

**Newsweek**

# Who Are You Calling Rambo?

**Paul Rieckhoff****NEWSWEEK**

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As any veteran can attest, coming home from war is a long journey, and it's never easy. Then again, neither is sitting across the table from Stephen Colbert. So when I appeared on his show last month, I braced myself for a new kind of incoming fire. True to form, Colbert kept the audience laughing—even when his jokes raised important points about the country's care for combat veterans. "If we support our vets," he cracked, "who will be the crazed veteran in the remake of *Rambo* in 20 years?"

It was a very funny moment. But it also struck at the heart of a common stereotype—the "crazy veteran"—that the Vietnam generation spent decades fighting. It takes only a few unfortunate cases to undo the progress, and the terrible tragedy at Camp Liberty in Baghdad on May 11, when five U.S. soldiers were killed by one of their own, was just such an incident.

As one of the 1.8 million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I worry every day that people do not see combat veterans as who we are—brave, committed patriots—but rather as damaged or dangerous. A fellow Iraq vet, a rising star at a top financial company, told me recently that in front of a room full of company shareholders, his boss turned to him and asked, "Have you ever killed anyone?" It's the question veterans dread most—being asked casually about what may be the darkest experience of their lives. His boss didn't mean to be insensitive; he just didn't know any better. Less than 1 percent of the U.S. public has served in Iraq or Afghanistan; during World War II, the figure was 12 percent.

This disconnect can have real consequences. In polls, employers often say they don't know what skills veterans can bring to their company. More than 11 percent of vets who served after 9/11 are out of work. We have to do better. Stereotypes are insidious, but they can be overcome. Vets are people who excel under adversity, and we are ready to use our valuable experiences to help tackle America's biggest challenges. And speaking of experience, Stephen, I hope you were careful over there. That bull's-eye T shirt that I gave you on the show—it was a joke. Please tell me you didn't wear it in Iraq.

*Rieckhoff is the Executive Director and founder of Iraq And Afghanistan Veterans of America.*

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