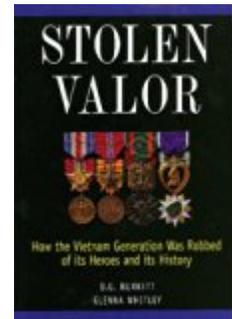


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

B. G. Burkett, Glenna Whitley. *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*. Dallas: Verity Press, 1998. 692 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9667036-0-3.

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Stolen Valor by B. G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley not only sets fire to post-war myths of the Vietnam War, but also avenges the theft of veterans' individual and collective honor. The author, a Vietnam veteran, discovered at first by accident and then by investigation that there are pretenders who are not exactly what they say they are, nor as sick as they act, nor as honorable as they claim. Curiosity yielded a host of cheats and liars looking for sympathy, praise, honor, and compensation.

Not all the phonies are totally phony; some served honorably but not in combat. The problem, according to Burkett, is that too many of these soldiers and airmen wanted medals but didn't want or have the opportunity to actually go into harm's way to earn them. Burkett shows his readers how nearly anyone can claim to be a combat hero, complete with matching decorations—even the Medal of Honor is for sale on the open market—and how clever forgers can create phony but legitimate looking documents for their service jackets that attest to sham heroics, or at least try to.

Called the "Munchausen Syndrome"—making up false war stories by both vets and non-vets alike (pp. 266-67)—this phenomenon started to appear during and after WW II when nearly an entire generation considered itself heroic without question. Perhaps it was difficult for some to say proudly that they served in the First Typewriter Repair Battalion in the United States or, perhaps, in Paris when family members and friends returned home from hard-bitten, gut-wrenching, combat in Europe or the Pacific. Maybe it was easier just to tell a simple war story to quiet the what-did-you-do-in-the-war questions that always seem to come up at the oddest times. *Stolen Valor*, however, is not about those harmless fictions told since

soldiers returned home from the American Revolution; it engages the massive assault on truth where it counts: in the nation's conscience and our national pocketbook.

According to Burkett, the modern American version of the "Munchausen Syndrome" goes well beyond the white lies, or Tim O'Brien's vision of the "war story" that nearly every veteran tells at one time or other. As Arthur Miller demonstrated convincingly in his play *The Crucible* (1953), with enough conviction, stage presence, active social agenda, and assistance from those who appear believable, one can sell false devils to the most pious. Burkett's devils are many: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Agent Orange, false decorations, and war stories gone ballistic as court defenses for crimes ranging from murder to wife-beating and even child molesting. Therein lies the problem of conscience: Burkett argues that human beings are not tabula rasa when they put on a uniform and serve in the armed forces. Soldiers take their individual social pathologies with them, and lawyers should know better than to offer the war-made-me-do-it legal defense for a crime committed later. It's both ridiculous and wrong.

The problem of treasure reflects another devil: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the disease invented in the late 1960s and 1970s by a few agenda-gripped social scientists. That PTSD exists as a psychological reality for those who suffered major trauma is not questioned; that it forms a root cause for crime or a wasted life is. To amplify the complications, Burkett takes his readers through numerous studies that evolved and affected how combat veterans were treated for psychological disorders by the Veterans' Administration. Two antiwar social scientists, Jonathan Shay and Robert Jay Lifton, created what became known as Veteran Outreach Centers throughout

the United States, in which “rap” sessions became exercises in political self-criticism. Most legitimate combat veterans avoided these centers, but politically like-minded veterans, many of whom were phonies to start with, flocked to them and eventually formed the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in 1967 and the Vietnam Veterans–“Victims” in Burkett’s view–of America (VVA) later. According to Burkett, the idea was to take the guiltless and make them feel guilty, to warp a conscience into accepting dependence on the VA for a living. This was accomplished first by openly accepting a veteran’s word as truth without checking the records for accuracy, then by filing for and winning a disability claim saying that the war made him/her crazy. The result, as Burkett points out, is that the VA pays these claims up to a point where a veteran can be considered 100 percent disabled—a considerable amount of tax-free money per month—further qualifying the psychologically disabled veteran to file for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as well. Hence, becoming guilty of soldiering, possibly becoming a drunk, or drug addict, not being able to hold a job or not wanting to, claiming falsely that one is a disabled former POW, all counts on winning a luscious government retirement income. For real disabled veterans, those dollars are paid with gratitude; on the other hand, to Burkett and to many other concerned veterans, paying the phonies constitutes an act of negligence on

the VA’s part and a criminal act by the phonies.

B. G. Burkett identifies a broad scale problem in contemporary American culture: in a word, cheating. Burkett’s solution to this mess is relatively simple. Before credence is given to stories about secret combat missions, therapists should check the teller for accuracy. One method is filing a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) request to the National Personnel Records Center for a service jacket, which will solve most of the problems but not all.

Stolen Valor is a detailed but incomplete study of phonies and “wannabe” veterans of the Vietnam War, a sad, possibly deadly, book that requires a considerable investment in time, patience, and temper. Not an academic book per se, Burkett does an excellent job in identifying phonies, some of whom are print and television celebrities we know. Others are names we don’t know. To me, this hard-hitting book confirms a long time suspicion: that the experience of war serves as a test of character because it makes bad men worse and good men better.

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