

Veterans' Suicide: From Eugenics to Video Games

by Carl Osgood

The Nov. 14, 2007 report by CBS News that 6,256 veterans had committed suicide 2005, has set alarm bells ringing all across the veterans advocacy community. Prior to the CBS report, there was little more than anecdotal evidence and rough estimates that suicide was a serious problem among veterans of all wars, including the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the Summer of 2003, when suicide and other mental health issues began to come to the fore in Iraq, so much evidence has surfaced as to the effects of combat trauma on the mental health of soldiers and Marines who fight these wars, that there is very little question, any more, that there is a direct link, though there is still some resistance from the military. What remains to be investigated in much depth, however, is the possibility that this problem is the product of something much more dangerous than mere ignorance, bureaucratic inertia, and a cynical desire to cut costs.

Preliminary research has turned up strong links between military psychiatry, the pseudo-science of eugenics, and the post-World War II Cybernetics Group's efforts to separate human beings from their humanity. The early-20th-Century proponents of eugenics essentially argued that human beings could be bred like dogs or racehorses, and that undesirable traits, including psychological problems and low intelligence, could be bred out of the human race by preventing "defectives" from having children. It was only a small jump from there to the cybernetics crowd's contentions that human beings could be programmed like computers, or that, some day, computers might become "superior" to human beings, as a result of advances in artificial intelligence. The LaRouche PAC pamphlet "Is the Devil in Your Laptop?" documents how this process of dehumanization began as an exploration of "shell shock" in World War I veterans, and then evolved into explorations of how to induce the state of shell shock in entire populations, using methods of mass psychology.

Eugenics Comes to the U.S. Army

Penny Coleman, a veterans' advocate and the widow of a Vietnam vet who committed suicide, provides leads to the actual nature of that beast in her 2006 book, *Flashback: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Suicide and the Lessons of War*, though she may not realize just what the beast is she's pointing to. Coleman testified to the House Veterans Affairs Committee on Dec. 12, 2007, that the Pentagon's refusal to accept

the connection between soldier suicides and war has resulted in a "public health issue of monstrous proportion," one that is not new. "Our soldiers and our veterans are not disposable, and yet, that's how they're being treated."

The lead that Coleman provides, that begins to explain why veterans have been treated as "disposable," is the role of Thomas W. Salmon. Salmon was put in charge of Army psychiatry during World War I, even though he was trained as a bacteriologist and had only learned what he knew about psychiatry from screening immigrants at Ellis Island. She notes that he was a leading proponent of the eugenics movement. "His influence is unmistakable in the disastrous plan the U.S. Army instituted [for World War II] to engineer a fighting force that would be both fierce and invulnerable, if not to physical, at least to psychiatric injury."

During the early 20th Century, Salmon was the medical director of the National Committee on Mental Hygiene (NCMH), and as such was deeply involved in the eugenics movement. Barbara Sicherman, in *The Quest for Mental Health in America, 1880-1917* (1980), reports that "Psychiatrists by 1910 expressed grave concern about the growing number of 'defective' citizens, including criminals, the mentally ill and especially the feeble minded." Salmon, she reports, argued that "There can be no question that the right of the individual to bear children must be disregarded in the interest of ordinary humanity as well as in the interests of the race." Other eugenicists among the membership of the NCMH included Charles B. Davenport, H.H. Goddard, Irving Fisher, and David Starr Jordan. Davenport and Jordan were two of the three vice presidents of the First International Eugenics Congress, held in London in 1912. That congress, plus two more held in 1921 and 1932, would, among other things, help lay the basis for Adolf Hitler's race laws.

Salmon was to be honored for his "pioneering" work by Dr. John Rawlings Rees, the longtime director of the Tavistock Institute, London's premier psychological warfare agency. In 1945, when Rees was still the director of the Psychiatric Division of the British Army, he delivered a series of lectures, to be published as *The Shaping of Psychiatry by War*, in the United States, to commemorate Salmon, who had died in 1927. In it, Rees echoed Salmon's outlook (which really was an echo of the British view, since it was the British imperialists that had invented eugenics in the first place). He argued that psychiatric methods were needed to separate out "dull men" from the pool of recruits, so that the costs—such as petty crimes and the expense of training men for technical tasks that they are genetically incapable of mastering—run up by men "wrongly placed in the service" could be minimized. Rees's argument about the problem of "dull men" exactly paralleled those of people like Salmon, who argued that "mental defectives" should not be allowed to have children.

Naturally, Rees praised the methods that the U.S. Army had adopted for the selection of recruits during World War II,

which were based on Salmon's eugenics outlook, despite the fact that Hitler had given eugenics a bad name. These methods "worked so well" that, according to Coleman, by 1943, the number of psychiatric discharges exceeded the number of new recruits, showing that the system was, in fact, a disaster. Coleman reports that Salmon is revered in military psychiatric circles to this day.

From Eugenics to Cybernetics

As documented by Jeffrey Steinberg in "From Cybernetics to Littleton: Techniques of Mind Control (*EIR*, May 5, 2000), Rees's and Salmon's National Committee for Mental Hygiene came together, along with the cybernetics crowd which regularly met under the auspices of the Josiah Macy Foundation between 1948 and 1953, to inaugurate the World Federation of Mental Health, of which Rees would be the president. The manifesto for the WFMH, written by anthropologist Margaret Mead and Lawrence K. Frank, who was then with the NCMH, declared that "the goal of mental health has been enlarged from the concern for the development of healthy personalities to the larger tasks of creating a healthy society. . . . The concept of mental health is co-extensive with world order and world community."

Gregory Bateson, then the husband of Mead, and a participant in the Macy Foundation conferences, was himself deployed to the Palo Alto Veterans Administration Hospital in California, during the 1950s, to carry out experiments with LSD-25 as part of the MK-Ultra project to create and spread the rock-drug-sex counterculture. As reported in *EIR*'s book *Dope, Inc.* (1992), by experimenting on patients already hospitalized for psychological problems, Bateson created a core of "initiates" into the psychedelic cult that would become so much a part of the counterculture in the 1960s. Presumably, Bateson's experimental subjects would have included veterans of World War II and Korea. A scan of the literature on the subject suggests, also, that Palo Alto was not the only veterans hospital where such LSD experiments were carried out.

From Cybernetics to Violent Video Games

Today's violent video-game culture, which very much has its roots in the cybernetics-counterculture project launched by the Macy conferences (see "Is the Devil in Your Laptop?") has largely taken over the U.S. military in recent years. Video games, such as the Army's "America's Army," are used as recruitment tools, and more muscular versions of the same games are used to train soldiers to be more effective killers in combat. In fact, young people are in a sense, already half trained when they come into the military, by having played video games as children; hence, the growing use of video-game controllers for new weapons systems, such as robotic vehicles designed to carry out many different military tasks.

Recognition, however, has begun to dawn, at least in a

few places, that the mixture of combat trauma and violent video games may not be a good one for mental health. Steve Robinson, a well-known veterans' advocate who has become involved in developing programs to mitigate the harmful effects of combat stress, reported to *EIR* on Jan. 10, that he is now warning senior military leaders to keep soldiers in the combat zone away from video games. In a recent predeployment training session, he told senior leaders, "The worst thing you can do is let your 19- to 25-year-old soldier, who comes off the battlefield, go back to his forward operating base, get off a combat mission, and keep his brain in combat mode by playing Halo 3 for the next four hours." He said that the soldier who does this is continuing to engage and replay in his head the day's events via the video game.

"What you really should be doing," Robinson said, "is giving the brain the opportunity to reset . . . to clear from your mind as much as possible the negative effects of what you witnessed that day, because if you let it continue to play in your mind, what you end up doing is creating a trough." The effect is like pouring water down a hillside from a bucket: The water will find a natural path down the hill, and the more water is poured, the deeper the path and the quicker the water reaches the bottom of the hill. "It's the same thing in creating these neuronal networks," Robinson said. "If you get off the mission and go to the video game, all you're doing is reinforcing the speed with which that path travels and the response time that your brain and your body has to what it sees, and it also becomes deeper and more ingrained."

What Is the VA Covering Up?

With the foregoing history in mind, it becomes less of a mystery why the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is unable to effectively address, or perhaps even is covering up as some charge, the problem of suicide among veterans. During the same Dec. 12 hearing at which Coleman testified, committee chairman Bob Filner (D-Calif.) expressed anger and frustration at the VA officials sitting at the witness table, for failing to address the issue. Filner castigated Dr. Ira Katz, the VA's top mental health official, for presenting a statement that showed lots of activity but no results. "It takes away the sense of credibility that you're trying to raise here, that you're doing all this, because we have both anecdotal evidence, and now we have more statistical data, that we're failing as a nation. . . . And you're acting as if everything is goodness and light," he said.

It came out in the course of the hearing that the VA actually has the resources to collect sufficient data on mental health issues, including suicides, among veterans, so that the magnitude of the problems could be understood, but is not doing so. One veterans advocate commented to *EIR* that the actual VA policy on suicides is, "Don't look, don't find." With eugenics and cybernetics lurking in the background, it would make sense that the VA would not be interested in looking too deeply into the suicide issue.