *forgotten*.

On an unusually cool, clear July night in the summer of 2006, a couple of friends and I were walking the barren streets of 2:00 a.m., Charleston, West Virginia. Passing an outdoor fountain, we stopped to admire it. A man in his mid-twenties wearing an old gray T-shirt and a pair of jeans worn thin at the knees approached us saying, “I wouldn’t try swimming in there. It’s filthy”. When he walked into the glow of a nearby streetlight, I noticed a deep scar running across the side of his face. He seemed eager to speak with anyone who would listen. During the course of our small talk, we mentioned that we were in Charleston for the Democratic Youth Leadership Academy and told him about a protest against the war in which we had participated. At this comment, his face dropped. He then told us he had just gotten back from Iraq. None of us knew quite what to say, so our new acquaintance took it upon himself to break the silence: “I was injured.”

As we walked with him, he introduced himself as Vincent. Vincent then began to

relate his experience in Iraq and his subsequent injuries. In a tone heavy and rough with bitter resentment, he told us how his job had been to enter a newly bombed area and “clean up” as he called it. Born from his trembling voice, scenes of sheer senselessness and violence began to carve their way into our minds. Through shakes and stutters, he told us of children that lay dead by their mothers and of whole apartment buildings flattened with unknown casualties buried underneath the rubble. Then, without prompting, he grabbed his left arm with his right hand, and with a quick turn, he dislocated it from his shoulder. “Grenade,” he mumbled. I hadn’t noticed it beforehand, but as Vincent walked, his entire body leaned to the left, and he took great effort in stepping from his left foot. A former United States Marine, Vincent is now the proud owner of 7.9 pounds of metal, permanently implanted in his left shoulder and leg. Along with his traumatic memories, his irons weigh upon him wherever he goes.

Eventually, our directionless wandering came to a stop, and Vincent, noting the awkward silence, invited us all to take a look at his artwork. We tentatively decided to accept his invitation. Intrigued, but slightly uneasy, we followed our mysterious companion off the safety of the paved streets that course through uptown Charleston and down a steep incline of dirt and rocks that led us underneath a bridge. We had left the realm of street signs and regulation far behind. Schedules, appointments, the passage of time, all became distant memories. We seemed to dissolve into the darkness Vincent had led us into. Through the feeble lights of our cell phones, we gazed at the beauty and horror Vincent had rendered upon the concrete supporting walls of the bridge. Haunting images of men, standing shoulder to shoulder, wearing misshapen helmets that obscured their soulless and empty eyes stared back into our own eyes with shameful accusation. Creatures of fire and hell animated the once lifeless slabs of rock and steel surrounding us: an entire world of Vincent’s creation.

The stagnant smell of the chemical laden Kanawha River filled my nostrils, reminding me where I was standing. I noticed a patch of scorched earth beside a tattered old mattress, its springs escaping one by one. Bottles of water, some half full and some, empty, were strewn across the earthen floor, many covered in filthy blankets and jackets. A cold wind lashed across my face and penetrated deep beneath my defenseless black dress shirt. This was Vincent’s *home*.

Below our busy feet, men struggle and die. Tragically, their scuffling feet and hurried breath go unheard. People like Vincent are disgracefully occulted from view. While the proud “Mission Accomplished” banners censor his art, his voice is silenced by the repetition of such empty slogans. In order for the American people to understand the true nature of their government and consequently make a change, the “Vincent’s” of this country must be brought into the light. Unfortunately, stories like his are often too sordid for public view, and due to the paranoia associated with many like him, the spotlight might present a fearful place to those who need to be seen. A change is demanded: a government that cares more about blood and bones than about bullets and bombs, a public willing to search for what may not be readily seen--compassion. All these things are needed in order for this nation to grow and develop into the beautiful idea we have always been told it was. As for me, I have seen the *forgotten* -- and *he* has been forever burned into my memory.

Jad Sleiman was awarded the 2007 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship and was recognized by the Charleston Daily Mail for his winning essay. He will receive a college scholarship check for \$750 for fall semester, 2007. He may use the scholarship at the college of his choice.