# What's broken here?

## Don't be too quick to assume Sgt. Bales' deadly rampage in Afghanistan was a symptom of post-traumatic stress

THE SUNDAY SPECIAL

BY JERRY LEMBCKE

"Cool."

That's the way Sgt. Robert Bales described his combat encounter in Iraq in 2007. Bales is now charged in the March 11 killing of 17 Afghan civilians, nine of them children. As we search for ways to understand this horrific event, we need to look beyond the character of Sgt. Bales, and even his record of military service, to the culture of American masculinity.

The "cool" comment should slow the rush to a post-traumatic stress disorder explanation for Bales' killing spree. With few facts at hand, reporters and commentators have speculated that injuries during prior deployments to Iraq or the sight of a fellow soldier losing a leg the day before his rampage may have traumatized Bales. Writing in a New York Times opinion piece on March 18, playwright Kate Wenner suggested that "seeing his buddy's leg blown off may have unleashed a PTSD episode his damaged brain could not stop."

Bales' "cool" doesn't disqualify the PTSD explanation, but it does hang an asterisk on it. Surprising. Threatening. Unsought. Those are some of the conditions associated with traumatic experiences. Experiences remembered as "cool," on the other hand, are less likely to have left the mind and emotions disturbed; credentialed with the "cool" of previous combat, the GI on his fourth trip to a combat zone, as was Bales, is unlikely to have been taken by surprise by the wounding of a buddy.

Bales, it appears, was unhappy about being redeployed to Afghanistan after three trips to Iraq, but there is no indication that he feared going.

The war-trauma narrative isn't the only one at work among pundits spinning for story-traction on Bales. A failed business in stock trading drove him to enlist after 9/11, according to news reports. His wife, at home with two kids, is said to have put the family home up for sale to avoid bankruptcy. Meanwhile, darker stories about prior charges of assault and mandated anger-management classes have led to headlines like this in the Worcester, Mass., Telegram and Gazette: "Sgt. Bales: Someone profoundly broken?"

A week after the shootings, though, even those human-failure lines were being shuffled into the PTSD explanation. It was a logical progression. Beginning with the return of soldiers from the Persian Gulf War in 1991, press reports, television specials and popular culture almost uniformly played up the coming-home-hurt theme.

That portrayal of returning soldiers was a legacy of the news media's turn away from the images of Vietnam veterans empowered and politicized by their time at war, and toward a psychologized portrait of veterans as traumatized. Even as troops boarded flights for Baghdad in 2003, reporters speculated about how many would come home emotionally damaged.

With news coverage having prepped public expectations that soldiers would return mentally injured by the war, it should have surprised no one that PTSD would frame the news about the troops' return in the coming years. The head wound suffered by ABC News Anchor Bob Woodruff while reporting from Iraq in 2006, and the media fascination with his recovery, drilled traumatic brain injury into the PTSD discourse, giving it dramatically new imagery and bringing larger numbers of veterans under the diagnostic tent.




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By 2008, most major news organizations had done feature stories or specials on the mental health status of veterans. The most gripping was a New York Times series begun in January of that year. According to the Times, 121 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan were charged with homicide for killings committed after their return home. About a third of the victims were spouses, girlfriends and children. Some of the veterans' lawyers successfully cobbled war-trauma defenses, an injection of PTSD-as-alibi thinking into the culture.

Writing about Bales four years later, Associated Press reporter Allen G. Breed observed that some Americans seem willing to believe that a U.S. veteran "worn down by four tours of combat and perhaps suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, simply snapped." For many Americans, speculated Breed, the war-trauma diagnosis is an explanation, if not an excuse.

For still others, the atrocity may substantiate PTSD as a war wound, making it a de facto Purple Heart signaling Bales must have seen some bad stuff to be driven to this — he must be a real-deal combat veteran. In any case, it may be the way Bales wanted his resume to read.

With PTSD dominating the conversation surrounding Bales' motives, the other image in his memory of war as "cool" has been obscured: the trenches. Bales said that the cool part about his brush with combat in Iraq was its "World War II style — you dug in." Leaving aside the fact that trench-style combat is emblematic of the first World War, not the second — and that the kill-ratio for the skirmish he was in was reportedly enemy dead = 250, U.S. dead = 0 — veterans' exaggerated memories of battle experience are in many cases essentially imagined experiences of what they wanted to have been part of, but weren't.

There are stones yet to be turned over in Bales' case. In the matter of his buddy's leg being blown off, for instance, what did he actually see? But for now, it seems too simple to merge his murderous outburst into the "profoundly broken" and failed-at-life narrative. The thought that he may have killed in order to establish his combat bona fides is unsettling but more suggestive of what else is broken. It isn't the Robert Baleses of America that need fixing so much as the America that expects from its men what they can't possibly deliver.

The high regard many Americans have for principled pacifism notwithstanding, the martial roles for men modeled in film, athletics and history books still rule the culture. The default occupation for measuring the mettle of the man remains the military, a fact that helps explain why some white collar and semi-professional men, like Bales, found their ways into uniform following 9/11.

The problem comes with finding glory in inglorious wars. Coming home with honor is hard when the mission is to invade and occupy someone else's homeland; it's still harder when the war is lost. In the wake of the war in Vietnam, PTSD morphed from a diagnostic category into a badge of honor — the credential that certified the recipient as the real deal and labeled the atrocity he committed abroad or at home evidence of his having experienced war's hell.

Robert Bales isn't the problem but, interpreted as a social and cultural matter, his alleged crimes abroad and perhaps at home point us to problems in American life for men that need to be addressed. Those problems begin with the conflation of masculinity with martial accomplishment — and the nature of the wars we send our soldiers off to fight.



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