Our wounds, our duty

Lance Cpl. Greg Rivers, 20, of Sylvester, Ga., waits to take psychological
tests at the Marine Corps
Air Ground Combat Center in
Twentynine Palms, Calif., on
Sept. 29. The U.S. government is
testing hundreds of troops before they
ship out in search of clues
that might help predict who is most
susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder.

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Associated Press

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what we need to do to help prevent such future tragedies. Every citizen of ancient Athens, who
invented democracy and gave us the template for our
democracy. The ancient Greeks lived in just as confus-
ing and terrifying a world as we live in. Athenian
politics was just as divisive. Their democ-
raacy, during its first 100 years, went through
assassinations, foreign military interventions,
economic crises, right-wing coups and radical
populist extremism. The Athenians were at
war almost every year in the century after
the battle for freedom fought by their own greatest
generation, the Marathon-fighters, in 490 B.C.
Marathon was their Normandy.

Near the end of that century, the Athenians,
at their height of power, fought a 27-year
war with Sparta. Athenian losses were stagger-
ing, the equivalent of the lost generation Great
Britain and Germany suffered during World
War I. Yet we have no reports of rape actions
by Athenian soldiers in the field. The few ac-
counts of crimes of soldiers suffering with war
trauma give no evidence that they committed
acts of public violence. The Athenians must
have understood that it was not in their inter-
test that we are not.

Athenian citizens understood war and its costs. They understood the need to look at war honestly,
collectively and openly. They had no other
choice. Every Athenian man, woman and
child knew the hardships and felt the sorrow of
war.

We have been sequestered from the wars in
Iraq and Afghanistan in a way unimaginable in
fifth century Athens. Our civilization is
haunted by a fear of a mysterious enemy that
strikes us anywhere, at any time. It gives us an
out. We could know little about such an enemy,
so we willingly let the conduct of the war in
Iraq and Afghanistan dictate our conduct.

We also went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan
quickly with the army we had, and with limited
public debate. Our exposure to the casualties of
combat was also limited. Even images of flag-
draped coffins were for a long time taboo.

In contrast, the Athenians displayed 11 cof-
fins at their annual public funeral for fallen
soldiers. Ten coffins contained the remains of
citizen-soldiers from each of Athens’ 19 tribes.
An 11th coffin was for soldiers whose bodies
could not be recovered.

The absence of a universal draft and the
small size and demographics of our army fur-
ther shelter us from the real tragedies of war.
Our military is largely composed of men and
women from the reserves or enlists. These
soldiers are brave and patriotic. But our situa-
tion stands in contrast with Athens, where all
adult citizens, rich and poor, were soldiers. And
the wealthier classes, armed infantry soldiers
known as hoplites and soldiers in the cavalry,
borne the brunt of their ground fighting.

The volunteer soldiers who do our fighting are
redeployed too soon and too often. They experi-
ence stress beyond bearable limits. When
they return from tours of duty, we know little
about the hell they have been through and seem
to care even less. We expect our dedicated mil-
itary health professionals to care for our
soldiers. Because many don’t re-enlist, their
numbers are shrinking dramatically. They are
overstretched and overtaxed.

Many soldiers returning from combat duty
and their family members require intensive
psychiatric therapy to heal the psychological
wounds of war. Caregivers cannot be passive
listeners. They must be there as fellow human
beings. They hear stories of extreme pain, often
in the absence of diagnosable post-traumatic
stress disorder. They take in the pain of their
patients. They share it, reshape it and help in-
tegrate it into a healthy post-war adaptation.
But they cannot and should not do these things
alone. Nor should our soldiers and their fami-
lies.

We have placed our soldiers and therapy-giv-
ers in a psychological pressure cooker. Combat
troops, their families, and military psychiatrists
and psychotherapists live in lonely and painful
isolation.

We propose that all Americans need to be-
come citizens as the ancient Athenians un-
derstood the term. We need to take an active
interest in what our soldiers and those who
care for them are going through overwise and
back home. They need to know that we know
the trauma they have suffered in the wars we
have sent them to fight.

In ancient Athens, the government sponsored
june of tragedies and comedies. Through the tragedies, written
by military veterans like Aeschylus and active
soldiers like Sophocles, Athenian soldiers and
veterans, their families and their fellow citi-
zens worked through the painful experiences of
war together. In the comedies, Sophocles, ag-
gressive public criticism, in which many soldiers participated, was directed at leaders
whose decisions and policies cost Athenian
lives or perpetuated a war that was going to cost
more.

A stunning example of communal partici-
pation occurred in 415 B.C., midway through
their war with Sparta. The citizens of Athens
by formal vote had directed Athenian soldiers
to destroy the neutral isle of Melos, put all its
male inhabitants to death, and sell its women
and children into slavery. Months later, those
very same citizens had joined other Athenians
in the Theater of Dionysus, 14,000 strong, about
eight-thirds of the whole adult male citizen popu-
lation of Athens. They watched a state-approved
play, “The Trojan Women,” in which Greek sol-
diers do the same horrifying things to the men,
women and children of Troy. On subsequent
days, other soldiers and citizens watched other
plays together.

These plays were not impersonal produc-
tions. The performers were deeply connected to
the roles they played, authentically feeling
and portraying their parts, and connecting to
their audience in very real ways. As well as
theatrical plays, the tragedies were designed
to cause deep feelings of sympathy and fear in
members of the audience. And the audience members
during each yearly Festival included the citizen-

We now think of “The Trojan Women” as
our current culture, and its traumatic con-
sequences was also a war play. The whole
citizen body embraced and absorbed the expe-
rience of the Tragedy, grieved and detoxified it.
Embraced their comrades sympathetically
and therapeutically.

No one comes out of war without post-tra-
umatic psychological scars. Combat soldiers
and their families suffer most. Overworked mental
health care professionals suffer, too; especially
if they assume responsibilities we all should
share. Every civilian employee who works in
places like Fort Hood share with soldiers and
their families the pain of war trauma. And all
suffer even more because we isolate and mar-
ginalize them from the mainstream of the rest of
us comfortably occupy.

The ancient Athenians knew that the traumas
of war are best healed when we all take part. Re-
cent performances of Sophocles off Broadway
and of a play based on psychiatrist Jonathan
Shaya’s “Advertisements in Vietnam” specifically
for Americans here in Austin (see Palaima’s op-
column in the Oct. 26 American-Statesman,
http://bit.ly/SuZ9Fb) have proved again the
power of authentically performed drama to
promote healthy discussion of problems that,
if repressed, can have horrific consequences.

We need to find a way for us all as a nation
to share in a broad range of such experiences,
citizens and soldiers alike. War must be fought
by our entire culture, and its consequences healed by our collective efforts to share the burdens of our aggressive behavior
and the aggression directed against us by our
enemies.

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