



Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming

By Jonathan Shay M.D.

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In this ambitious follow-up to *Achilles in Vietnam*, Dr. Jonathan Shay uses the *Odyssey*, the story of a soldier's homecoming, to illuminate the pitfalls that trap many veterans on the road back to civilian life.

Seamlessly combining important psychological work and brilliant literary interpretation with an impassioned plea to renovate American military institutions, Shay deepens our understanding of both the combat veteran's experience and one of the world's greatest classics.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

It's not exactly a secret that those returning from war often have difficulties adjusting to the peaceful life at home. Nor is it a secret that hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans have had emotionally rocky homecomings. The main reasons Vietnam veterans have suffered disproportionately have been identified in many books. Shay (*Achilles in Vietnam*), a Tufts Medical School faculty member, serves as a Veterans Administration psychiatrist administering to emotionally troubled Vietnam veterans and offers his second study engaging the Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, in order to describe and explain veterans' plight. Shay presents an amalgam of scholarly Homeric interpretation and case studies of maladjusted Vietnam veterans, arguing that leaders—from top policy makers to drill instructors—hold the key to preventing many psychological problems in the military. He advocates fostering a climate of community at the unit level by training and supporting competent, open-minded, ethical military leaders who have the full support of their superiors. While it's an intriguing argument, the case studies do not contribute to existing literature, and the tone of the book—which contains countless italicized words and phrases—comes off too often as hectoring or stridently didactic. Readers with a working knowledge of *The Odyssey* and a familiarity with the effects of PTSD among Americans who served in the Vietnam War may get the most out of this book, which could affect policy if it finds its way to upper echelons of command.

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From Library Journal

Shay, a psychiatrist in the Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, has worked with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam veterans for many years. In his first book, *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay explored the stresses and psychological injuries caused by armed combat, using the insight of Homer's *Iliad*. That book was warmly received in both the medical and the military professions. In the first third of the new book, Shay uses Odysseus's epic journey to explore the stresses faced by veterans who return home, still scarred by their intense experiences. In Shay's interpretation, Odysseus experienced nearly all of the symptoms he has observed in returned veterans of modern wars: fearfulness, inability to trust or be close to anyone, emotional outbursts, violence, criminal activity, sexual adventurism, and so forth. Clearly, Homer understood and appreciated what war really meant to the participants. The second section deals with healing techniques. The third contains Shay's suggested measures for prevention of such long-lasting injuries. Whether or not one agrees with Shay's prescriptive measures, this is a mandatory purchase for any library serving the military or their families, or where medical professionals deal with any kind of stress-related disorder. It is also a fresh take on a literary classic. Highly recommended. Edwin B. Burgess, U.S. Army Combined Arms Research Lib., Fort Leavenworth, KS

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From [Booklist](#)

This book's readers ought to read Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), too. Although the main thrusts of the two books differ, as do the characters of Achilles and Odysseus, they are complementary. Shay, a psychiatrist with a Ph.D. in neuroscience, worked with the V.A.'s Veterans Improvement Program for more than a decade. The veterans in the program, especially those who experienced great difficulty returning to society and family, soon learned that Shay wasn't just interested in them; he actually listened to them. This led to productive realizations for doctor and patients alike, such as that feeling guilty about what a man has or hasn't done doesn't necessarily imply that he *is* guilty. Just as Homer's war hero Achilles "speaks" to the psychology of the soldier, the character and experience of Homer's returning vet Odysseus, Shay says, are fonts of insight

for vets, their families, and their employers. Meanwhile, nonvets will perceive from this book the wisdom of replacing whole units rather than individual soldiers at the front. *William Beatty*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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