

An End to Silence – A Call to Act

Posted on May 27, 2013 by J. A. Moad II

In March, as the ten-year anniversary of the Iraq War rolled around, I felt a sense of obligation to write about the event. Considering that the repercussions of the war continue to resonate across our nation and the globe (and will for decades to come), acknowledging the day seemed important. But neither the impulse nor the spark was there. I sat in front of a blank screen, uninspired, and I was blank inside, too. I found myself pushing back against this sense of obligation, deciding to let the opportunity pass by. Others would say what they needed to say, but for me, silence seemed a more fitting response.



Instead, I simply reflected on my own experience ten years before. I was on airplane returning to the U.S. from Germany on the day the war began. I'd been flying support missions during the previous year and helping to plan part of the invasion of Iraq through Turkey—a plan that died on the desks of the Turkish general staff. Downtown Baghdad had already been hit hard by the time I stepped onto a flight bound for the U.S. and for a new job at Tanker Airlift Control Center. I would spend the next three years in a dark, twenty-four hour command center in the Midwest, planning and coordinating airlift operations in support of the wars.

Back on American soil, *Shock and Awe* had given us all a sense that victory would be swift and decisive. It was an illusion we would cling to as the months and years of brutal combat, suicide bombings, house-to-house fighting, IEDs and the spark of secular violence took their toll on the people of Iraq, their infrastructure, and the Americans soldiers embroiled in a conflict they couldn't win. The months and years passed by, reflecting a rare certainty of all wars—that they are seldom short, simple, efficient, or cheap. Despite this well-known reality, it's quite clear that each new generation suffers a kind of amnesia when it comes to contemplating the next war. As former Vice President Dick Cheney knew all too well in 1994, a war in Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein would lead to a protracted and costly quagmire and one costly in American lives, too. He clearly articulated his reasons for not ousting the dictator in the First Gulf War in a [News Interview](#)—thoughts grounded in an honest assessment from knowledge gleaned as Secretary of Defense. I wonder if he suffered a kind of amnesia as well.

In the days leading up to the ten-year anniversary, I listened to what was being said and written by others, watched commentators speak about a military pushed to the limits, the layered costs of the war, an overwhelmed VA system, the unprecedented rise in military suicides, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), domestic abuse, sexual assaults, violence, incarceration, and of course, Post Traumatic Stress (PTS – I've decided to no longer use the term, 'disorder' by the way, because it's not a disorder. It's a normal response to trauma of that nature). No, I didn't need to add anything to the discussion.

Looking back, I think it felt wrong to give more attention to the beginning of a war that should never have been waged. After all, the impetus for our invasion of Iraq was not tied to *A Day That Would Live in Infamy*. There

was no 9-11 or Boston Massacre from which to ground our methodical march toward war long after the Two Towers fell. No, the decision to invade Iraq seemed to mirror the start of other unnecessary wars in our past—the 21st Century version of the *Sinking of the Maine* or *The Gulf of Tonkin Incident*. It was linked to insecurity, to fear and an abiding need for retribution in the aftermath of an attack we were still coping with. Afghanistan wasn't enough. We needed to believe there was more at work out there, and despite little or no proof, we accepted the plausible scenarios, let our fears drive us, indifferent or unaware that intelligence had been manipulated or obtained by torture.

I fell in line too, clinging to flimsy evidence, compelled by the desire to stop another attack. In part, I think we were entranced by our own good intentions as well: to be a force for good, to end a brutal tyrant's reign, stop his use of weapons of mass destruction, and to spread democracy throughout the Middle East (a naïve endeavor if ever there was one). This is, after all, a vein that runs deep within the American narrative—a sense that all our wars are done for the right reason (a myth we need to confront, as well). I remember all too well, my own sense of certainty that Iraq was hiding weapons that could fall into terrorists' hands. I silenced the questions within me, letting my own fear and need for a degree of certainty—action in the face of danger—drive my thinking. But like so many of us, I was wrong.

The voices questioning the need for war were stifled or silenced by the resounding drumbeats of a war machine in motion. Derided as unpatriotic or weak, those few voices were pushed aside, and a pervasive silence ensued as the military prepared and government contracts were signed. Yes, the beasts of war were uncaged—acts that we, as a society, are complicit in.

But for me, the question is, why? Why was it so easy for us to silence the voices of the past and present, the voice of doubt within us, the lessons from history and the literature of war, and even the counsel of Generals who chose to question the war effort? I've come to a conclusion that we've marginalized the important voices of past wars—relegated the literature of war to a narrow genre of study to be looked at through a distant lens. The lack of a war on our shores has made this failure easy to understand.

Over the last decade I've become all too aware of the lack of knowledge—the limited education that our students have been afforded on the subject. Whenever I speak with an English professor or high school teacher, they always tend to mention the one or two books they've chosen to teach in the genre: *The Killer Angels*, *The Things They Carried* or *Catch 22*, but they seem uncomfortable delving too deep or taking the discussion into the dark places we need to explore. Instead, we tend glorify war in movies, video games, and even in our history—a great disservice to our future by failing to study the effect of war on our nation. It is my hope that these wars of the Twenty First Century and the current generation of Vets will continue to open the door to a greater dialogue... an end to silence.

Yesterday, I was all ready to post this piece. I was planning to simply add a final paragraph to reference the [Living List](#) I published two and a half years ago. At the time, I listed the top thirty recommended war literature books from people in the War Lit community. I was planning to end this piece by writing how I'd been asking people over the last few years the following question: What books would you add to the list? The response has been amazing, and I've discovered something new or different that I'd never read before. I was planning to make one final call to everyone out there, and then to post an updated list of a hundred books on the subject (which I'm still planning to do, by the way). But an opinion piece I saw in the Washington Post yesterday, made me pause and rethink what I wanted to say.

The piece, [*Veterans Need To Share the Moral Burden of War*](#) was by Sebastian Junger. While I agree with almost everything he had to say, his final plea to Veterans prompted me to rewrite the ending to this essay and take things a bit further. At the end of his OpEd, he wrote,

“On Memorial Day or Veterans Day, in addition to traditional parades, communities could make their city or town hall available for vets to tell their stories. Each could get, say, 10 minutes to tell his or her experience at war. Attendance could not be mandatory, but on that day “I support the troops” would mean spending hours listening to our vets. We would hear a lot of anger and pain. We would also hear a lot of pride. Some of what would be said would make you uncomfortable, whether you are liberal or conservative, military or nonmilitary, young or old. But there is no point in having a conversation about war that is not completely honest.”

My first thought was, *I hope something like this can happen*, but I realized as I began crafting the ending to my own essay, *Hope* isn't enough. While Sebastian's sentiment is a respectable one that I subscribe to, the reality is that the Veteran-Civilian divide is still too wide. For the non-writer Veteran out there, sharing a personal story with civilians is an incredibly challenging endeavor. I've worked with Veteran writing groups, and even in rooms surrounded by other Vets, it's difficult to get them to write or talk about what they've experienced. The pain, anger and hurt from the trauma is too powerful to share with just anyone. But Sebastian is right, this idea of sharing their stories is incredibly important—something that needs to happen. But it needs to start at a much earlier level.

The history of Memorial Day is grounded in Decoration Day—a day on which the graves of Civil War Soldiers were decorated. It has evolved and is meant to honor the fallen from all our wars—to be a reminder of the sacrifice they made for our nation. It's a powerful and sincere endeavor with parades, flag waving, and a moment of silence to honor the dead. But these gestures are empty without recalling the stories of the suffering endured by those who gave their lives on our behalf.

In addition to serving as a means of respect, *silence* can represent many things: denial, ignorance, fear, repression, and death. As a friend once told me, her father who'd fought in World War II was bothered by all the Vietnam Vets who came back home with horrible stories and spoke out against the war. That new generation of Vets had broken an unwritten code of silence among Veterans of World War II—a code they'd suffered under as their war faded into the background of the Cold War. Their war had been such a horrific experience, one that Americans at home had been distanced from and wanted to let go once the fighting had stopped. It's understandable, of course. We were a nation exhausted from the war effort and didn't seem interested in confronting the harsh realities of that era. Those men of the Greatest Generation were never afforded the opportunity to share their stories. The result, as we've come to understand over time, is that behind the silence lies repression, anxiety, violence, alcohol and drug abuse—issues which have rippled across generations, touching each of us in one way or another.

Yes, we need to end the silence, and rather than simply express the importance of reading the literature of war, I'm going a step further. I'm calling on all the educators across our nation to share the voices of the past wars—the stories of the dead and the living—to resurrect the ghosts of war and end the silence. After all, hope requires a form of action to achieve that which we hope for, doesn't it?

And with that, I propose October – the month before Veteran’s Day be a month devoted to teaching the literature of war. I’m calling on the known voices out there to help and promote this: *Sebastian Junger, Thomas Ricks, Brian Turner, Dexter Filkins, Donald Anderson, Tobias Wolff, Siobhan Fallon, Andrew Carroll, Matt Gallagher, Brian McDonald...* and so many more. Let’s make this happen.

Maybe after we’ve laid the foundation for understanding, once we’ve shared in an open dialogue on one level, we can set the stage for a greater discussion—the most important one of all: A dialogue between our Veterans and citizens on the true costs and the repercussions of war. Maybe then we can end the silence.

Please send any thoughts on a way to help get this effort get off the ground to me at James.Moad2@gmail.com — As well as any War Lit Books to update *The Living List*.

Until Next Time,

J. A. Moad II



About J. A. Moad II

J.A. Moad II is a former Air Force C-130 pilot with over 3000 flight hours and 100 combat sorties. He served as an English Professor at the United States Air Force Academy and as a fiction editor for the War, Literature & the Arts Journal (WLA). He writes online essays for WLA and is engaged in a program to make October Veterans' Voices Month across the country. His short stories, poetry and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, including winning the 2014 Consequences Magazine Fiction Award. In addition to writing, he has performed on stage at the Library of Congress and The Guthrie Theater as part of the Telling Project - giving a voice to the Veteran experience. He currently resides in Northfield, MN where he flies for Delta Airlines and is editing on a novel about an American military in a not too-distant future.

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7 Responses to *An End to Silence – A Call to Act*



[patricia bubash](#) says:

May 27, 2013 at 10:18 pm

Excellent thoughts-my husband and I have attended two memorial services this weekend. I feel it is the least that we can do, as well as the minimal time we volunteer for the USO. My dad is a 20 yr. Navy veteran, my husband drafted into VietNam. I am so proud of both these men in my life- they served, did their share for the citizens at home. I agree, wholeheartedly, with you. It is discouraging to me that my children, grandchildren do not understand what this holiday was created for: honoring our fallen soldiers, current soldiers and veterans. I wish, I really wish, your comments, suggestion would be taken to task. And, I am going to hope that it does. Regards, pbubash

[Reply](#)



James A Moad II says:

May 28, 2013 at 1:09 am

Thanks for the kind words. We need to keep educating the kids who are distanced from war and tend to think of it as game. We have to start somewhere.

[Reply](#)



Michael Patterson says: