

The Hunger Games vs. The Reality of War

by
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Author's Note: *I wrote this because the first book in The Hunger Games series has become required reading in many schools. When students are required to read a book for a class they have a reasonable expectation of being educated, but The Hunger Games portrays serious subjects such as war, violence, and trauma in very unrealistic ways. I hope the following will encourage critical thinking, promote discussion, and help people better understand war. I dedicate this to the veterans whose psychological wounds are misunderstood because of unrealistic media depictions of war, violence, and trauma.*

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS OF WAR

Imagine yourself sitting in a doctor's office. Looking at you remorsefully, the doctor says you have been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and there is only a four percent chance you will be alive in two weeks. Even worse, he informs you that your death will be incredibly painful. The illness kills most people by violently rupturing one or more of their internal organs, causing them to bleed to death. As if the situation could not get any worse, he then says you must be quarantined in a government laboratory. You will be prevented from communicating with your friends and family members in any way as you lie on your deathbed. You will be forced to face death alone.

How do you think most people would react upon hearing this grim news? And how do you think most people would feel while lying on their deathbed alone, afraid, and on the verge of suffering an extremely painful death? Could you imagine some people having panic attacks, nervous breakdowns, and other severe psychological issues?

The scenario I just described is very similar to the situation twenty-four children must face in the science fiction series *The Hunger Games* written by Suzanne Collins. In the first book (and film) of the series, twenty-four children from the ages of twelve to eighteen are chosen to compete in a fight to the death called "the hunger games," where they must kill each other with bows and arrows, swords, knives, and other close-range weapons until one person is left standing. Most of the children are selected at random through a kind of lottery, while a few volunteer. Like the terminal illness scenario, each child has only a four percent chance of surviving¹, dying will be extremely painful, and they will be forbidden from seeing their friends and family members while facing death.

If twenty-four children from the ages of twelve to eighteen were told they had a terminal illness – giving them a ninety-six percent chance of dying an

¹ They actually have a 4.16 percent chance of surviving, but I am rounding the number to the nearest whole percentage.

extremely painful death in the next two weeks – and then prevented from seeing their friends and family members, do you think many of the children would suffer from panic attacks, nervous breakdowns, and other severe psychological issues? If so, isn't it odd that *not a single child* in the first book of *The Hunger Games* series has a mental meltdown when their situation is in fact *worse* (for reasons I will explain later) than the terminal illness scenario?

There is a common myth in our society that human beings are naturally violent. In my books I write about the abundant evidence that refutes this myth, and although I cannot offer all the evidence in this short essay, I will share a few examples later on. As a result of this myth, many believe if you simply tell people to kill each other, their natural violent urges will take over and they will massacre each other rather easily. We can see this myth in *The Hunger Games*, because most of the twenty-four children are given only three days of combat training (a few have been training throughout their lives, which I will discuss later), yet despite this extremely minimal training the children are able to function well in a situation that requires them to kill or be killed. But is a three-day session of combat training enough to prepare people for the trauma of war? During World War I, World War II, and the Korean War, American soldiers who were not children but grown men were given months of combat training (and in some cases years if they were in the regular army). Yet despite this, more American soldiers were pulled off the front lines due to psychological trauma than were killed during the wars.

Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman is a former West Point professor and Army Ranger who has written extensively about combat. He also trains military and law enforcement personnel throughout the country. Grossman's in-depth research shows that the human mind, rather than the body, is actually the weakest link in war, because in combat our mind is more vulnerable to collapse than our body. Explaining how this can affect soldiers in war, Grossman tells us: "Richard Gabriel, in his excellent book, *No More Heroes*, tells us that in the great battles of World War I, World War II and Korea, there were more men pulled off the front lines because of psychiatric wounds than were killed in combat. There was a study written on this phenomenon in World War II entitled, 'Lost Divisions,' which concluded that American forces lost 504,000 men from psychiatric collapse. A number sufficient to man 50 combat divisions! ... Very few people know about this. While everyone knows about the valiant dead, most people, even professional warriors, do not know about the greater number of individuals who were quietly taken out of the front lines because they were psychiatric casualties. This is another aspect of combat that has been hidden from us, and it is something we must understand."²

Lieutenant Colonel Elspeth Ritchie, an army psychiatrist who is the director of the Army Surgeon General's office for behavioral health, tells us: "In the first months of the Korean conflict, from June to September 1950, both the physical and psychological travails were overwhelming. Many of the soldiers were initially pulled from easy occupation duty in Japan, with inadequate uniforms (including winter

² Lt. Col. Dave Grossman with Loren W. Christensen, *On Combat* (Milstadt, IL: Warrior Science Publications, 2008), 12.

clothes), arms, or training. The rate of psychological casualties was extraordinarily high, 250 per thousand per year.”³

Steve Bentley, Chairman of the Vietnam Veterans of America PTSD and Substance Abuse Committee, describes some of the ways war trauma can affect people’s behavior: “During the siege of Gibraltar in 1727, a soldier who was part of the defense of the city kept a diary. In it, there is mention of incidents in which soldiers killed or wounded themselves. He also describes a state of extreme physical fatigue which had caused soldiers to lose their ability to understand or process even the simplest instructions. In this state, the soldiers would refuse to eat, drink, work, or fight in defense of the city, even though they would be repeatedly whipped for not doing so.”⁴

All people in combat are vulnerable to psychological collapse, especially if the combat is intense and extended over a long period of time. Roy Swank and Walter Marchand, who both served as medical doctors in the military during World War II, conducted a study during the war that concluded ninety-eight percent of soldiers became psychological casualties after sixty days of sustained day and night combat. According to their study on combat trauma, the two percent who were not driven insane by war seem to have already been insane. Swank and Marchand said that in this “abnormal” group of soldiers, “it is interesting that aggressive psychopathic personalities, who were poorly disciplined before combat, stand out.”⁵ They further stated, “One thing alone seems to be certain: Practically all infantry soldiers suffer from a neurotic reaction eventually if they are subjected to the stress of modern combat continually and long enough.”⁶

Of course, the children in *The Hunger Games* are not being subjected to sixty days and longer of continuous combat, so one might assume they would be less likely to suffer from psychological collapse. But there are many reasons why they would be far more vulnerable to having a mental breakdown than soldiers experiencing prolonged combat in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. There are three protective methods that can fortify the minds of soldiers in combat, making them less likely to suffer from a mental breakdown. But the children in *The Hunger Games* do not have any of these protective methods to guard their minds against the enormous psychological stress of war.

THE THREE PROTECTIVE METHODS

The first protective method that can fortify the minds of soldiers in combat is *having reliable comrades*. Although soldiers sent to war are taken away from their families, effective military units compensate for this by transforming their soldiers

³ Lt. Col. Elspeth Ritchie, “Psychiatry in the Korean War: Perils, PIES, and Prisoners of War.” *Military Medicine*. Vol. 167. November 2002, 898.

⁴ Steve Bentley, “A Short History of PTSD.” *The VVA Veteran*, January 1991.

⁵ Roy L. Swank and Walter E. Marchand, “Combat Neuroses: Development of Combat Exhaustion.” *American Medical Association: Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*, 1946, 244.

⁶ *Ibid*, 243.

into a tightly bonded family unit. Jonathan Shay, the 2009 Omar Bradley Chair of Strategic Leadership at the U.S. Army War College and a MacArthur Fellow, is a clinical psychiatrist who has dedicated his life to helping traumatized veterans. The author of *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*, from 1999 to 2000 he also performed the Commandant of the Marine Corps Trust Study. In it he says: “Of all groups in America today, military people have the greatest right to, and will benefit most, if they reclaim the word ‘love’ as a part of what they are and what they do... Bluntly put: The result of creating well-trained, well-led, cohesive units is – love. These Marines are ‘tight.’ They regard each other – as explained in Aristotle’s discussion of *philia*, love – as ‘another myself’ ... The importance of mutual love in military units is no sentimental claptrap – it goes to the heart of the indispensable military virtue, courage... As von Clausewitz pointed out almost two centuries ago, fear is the main viscous medium that the Marine must struggle through... the urge to protect comrades directly reduces psychological and physiological fear, which frees the Marine’s cognitive and motivational resources to perform military tasks... The fictional Spartan NCO [non-commissioned officer] named Dienikes, in the acclaimed novel *Gates of Fire*, puts it very compactly: ‘The opposite of fear... is love.’”⁷

When you can trust your comrades with your life, the benefits are enormous. Not only do you feel more secure when someone is protecting your back, but the urge to protect comrades can make you less concerned about your personal safety. To better understand this, imagine if a massive vicious dog were running toward you. You would probably have a strong urge to get away as fast as you can by running, climbing a tree, or retreating to a safe place. Now imagine if a massive vicious dog were running toward someone you cared deeply about such as your child, sibling, parent, or close friend. You would probably have a strong urge to run as fast as you can *toward* the dog and your loved one, disregarding your personal safety to protect the person you care about. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said in the sixth century BC, “By being loving, we are capable of being brave.”⁸ And as the Greek philosopher Onasander said in the first century AD, soldiers fight best when “brother is in rank beside brother, friend beside friend...”⁹

When soldiers love each other as friends, brothers, and comrades, they often behave courageously. This can be seen when Epaminondas – a Greek soldier from Thebes – fought with the Spartans against the Arcadians. Epaminondas later became a powerful Theban politician and general who defeated the Spartans in two decisive battles after they tried to invade Thebes. The historian Plutarch describes how Epaminondas, as a young soldier fighting with the Spartans, risked his life to save his wounded friend Pelopidas: “Pelopidas, after receiving seven wounds in front, sank down upon a great heap of friends and enemies who lay dead together; but Epaminondas, although he thought him lifeless, stood forth to defend his body... and fought desperately, single-handed against many, determined to die rather than leave

⁷ Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps Trust Study – Final Report, Appendix E: Cohesion Essay, 2000.

⁸ Lao Tzu, *Tao de Ching*

⁹ Victor Hansen, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 209.

Pelopidas lying there. And now he too was in a sorry plight, having been wounded in the breast with a spear and in the arm with a sword, when Agesipolis the Spartan king came to his aid from the other wing, and when all hope was lost, saved them both.”¹⁰

Contrary to popular myths, the gladiators in Rome often fought in teams rather than alone (because people fight more courageously with a comrade by their side), and usually did not fight to the death. According to scientist Karl Kruszelnicki, “The [gladiator] bouts were definitely not undisciplined free-for-alls. The gladiators were carefully matched in pairs... taking into account the attack and defense weapons they carried, and the strength and skill of each individual. Like modern Western boxers who observe the Marquis of Queensbury rules, gladiators had their own very brutal and strict rules, which two referees would enforce... Gladiator bouts were more like a sophisticated entertainment version of martial arts. They were closer to modern choreographed TV wrestling, than wild melees... There are many references to the gladiators being trained to subdue, not kill, their opponent. The bout had to end in a decisive outcome, but defeat through death was rare. More likely was defeat through injuries or exhaustion.”¹¹

The gravestone of the famous gladiator Flamma (which means “Flame” in Latin) states he had twenty-five victories, nine draws, and four losses.¹² With such a high number of draws and losses, it is obvious the gladiators often did not fight to the death. In *The Hunger Games* the children have a ninety-six percent chance of being killed, but historical records indicate the gladiators in Rome had a much lower chance of being killed in combat. Stephen Dyson, the former president of the Archaeological Institute of America, explains, “Since gladiators were fairly expensive to maintain and train, economically it doesn’t make much sense for them to have been killed off intentionally on a regular basis.”¹³ Nevertheless, fighting in the arena was still dangerous and some gladiators chose to commit suicide instead. Historian Stephen Wisdom tells us, “One Germanic gladiator choked himself to death by ramming the ancient sponge equivalent of toilet paper down his throat. Symmachus, a wealthy pagan politician eager to win votes by [hosting] a games, mentions the 29 Frankish prisoners he purchased, who strangled each other rather than fight in the arena. The last remaining fighter smashed his head against the wall until he died.”¹⁴

Unlike many soldiers in war and gladiators fighting in the arena, the children in *The Hunger Games* do not have reliable comrades they can trust with their lives, making them far more vulnerable to panic and psychological collapse. Near the end of the competition a new rule is passed that allows children from the same district

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Plutarch Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1917), 351.

¹¹ Karl Kruszelnicki, “Gladiator Myths”, ABC Science, <http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2007/09/20/2038358.htm>

¹² Stephen Wisdom, *Gladiators* (Oxford U.K., Osprey Publishing, 2001), 47.

¹³ Jennifer Viegas, “Gladiator Truths Counter Movie Myths,” Discovery Channel, http://dsc.discovery.com/news/2007/06/26/gladiator_arc_02.html?category=animals&guid=20070626100030

¹⁴ Stephen Wisdom, *Gladiators* (Oxford U.K., Osprey Publishing, 2001), 44.

to fight and win as a team, but since most of the children are dead at that point only four are able to take advantage of the opportunity. Some of the children in *The Hunger Games* form temporary alliances with each other, but since there can be only one survivor, the children realize they must eventually kill their comrades or be killed by them. There is no real trust between them, and military history shows that when soldiers cannot trust their comrades, it actually *increases* rather than decreases their psychological stress. It's bad enough having to worry about being killed by the enemy in front of you, but having to also worry about your comrades standing to your left and right killing you can push your mind to the breaking point.

The second protective method that can fortify the minds of soldiers in combat is *having reliable leaders*. If you were sent to war, but felt that your military commanders cared more about your safety than their own and would even risk their lives to protect yours, wouldn't that make you feel more secure? And if your military commanders were brilliant strategists and tacticians who had the skills to keep you alive, this would further reduce psychological stress and the urge to panic.

The children in *The Hunger Games* know they only have a four percent chance of surviving since only one out of the twenty-four will be alive at the end. But effective military commanders can convince the soldiers fighting for them that their chances of surviving are very high. In ancient warfare the purpose of a battle was to force the other side to retreat, and the majority of casualties were inflicted when the soldiers on one side turned their backs to flee and were run down by the pursuing army. As long as you did not lose a decisive battle, most of your soldiers would survive in combat.

Hannibal, a North African commander of a mercenary army, spent fifteen years in Italy terrorizing the Roman Republic during the fourth century BC, but he lost less than fifteen percent of his soldiers in combat while in Italy because he never lost a decisive battle. And Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire while losing less than ten percent of his soldiers in combat because during his early military campaigns he also did not lose a decisive battle. Furthermore, Alexander and Hannibal inspired their soldiers by fighting at the most dangerous point on the battlefield. Alexander was wounded eight times in combat, and the Roman historian Livy tells us that Hannibal was "the first to enter battle [and] the last to leave once battle was joined."¹⁵ The children in *The Hunger Games* do not have reliable leaders to inspire, protect, and guide them, making the children far more vulnerable to panic and psychological collapse.

The third protective method that can fortify the minds of soldiers in combat is *having reliable and realistic training*. This kind of training relies heavily on repetition, such as shooting a target shaped like a human being over and over again. This not only helps people overcome their aversion to killing another human being by desensitizing them, it also enables them to develop new "automatic reflexes" such as quickly aiming a rifle and pulling the trigger the moment anything shaped like a human appears in the distance. For training to be reliable and realistic, it also has to be challenging and cover a variety of potential scenarios. Most of the children in *The Hunger Games* are given only three days of combat training, but a person

¹⁵ Livy, *Hannibal's War*, trans. J.C. Yardley (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2006), 5.

cannot get reliable and realistic training in three days. Around six of the twenty-four children in *The Hunger Games* have been training for most of their lives, but their training pales in comparison to the Spartans, who were among the most highly trained soldiers in human history.

Spartan boys left home at age seven to begin military training, and they served in the military from ages twenty to sixty.¹⁶ An average thirty-year-old Spartan soldier had more than a decade of combat training and military experience over the most experienced child in *The Hunger Games*. Despite their extreme training, however, even the Spartans sometimes panicked in combat. In *The Hunger Games* some of the children make a calculated decision to retreat into the woods and hide as part of their strategy, and in the film one child screams and seems to freeze in fear before being killed. But unlike the children in *The Hunger Games* – who always seem to be in complete control of their mental faculties in combat – the Spartans retreated on numerous occasions due to uncontrollable terror.

During the Battle of Thermopylae when three hundred Spartans and their allies defended a narrow pass against an invading Persian army, the Spartans did not retreat and died to the last man. But this is extremely rare and one reason why the Battle of Thermopylae is so greatly admired and celebrated around the world. Less than one percent of battles in history ended with the losing side dying to the last man. Usually the battle ended when one side panicked and retreated. At the height of their military power, the Spartans retreated in three battles against Thebes – a rival Greek city-state. In the Battle of Tegyra in 375 BC, the Greek historian Plutarch tells us that a Spartan army numbering between 1000 and 1800 soldiers attacked a small Theban army of only three hundred.¹⁷ Although the Spartans greatly outnumbered the Thebans, the Theban soldiers made the Spartans panic and retreat.

A friend once asked me, “But how were ancient armies able to make their opponents panic?” I replied, “Well... they made their opponents panic by trying to kill them. When you try to stab people to death it tends to freak them out.” The greatest problem of every army in history has been this: when a battle begins, how do you stop soldiers from running away? Where our fight-or-flight response is concerned, the vast majority of people prefer to run when a sword is wielded against them, a spear is thrust in their direction, a bullet flies over their head, or a bomb explodes in their vicinity. People often compare chess to war, but there is a major difference. Imagine playing chess and seeing your pieces run off the board. Imagine your pawns moving backwards and your knights being so filled with fear they refuse to do what you tell them. Then chess would more accurately reflect the reality of war.

The Thebans also made the Spartans retreat during the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC, even though the Spartans again outnumbered the Thebans. And the Spartans retreated yet again during the Battle of Mantinea in 362 BC, when the

¹⁶ Thomas F.X. Noble, *Western Civilization: Beyond Boundaries*, 5th. Ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 66.

¹⁷ Plutarch, “Pelopidas,” trans. John Dryden, The Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/pelopida.html>

Theban politician and general Epaminondas, who was now fifty-six years old, charged the Spartan army with a small group of his best soldiers. The Greek historian Diodorus described what happened: "After the battle had continued long, and none were able to judge who would be the conquerors, Epaminondas ... resolved to decide the matter, with the hazard of his own life. To that end taking a choice band of the most able men he had with him, and, drawing them up in close order, he forthwith charged at the head of them, and was the first that cast his javelin, and killed the [Spartan] general, and then broke into the midst of his enemies... The fame of Epaminondas, and the strength of [the soldiers] he had with him, struck such a terror into the [Spartans], that they turned their backs, and began to make way."¹⁸

What happened next reveals how ferociously people will fight to protect a wounded comrade. As Epaminondas and his soldiers pursued the retreating Spartans, he was seriously wounded when a javelin struck him in the chest. The Spartans tried to capture him, but the Theban soldiers fought furiously to protect him, again forcing the Spartans to retreat. The Thebans pulled Epaminondas to safety, and he died from his chest wound soon after the battle ended. When Epaminondas and his soldiers defeated the Spartans, they demonstrated the power of having reliable comrades willing to die for each other, reliable leaders willing to sacrifice for their subordinates, and reliable and realistic training.

It might seem unrealistic for a fifty-six year old man such as Epaminondas to fight on the front lines in war, or for the Spartan soldiers to serve in the military until age sixty, but it is far more realistic than twelve and thirteen year old children fighting with bladed weapons in *The Hunger Games*. Tragically, child soldiers have become common during the age of rifles and machine guns, but ancient armies did not use child soldiers because it would have been completely impractical. Children do not have the upper body strength necessary to effectively wield a sword and shield, let alone carry heavy armor. A man in his fifties if he was well trained and in good shape could wield a bladed weapon with the strength necessary to kill an armored opponent. Lack of upper body strength is also a reason women were not recruited to fight in ancient armies, unlike today, when a woman can use a seven-pound rifle to kill a much larger and stronger man. I met countless women in the army who possess a strong warrior spirit. And when we look at the many women serving in modern militaries around the world today, we realize that lack of upper body strength, not lack of a strong warrior spirit, was one reason¹⁹ women did not fight in ancient wars.

Although the children in *The Hunger Games* do not have to wear heavy armor, in a sword fight a muscular eighteen-year-old boy weighing over two hundred pounds is going to have a significant advantage over a twelve-year-old boy or girl weighing less than ninety pounds. *The Hunger Games* character Cato, a very athletic older boy who has been training in combat since his early childhood, would also be much faster than the younger children. So the truth is that some of the children would have much less than a four percent chance of surviving, yet despite the near

¹⁸ Diodorus, *The Fragments of Diodorus*, trans. G. Booth (London: W. McDowall, 1814), 68.

¹⁹ Gender inequality also prevented women from serving in the military.

certainty of a violent death none of them are shown having mental breakdowns. Isn't that odd?

In addition to the high probability of dying alone away from loved ones, along with their lack of reliable comrades, lack of reliable leadership, and lack of reliable and realistic training, many of the children in *The Hunger Games* would have had mental breakdowns because of other reasons. One reason is because close-range fighting with bladed weapons is the most terrifying form of combat. Another reason is because the human brain does not fully develop until we are in our twenties, making children more vulnerable to trauma and psychological stress than adults. The average age of an American soldier in World War II was twenty-six, whereas the children chosen to fight to the death in *The Hunger Games* are from the ages of twelve to eighteen. Psychiatrist Bruce Perry says, "Unfortunately, the prevailing view of children and trauma ... that persists to a large degree to this day – is that 'children are resilient.' If anything, children are more vulnerable to trauma than adults."²⁰ Another reason is because instead of being naturally violent, we actually have a phobia of human aggression and violence when it is up close and personal.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN PHOBIA

Although a small percentage of people are afraid of snakes, spiders, and heights, around ninety-eight percent will have a phobic-level reaction to human aggression. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman calls this the *universal human phobia*. In fact, this is one reason fear of public speaking is so common: we might say something that evokes an audience's aggression. What if the worst-case scenario happens and the audience shouts at us angrily or laughs cruelly at our expense?

Fear of human aggression can be even more terrifying than fear of death. For example, every year hundreds of thousands die from the effects of smoking, but every day millions of people smoke without worrying. Every year tens of thousands die in car accidents, but every day millions of people drive casually to work. But a few murders by a serial killer will cause a city to go on alert, striking terror in many of its citizens. One terrorist attack in America created so much fear that our country has never been the same since.

What makes terrorism so dangerous is not the terrorist act itself, but our reaction to it. If Osama bin Laden had asked us to betray our democratic ideals by sanctioning torture, spying on U.S. citizens, and infringing on our civil liberties, we would never have agreed. But by attacking us on 9/11, many Americans willingly betrayed our democratic ideals because Osama bin Laden ignited the universal human phobia. Why is the universal human phobia so frightening? Why is our reaction to terrorism often more dangerous than the terrorist act?

Grossman asks us to consider two scenarios. Imagine that a tornado knocks down your house, destroys everything you own, and causes injuries severe enough to put you and your family in the hospital. Next imagine that a gang breaks into your house, beats you and your family so badly that you all end up in the hospital, and

²⁰ Bruce Perry, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 38.

then burns down your house. In both cases the result – your house and possessions being destroyed and your family being in the hospital – is the same, but which scenario is more traumatic?

Is it more traumatic to fall off a bicycle and break your leg, or for a group of attackers to hold you down and break your leg with a baseball bat? In both cases the result – a broken leg – is the same, but which scenario is more traumatic? Obviously, when people hurt us the trauma is much more severe. But why? Grossman explains: ‘The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R)*, the bible of psychology, states that in post-traumatic stress disorders ‘the disorder is apparently more severe and longer lasting when the stressor is of human design.’ We want desperately to be liked, loved, and in control of our lives; and intentional, overt, *human* hostility and aggression—more than anything else in life—assaults our self-image, our sense of control, our sense of the world as a meaningful and comprehensible place, and ultimately, our mental and physical health. The ultimate fear and horror in most modern lives is to be raped or beaten, to be physically degraded in front of our loved ones, to have our family harmed and the sanctity of our homes invaded by aggressive and hateful intruders. Death and debilitation by disease or accident are statistically far more likely to occur than death and debilitation by malicious action, but the statistics do not calm our basically irrational fears. In rape the psychological harm usually far exceeds the physical injury . . . far more damaging is the impotence, shock, and horror in being so hated and despised as to be debased and abused by a fellow human being.”²¹

If human beings are naturally violent, why do so many people have a phobia of human aggression? If we are naturally violent, why is war one of the most traumatizing things a human being can experience, and why does war drive so many people insane? If we were naturally violent, wouldn’t people go to war and become more mentally healthy? If we were naturally violent, why did the U.S. Army implement combat rotations after World War II so that soldiers could recuperate psychologically, and why did the military change combat operations and training in an attempt to reduce psychological trauma? Although human beings are not naturally violent, we can certainly *become* violent through conditioning. In my books I describe the many ways people can be conditioned to be violent, and the situations that compel people to resort to violence. Just as doctors who promote health must study and understand illness, if we want to promote a safer and more peaceful world we must study and understand violence.

HEROES NEVER WET THEIR PANTS AND OTHER MYTHS

Seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes had a negative view of human nature, leading many people to believe we are natural killers. Because of Hobbes, many people assume human beings in the “state of nature” were clubbing each other over the head in a violent free-for-all. Hobbes said that early humans were “in that condition which is called War; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man... where man is Enemy to every man... and the life of man,

²¹ Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 77.

solitary [emphasis added], poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”²² But military history shows that when untrained human beings must face lethal combat alone as solitary individuals they usually fall apart mentally. Consequently, Hobbes’ view of human nature is not only negative but unrealistic, because he did not study military history, human psychology, or anthropology (Douglas Fry’s book *Beyond War* offers thorough anthropological evidence that early humans rarely killed each other).

In addition to countering the myth that human beings are naturally violent, I am writing about *The Hunger Games* and contrasting it with the reality of war for several other reasons. One reason is because a seventh-grade teacher told me her students were reading the first book in *The Hunger Games* series in class and asked me to provide some thoughts that could sharpen their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, *The Hunger Games* is now being used as required reading in many middle and high school classes around the country. This got my attention, because when students are required to read a book in school they have a reasonable expectation of being educated. If students are reading a book in school that grossly misrepresents very serious issues such as war, violence, and trauma, it is the responsibility not only of teachers but citizens as a whole to provide the students with accurate information, because the fate and survival of our country and planet depend on an educated and informed population.

But can inaccurate depictions of war, violence, and trauma really cause any harm, or are these misrepresentations mostly harmless? War, violence, and trauma destroy millions of lives, and whenever serious issues that destroy so many lives are depicted in inaccurate ways that neglect their real psychological harm, the results can be damaging. What if serious issues such as racism, sexism, drug addiction, rape, and slavery were depicted in grossly inaccurate ways that neglected their real psychological harm? And what if these misrepresentations were then brought into a classroom where students have a reasonable expectation of being educated?

A major problem with inaccurately depicting violence is that these misrepresentations tend to glamorize violence, war, and killing. Lieutenant Colonel Grossman tells us: “*The American Soldier*, the official study of the performance of U.S. troops in World War II, tells of one survey in which a quarter of all U.S. soldiers in World War II admitted that they had lost control of their bladders, and an eighth of them admitted to defecating in their pants. If we look only at the individuals at the ‘tip of the spear’ and factor out those who did not experience intense combat, we can estimate that approximately 50 percent of those who did see intense combat admitted they had wet their pants and nearly 25 percent admitted they had messed themselves. Those are the ones who admitted it, so the actual number is probably higher, though we cannot know by how much. One veteran told me, ‘Hell, Colonel, all that proves is that three out of four were damned liars!’ That is probably unfair and inaccurate, but the reality is that the humiliation and social stigma associated with ‘crapping yourself’ probably results in many individuals being unwilling to admit the truth. ‘I will go see a war movie,’ said one Vietnam veteran, ‘when the main

²² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Digireads: 1st Touchstone Edition, 2004), 56

character is shown shitting his pants in the battle scene.' Have you ever seen a movie that depicted a soldier defecating in his drawers in combat?"²³

Think about it. Have you ever seen an action movie where the hero urinates or defecates in his pants? Ever? The first book in *The Hunger Games* series also heavily distorts the reality of war trauma – commonly referred to as post traumatic stress disorder. Many people think war trauma only takes effect after combat, not realizing that soldiers can collapse mentally *during* combat. The main character in *The Hunger Games* goes through therapy in the later books, but children reading the first book are given the unrealistic impression that our minds are virtually immune to trauma *during* combat. I have not read the other books, and I am focusing only on the first book because it is the one most commonly used in schools. Too often war trauma is either presented in a shallow way (as it is in the first book of *The Hunger Games* series), or veterans are stereotyped as being “damaged goods.” Both misrepresentations are inaccurate and dangerous. The most common features of serious war trauma are a chronic sense of meaninglessness, losing the will to live, mental breakdowns, an inability to trust that leads to self-destructive behavior, and going berserk. Jonathan Shay calls going berserk “the most important and distinctive element of combat trauma,”²⁴ and it can cause people to mutilate corpses and commit other atrocities.

If teachers do not give their students accurate information about war, violence, and trauma, some of the students reading *The Hunger Games* in school may think, “None of the children in *The Hunger Games* have mental breakdowns in combat, so I don’t see why soldiers in war have so many problems.” The situation in *The Hunger Games* is so extreme that at least some of the children would experience serious war trauma and have mental breakdowns during or even prior to the battle. In the *Iliad*, composed by Homer around three thousand years ago, the highly trained Greek warrior Achilles suffers from serious war trauma *during* the war.²⁵ Jonathan Shay explains: “Profound grief and suicidal longing take hold of Achilles; he feels that he is already dead; he is tortured by guilt and the conviction that he should have died rather than his friend; he renounces all desire to return home alive; he goes berserk and commits atrocities against the living and the dead. This *is* the story of Achilles in the *Iliad*.”²⁶

It might seem like the children in *The Hunger Games* do not break down mentally because they still have a miniscule chance of surviving if they take the right actions, and unlike the terminal illness scenario, this gives them some control over their fate. But military history shows that when soldiers have a miniscule chance of surviving they are more likely to lose the will to live and become suicidal. This is why it is so important for military commanders to encourage their soldiers, give them hope, and maintain high morale. Most human beings want to have a

²³ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman with Loren W. Christensen, *On Combat* (Milstadt, IL: Warrior Science Publications, 2008), 9, 10.

²⁴ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 76.

²⁵ Part of Achilles’ war trauma is the death of his friend Patroclus. When soldiers love their comrades, the downside is that the death of those comrades can cause serious trauma.

²⁶ *Ibid*, xxi.

reasonable level of control over their lives, and losing almost complete control can cause some people to believe the only control they have left is the decision to take their own lives.

When soldiers have almost no chance of surviving and are pushed to the breaking point they can also go berserk. This is why Sun Tzu – who wrote *The Art of War* over two thousand years ago – advised military commanders to never trap their opponents into a corner, but to always give them an escape route because berserker soldiers are extremely dangerous. There is no indication in the first book of *The Hunger Games* series that any of the characters go berserk, because they always seem to act rationally. Common characteristics of berserker rage are suicidal behavior (because the person going berserk feels invincible), a severe lack of self-control that resembles intoxication, and the mutilation of corpses. The author makes a vague reference to participants in past events eating each other's hearts, but it is unclear whether this is a reference to berserker rage.

When books are used in schools they must be held to a higher standard. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is taught in schools because it provides an accurate commentary on racism, but what if the book instead grossly misrepresented the harm caused by racism and segregation? Violence has become so normalized and glamorized in our society that depictions of violence are rarely assessed for their accuracy, but when the United States is involved in multiple wars overseas and American soldiers are returning home with physical and psychological wounds, we must seriously question what students are being taught about war, violence, and trauma.

Several people have suggested to me that the first book does in fact teach students about war, violence, and trauma, because the “hunger games veteran” Haymitch – who won the competition when he was younger and serves as a mentor to the main character – is an alcoholic. But if he really has war trauma, why is his alcoholism always portrayed in a comical and harmless way in the first book? Haymitch seems like the stereotypical “alcoholic war veteran,” except that his drunken antics come across as clownish. My father had severe war trauma from the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and his violent rages were truly terrifying. If Haymitch is supposed to represent the effects of war trauma, students who read the book in school are given the impression that war trauma looks funny, rather than frightening.

People have also suggested to me that Haymitch is less affected by war trauma because he – like most of the other competitors in *The Hunger Games* – came from poverty. But do the poor value their lives less than the rich? My father, who was half white and half black, grew up under segregation in the South during the Great Depression. Many of the World War II and Korean War veterans also lived in poverty during the Great Depression. And soldiers throughout history did not have the luxuries we enjoy in the twenty-first century, while many were poor. So military history gives us overwhelming evidence that coming from poverty does not make people immune to war trauma.

Perhaps *The Hunger Games* is a blessing in disguise, because it can give students an opportunity to think critically and discuss serious issues such as war, violence, and trauma. *The Hunger Games* also has several noble themes and offers some useful critiques on society. I am not analyzing the writing quality, character

development, or any part of the book other than its depiction of violence – one of its central themes. I don't think Suzanne Collins, the author of *The Hunger Games*, had any bad intentions or intentionally misrepresented war, violence, and trauma. There are many reasons to believe she tried to make the book as serious and realistic as possible. For example, she describes injuries in gory detail, and she explains physical adversities such as thirst and hunger with impressive thoroughness. But like many people in our society who have been misled by the myths of war, she has emphasized the physical adversity of war but greatly underestimated the psychological adversity. Inaccurate depictions of violence have been around for a long time, but *The Hunger Games* is unique because it distorts the psychological reality of war, violence, and trauma more than any book I have ever seen used in school.

For example, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has been around for over fifty years, and although it glosses over many aspects of war, it portrays war and violence far more realistically than *The Hunger Games*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the ability of soldiers to fight courageously is more believable because they have reliable comrades, reliable leaders, and have had military training. Furthermore, killing monsters that don't look like us is less psychologically stressful than killing our own species, and this is why war propaganda often portrays the enemy as inhuman monsters. And although the hobbits aren't highly trained in combat, their ability to fight ferociously is believable because they are trying to protect their friends who are in immediate danger. I am certainly not saying *The Lord of the Rings* portrays war or trauma accurately. Instead, I am saying *The Hunger Games* is unique, because it is far more unrealistic than *The Lord of the Rings* and many other violent depictions in the past.

The Hunger Games is also unique because it is being taught in schools during a critical time in history when the destructive capacity of nuclear weapons makes war a threat to human survival. During this critical time in history it has never been more important for people to understand the reality of war.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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