

Introduction: On Nostalgia



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In the U.S. Congress on December 26th, 1799, Colonel Richard Henry Lee delivered a eulogy of George Washington that included a letter written by Tobias Lear, Washington's personal secretary, who was present at his death:

First in war—first in peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and enduring scenes of private life; pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding, his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting. To his equals he was condescending, to his inferiors kind, and to the dear object of his affections exemplarily tender; correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence, and virtue always felt his fostering hand; the purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues. His last scene comported with the whole tenor of his life—although in extreme pain, not a sigh, not a groan escaped him; and with undisturbed serenity he closed his well-spent life. Such was the man America has lost—such was the man for whom our nation mourns.

Ideas have changed over time and made it hard to recognize the fact that the nation's founding father was a powerful symbol of transitioning from military to civil life. The hero of the American Revolution was also an enduring symbol of Post-Traumatic Growth long before psychology was a recognized intellectual endeavor.

It is also fitting to note that, though Washington was a symbol of seamless transition from war to civil life, Henry Lee's life was much more troubled. Commonly referred to as Light Horse Harry Lee and the father of Robert E. Lee, he was a successful and noteworthy figure immediately following the Revolution. But when he was injured in a riot during the War of 1812, he was permanently disabled and forced to seek a better climate in the West Indies. His memoirs came from a debtors' prison and became popular only when his more noteworthy son edited them. Still, his memoirs are an impressive account of the Revolution and can serve as an example of someone channeling trauma's effect into a lasting and valuable collective memory of his experiences. Lee's words, like Washington's transition, illustrate how Post-Traumatic Growth has been central to the American experience of war, and life in general.

Nostalgia was an American Civil War condition that scholars have recognized as a predecessor to Shell Shock. Historians like Eric Dean Jr. and Dianne Miller Sommerville are not only expanding our understanding of conditions like PTSD, but also providing a better understanding of soldiers' experience in the

Civil War. However, while there are certainly some reified and socially constructed aspects of the syndrome in the present, most of its central problems are ahistorical and timeless.

There are two influential, socially constructed ideas of the war veteran. One says that war is the ultimate experience and the veteran's experiences triumphs over any other human endeavor. The other narrative is of the vagabond veterans who fail to cope with war and trauma: they commit suicide; they are homeless; they do not control their anger; or they are helpless against the force of PTSD. Like all popular images, these have power and some veterans conform to the mold set for them. Even the complicated essays you will read in this volume could, in some ways, be fit into one of these powerful narratives, if that were this publication's objective. Instead, what you will read is much more fractured and temporal. Surviving war and rape is hell, and PTSD is very difficult; yet these authors have found a way to grow. Exposure therapy or writing about trauma helps foster strength in PTSD survivors. We create the environment in which growth can occur.

PTSD may not be the right diagnosis for every one of these authors; the common bonds between our authors are survival, loss, difficulty in life after the military, and the shared strength of accepting the way violence has shaped them. Tragedy and trauma in uniform takes many forms, and each author's path toward growth is both an idiosyncratic representation of self and a story of survival. Our authors have found growth through things as diverse as faith in Jesus Christ to the love of their children, among other

routes. They all have taken ownership of their traumatic pasts through the process of writing and revision. The road has been hard, but by writing they have faced their memories. We hope that what you read will forever be a source of growth and strength. Hopefully, this volume can inspire our readers to grow through the difficult, but valuable process of writing, if only in a journal or private computer file.