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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## An Invisible War

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Paul Rieckhoff looked across the crowded restaurant, which was not far from Times Square.

“During World War II,” he said, “we could be in this place and there would be a guy sitting at that table who was in the war, or the bartender had been in the war. Everybody you saw would have had a stake in the war. But right now you could walk around New York for blocks and not find anybody who has been in Iraq.”

“The president can say we’re a country at war all he wants. We’re not. The military is at war. And the military families are at war. Everybody else is shopping.”

Mr. Rieckhoff is an imposing six-foot-two-inch, 245-pound former infantry officer who joined the military after graduating from Amherst College. When he came home from a harrowing tour in Iraq in 2004, he vowed to do what he could to serve the interests of the men and women who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan but have never fully gotten the support they deserve from the government or the public at large.

He wrote a book, “Chasing Ghosts,” which is now out in paperback, and he formed a powerful veterans’ advocacy organization called Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Mr. Rieckhoff is not bitter. He’s actually funny and quite engaging (and a good writer). But he has very little tolerance for the negligence and incompetence the government has shown in equipping the troops and fighting the war in Iraq, and he is frustrated by the short shrift that he feels the troops get from the media and the vast majority of Americans.

There’s a gigantic and extremely disturbing disconnect, he says, between the experiences of the men and women in uniform and the perspective of people here at home. “We have a very diverse membership in I.A.V.A.,” he said. “We’ve got Republicans and Democrats and everything in between. But one of the key things we all have in common is this frustration with the detachment that we see all around us, this idea that we’re at war and everybody else is watching ‘American Idol.’”

“I think that’s one of the main reasons why so many guys want to go back to Iraq. They come home and feel like: ‘Man, I don’t fit in here. You know, I’m out of place.’” Even though there’s never been a clear statement of the military’s mission in Iraq, and the goals have shifted from month to month and year to year, the soldiers and marines who have been sent there have felt that they were carrying out an important task on behalf of the nation.

“It’s tough to have such a serious sense of commitment,” Mr. Rieckhoff said, “and then come home and see so many people focused on such frivolous things. So I think that frustration is serious and growing. And I’ll tell you the truth: I blame the president for that. One of the biggest criticisms of the president, and I hear

this across the board, is that he hasn't asked the American people to do anything."

Mr. Rieckhoff is convinced that if the public heard more from the soldiers and marines who have actually experienced combat, including those who have been wounded and suffered emotional trauma, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would be viewed more seriously. Part of the problem, he said, is that too many civilians have little or no understanding of what war is really like, and of the toll it takes beyond the obvious toll of the dead and wounded.

Among other things, there are family problems, drug and alcohol abuse, untreated post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicide — all directly attributable to service in a war zone. "Incredibly," he writes in his book, "no government agency keeps track of the number of veterans who kill themselves after their service has ended — another sign of how little value is placed on veterans' long-term well-being."

I mentioned a young soldier I had interviewed in 2005 who worried that because he had killed three insurgents during a battle in Iraq he might not be "allowed into heaven." The soldier wondered whether he had "done the right thing."

Mr. Rieckhoff nodded. "Asking somebody to die for their country might not be the biggest thing you can ask," he said. "Asking my guys to kill, on my orders — as an officer, that's difficult. I'm telling that kid to squeeze that round off and take a man's life. And then he's got that baggage for the rest of his life. That's what you have to live with."

I signaled for the check and we left the restaurant. It was a beautiful, sunlit afternoon. New Yorkers were smiling and enjoying the spring weather. There was no sign of a war anywhere.

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