
Book Review

The Vietnam Veteran In Greek Tragedy

by Dean Andromidas

Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character

by Dr. Jonathan Shay, MD
New York: Scribner, 1995
272 pages, paperback, \$14

“The greatest Classical dramas, such as Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, or the dramas of Friedrich Schiller, typify the way in which the principles of Classical drama, especially Classical tragedy, may bring to the surface some of those important, deep, usually hidden assumptions and principles which had otherwise escaped conscious recognition. The part which the crucial importance of a sense of immortality in leaders plays in avoiding an otherwise inevitable tragedy of that leader’s culture, in *Hamlet*, is an appropriate illustration of the point. The Classical humanist tradition in physical science, is rich in examples of this same principle.”

—Lyndon H. LaRouche, “Europe and the U.S.A Today,” *EIR*, Oct. 24, 2003

A masterwork is not too strong a word to identify *Achilles in Vietnam* by Dr. Jonathan Shay, who is neither a Classicist nor a literary writer, but a clinical psychiatrist at the Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, where he treats Vietnam combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Dr. Shay draws the parallel between the experience of veterans of the Vietnam War, and that of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*. Just as the ancient poet composed an epic revealing how the personal tragedy of Achilles, stemmed from the failures of the generation of Hellenes, Dr. Shay demonstrates that the responsibility for the tragedy of Vietnam’s veterans must be shared by an entire generation of Americans. Moreover, Dr. Shay demonstrates that the only effective treatment for his patients is to apply the principles of ancient Greek tragedy because, as LaRouche writes, “it may bring to the surface

some of those important, deep, usually hidden assumptions and principles which had otherwise escaped conscious recognition.”

It is not sufficient to say this is a book for those interested in the plight of the Vietnam veteran, or the Classicist interested in a remarkable interpretation of Homer’s great work. Anyone who wishes to understand the greater tragedy of the “Baby-Boomer generation,” which should include every American citizen, should read this book. In light of a new American Vietnam War now taking place in Iraq, reading this book becomes urgent. Although *Achilles in Vietnam* was published in 1995, a full decade ago, it is still available.

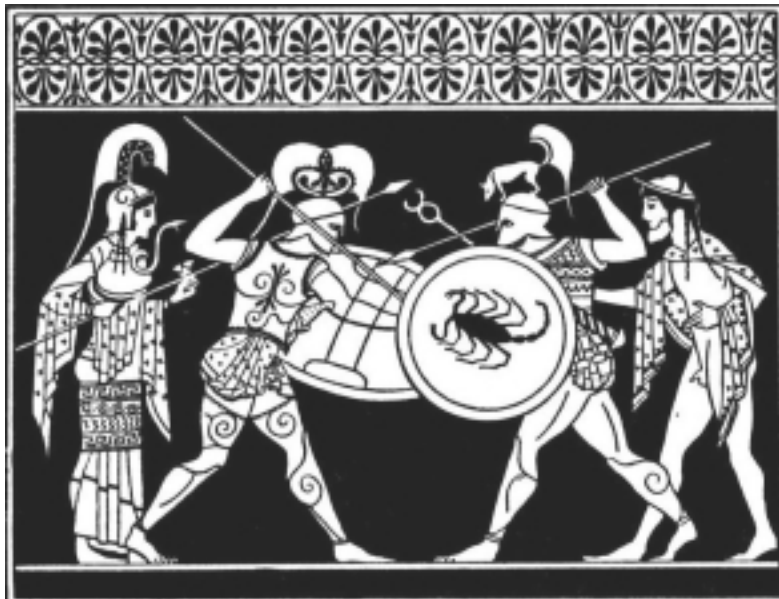
Shay’s drawing of the parallel with Homer is a remarkable demonstration of the universal truth of the natural law embodied in a work that is nearly 3,000 years old.

Dr. Shay did not approach his subject as an academic Classicist, nor as a “professional” psychiatrist—which is the secret of his success. His approach had a “mission orientation,” which has now gone beyond the realm of “professionally” dealing with his patients. The mission was the treatment of Vietnam veterans suffering profound psychological and emotional wounds caused by a war so evil, it destroyed the very souls of its combatants. Dr. Shay found the professional term “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) to have severe limitations in healing his patients. Therefore, Shay reached out to the first of all Greek tragedies, the *Iliad*, as a guide for his therapy, which is every bit an act of love—or to use the more appropriate Greek word, *agapē*—as an act of an internist or specialist in internal medicine, endeavoring to cure his suffering patients. And it is perfectly lawful, that through this exercise, he has expanded his mission from the treatment of his patients, to the much broader undertaking of ensuring that this nation never allows such a tragedy to repeat itself.

Vietnam and Troy

LaRouche has identified the paradigm shift of the 1960s, as key to the failings of the Baby-Boomer generation that now holds the reins of political and economic power of this nation. The United States underwent a shift from being a producer society, committed to creating a future for the next generation, to becoming a “rock-drug-sex counterculture,” living for the “here and now,” and thereby dooming future generations to a dark age. That paradigm shift followed the terror of the threat of thermonuclear destruction during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. But these were only passing acts of terror compared to the escalating, non-stop terror the Vietnam War wreaked on this generation. Although only 10% of the Baby-Boomer generation was directly involved in that war, the entire generation shared in its demoralization, which has inevitably led to its immoral political behavior. Nowhere do its effects appear more dramatic and more poignant, than in the Vietnam combat veteran.

Although Shay does not refer to the paradigm shift nor identify those responsible, as such, he nonetheless identifies



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in the plight of his patients the hand of a political and military leadership whose policies created one of the most evil wars of the 20th Century. Shay also identifies the singular limitations of PTSD as a diagnosis and prospective for treatment, because it normally refers to a reaction to a catastrophic experience. What afflicted the Vietnam veterans was far more profound, because it undermined the veterans’ very “character,” as Shay writes. And thus, the standard tools of psychiatry for dealing with disorders of the “character” or the soul—including anti-depressant medications, group therapy, etc.—were completely insufficient.

Hence, Shay reached out to the insights of Homer’s *Iliad*. He masterfully draws the parallel between the degeneration of the character of his patients as a result of their experience in the Vietnam War, with “the wrath of Achilles,” the central theme of the *Iliad*.

The Iliad

To fully appreciate Shay’s work, one should read the *Iliad*. Here we present a brief outline. Homer begins his epic poem in the tenth year of a war, which began as the fulfillment of an oath of honor by all of Greece to protect and restore the marriage of the beautiful Helen, to Sparta’s King Menelaus; the task of upholding the oath fell on Menelaus’ brother Agamemnon, commander of the Greek armies, after Helen had been abducted by Prince Paris of Troy (“Ilium,” whence the name of the poem). But, through the folly of mortal men and immortal gods, it has become a brutal conflict that has dragged

on for too many years. The Greek force is suffering greatly from a plague cast upon it by Apollo.

The story is set by a dispute between Agamemnon, the all-powerful “king of men” and leader of the Achaean host, and Achilles, one of the great captains of the Greek host. A Greek soothsayer revealed that Apollo sent the plague, having been beseeched by one of his local priests whose daughter had been carried off as a prize for Agamemnon, whose army had sacked the priest’s village. Agamemnon, at first, refused the priest’s blandishments to return the girl, but finally did so to end the plague sent by Apollo in his attribute as the “Mouse God,” as Homer calls him. Agamemnon, having released his prize girl, then demands that Achilles compensate him by handing over the prize girl Achilles had gotten. After a bitter argument, Achilles does so, and, with this irreparable insult to his honor, stomps off, withdrawing himself and his forces.

Pouting in his camp with his men, “the god-like Achilles” (as Homer calls him) nurses his hurt pride, the infamous “wrath of Achilles.” His wrath systematically leads to his moral degeneration: Achilles beseeches his mother, the goddess Thetis, to ask her father Zeus to avenge the affront to Achilles’ honor, to which Zeus obliges, decreeing that the Achaeans will never achieve victory over Troy unless Achilles returns to the battle. For destiny has it that only Achilles can kill Troy’s “manslaying” Prince Hector. So, it comes down to Achilles’ choice: Withdraw from battle and return home, to live out his life to old age and historical oblivion, while leaving the Greek forces to bitter defeat and destruction;

or, win victory, with the knowledge that although he will die on the battlefields of Troy, he will bring the cruel war to a close and achieve an immortality no god could have, the immortality before the tribunal of history.

His descent into immorality is fueled by a rageful satisfaction at seeing his comrades lose battle after battle, as the fickle gods intervene, each for his own side, dispensing with living human beings like so many chess pieces. But, then his beloved friend Patroclus, seeing the Greek host on the verge of defeat at the hands of the all-powerful Hector, dons Achilles' armor, which rallies and remoralizes the Greek forces; Patroclus drives the Trojans back almost to the city walls, only to be cut down at the last minute by the mighty Hector.

Achilles' unfathomable remorse over Patroclus' death further stokes his rage. He decides to enter the battle, not to end the war, not to achieve a true immortality of a peacemaker, but to seek a revenge that nothing can quench but his own death.

Four Millennia Later

Almost four millennia later, Shay sees Achilles' affliction in his own patients. Many of Shay's patients' trauma follows a common pattern. Unlike the draft-dodgers, many of these GIs believed the propaganda about the war and volunteered out of the sense of duty to their nation. Many were from deeply religious backgrounds, with common-sense notions of right and wrong; almost none of them joined the military with psychological proclivities to become highly capable killers. A large number feel deep remorse that they had this cold-blooded capability, so at odds with their civilian upbringing; while others are unable to come to terms with it. For them all, it has shattered their lives. As with Achilles, they found themselves in the midst of an unjust war, which transformed, or deformed, their lives beyond their most horrible nightmares; and as with Achilles, they experienced the sense of thorough betrayal—not a simple, personal betrayal, but a betrayal of their trust, a betrayal of their moral sense of right and wrong. A betrayal not by the enemy, but by their own commanders and the political leadership of the United States, who dispensed with the lives of human beings with the nonchalance of the gods of Olympus. The betrayal of these men was coupled with the task of merely surviving in a horrific

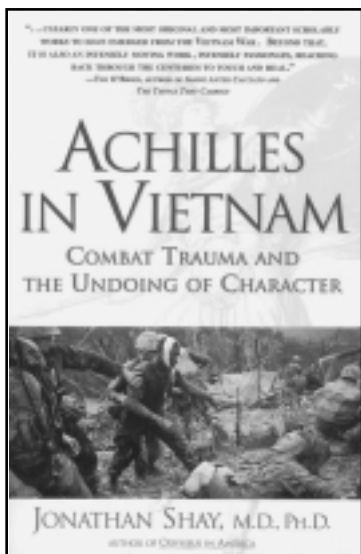
war. Like Achilles, they too capitulated morally to the situation.

For the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, it was a war of liberation against an immensely powerful enemy, who could only be defeated through "asymmetrical warfare," using tactics that American GIs often referred to as "mind-fucking." Thus, the Vietnamese perfected the booby trap or ambush to a science, which drove their enemy to madness. This madness, in turn, not only led to the deaths of many Americans, as their capability to think was relentlessly undermined by the uncertainty of knowing when, where, and how to expect the next attack; but for those who learned how to survive, the madness stalks them to this day. For, the path open to them was a deadly sharpening of their tactical response, which inevitably led to their being instruments in a policy of genocide and mass murder. Their Vietnamese enemy was dehumanized and reduced to "Commie bastards" or "yellow vermin," who deserved death, whether they were North Vietnamese Army regulars, Viet Cong guerrillas, or the old men, women, or children in so many South Vietnamese villages. The Vietnam veteran was left with a madness so compelling, so seemingly beyond his control, that he seemed to be cursed by a Greek god, as in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides—of the capricious gods in Homer's epics.

This is the important difference with the *Iliad*. For Homer makes no moral distinction between a Greek and a Trojan soldier: Whenever any one of these dies, Greek or Trojan, Homer composes a personal biography of the fallen man, sometimes in two lines, sometimes in a hundred. The poet will identify the mourning father, the grief-stricken widow, her fatherless children, as the poet incarnates the enormity of the whole war's tragedy in the death of each individual, whose personal tragedy is a microcosm of the great tragedy.

Shay also identifies, in this narrative of the combat veteran, that there is a Patroclus: the soldier's "buddy," his comrade-in-arms, his companion in the fight for survival both physically and morally. It is when this buddy, this true soul-mate, is killed, often through a devilish ambush or booby trap, that the veteran "snaps" and goes into what Shay describes as the "berserk state." In this state, the soldier seeks deadly revenge, and through that revenge, his own death. He no longer wishes to return alive from this war.

But for the soldier who physically survived, the sense of an inner death remains, and here Shay has used the lesson of the tragedy. Achilles, too, went into his "berserk state" after the death of his beloved Patroclus, in which he took to the battlefield and inflicted merciless, brutal, and bloody revenge on anyone who crossed his path. For Achilles, slaying the mighty Hector, the act that would seal the fate of Troy, was not enough. He had to take his revenge even on Hector's bloody corpse, chaining it to his chariot and dragging it around Patroclus' funeral pyre, before leaving the unrecognizable remains for the dogs. This rage, meant to inflict the worst



dishonor on Hector—and on all of Troy—did its worst damage to the very soul of Achilles, shocking even the Greek forces, who are unable to gloat over the death of their worst enemy. Even the gods become sickened, and choose to answer the pleas of Hector’s father, King Priam, whom they protect, when he goes to Achilles to retrieve Hector’s corpse. Only Priam’s pleas break through Achilles’ madness, so both may give honor to their loved ones who died on the field of battle. Thus Homer ends the *Iliad*, with the funerals of Patroclus and Hector.

Living Death

Unlike Achilles, who will eventually die on the battlefield, the Vietnam veteran lives. He lives on the borderline between terror and death.

Shay sees his task, and the task of this nation, as to rebuild the veterans’ “character,” to bring their very souls, back into their hearts, and in the process reform our nation, which bears the responsibility. He calls for an American “equivalent to Athenian tragedy”: “We must create our own new models of healing which emphasize communalization of the trauma. Combat veterans and American citizenry should meet together face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater at the foot of the Acropolis. We need a modern equivalent of Athenian tragedy. Tragedy brings us to prefer attachment to fragile mortals whom we love, like Odysseus returning from war to his aging wife, Penelope, and to refuse promised immortality (*Odyssey* 5:209).”

I would add that the question of “healing” must, above all, deal with the question of true immortality which is central to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is also central to the question for a nation that must send young men to war, where they are asked, if necessary, to sacrifice their lives without sacrificing their souls. Homer always forces his reader to ask himself: What is immortality? Is it everlasting life as we see these gods on Mount Olympus, who seem to spend their eternal existence on rivalries among themselves, often at the expense of the human race? Or, is there another, far more potent form of immortality, that only man, who unlike the gods, will die, can achieve? For man can freely choose to dedicate his life and, if necessary, his death, for something more precious than life itself.

Achilles is a half-god, whose mother, the goddess Thetis, is obsessed by the fact that her mortal son must die. In different accounts of the legend, she tries to make the infant Achilles immortal by immersing him in the River Styx in infancy, or holding him over a fire of immortality; but she misses the spot at the base of his heel, where she is holding him; this is the famous Achilles’ tendon where Paris aimed his deadly arrow. Thetis would rather see Achilles return to Greece and die a ripe old age, “a burden to the earth,” as Achilles would put it, than have him die a young man, on the battlefields of Troy.

But what is this immortality, that is worth more than life

itself? Is it the narrowly defined sense of “honor,” as Achilles defines it, by refusing to fight because Agamemnon had blemished his honor? It is not enough to die the glorious warrior—as did Hector, who leads the Trojan host, knowing full well that the war is lost, because his only purpose is to defend an unjust act by his brother Paris. And it certainly is not for revenge, as Homer has Achilles fail in this effort, as he re-enters the battle to avenge Patroclus. Homer, being the first of the great Greek poets, never answers that question directly, but his great epic forces his reader to ponder that most profound of questions.

The tragedy does not lie with Achilles, or Hector, but with the doomed civilization for which they lived and died. As we know from the *Odyssey*, the Greeks defeated Troy, but there was no Treaty of Westphalia, no peace on the principle of the “advantage of the other.” Following their victory, the Greeks completely destroyed the city of Troy, killing all the men, and driving the women and children into slavery. The triumphant Greeks returned to their homes, only to see Greek civilization collapse within one generation of their victory. And here is the true tragedy.

Homer wrote his great epic in the midst of a dark age which, he and his contemporaries knew, began after the “victory” of the Hellenes over Troy. Therefore, through his poem, he hoped to foster a new renaissance—one that would eventually give birth to the great law-giver Solon, the tragedian Aeschylus, and the philosophers Socrates and Plato.

Readers may find shortcomings, mistakes, and even what they might consider fundamental flaws in Dr. Shay’s book. They might question his understanding of Homer, or wish that Shay were more politically outspoken about those responsible for this war. Nonetheless, at a time when the Bush Administration’s unjust war in Iraq has managed to do more evil in a few months, than it took three Presidents years to accomplish in Vietnam, Shay’s book is a “must read.” *Achilles in Vietnam* serves as a powerful warning of what this nation can expect when Iraq War veterans return to the United States.

Dr. Shay has written a sequel to *Achilles in Vietnam*, appropriately entitled *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2003) where he compares Odysseus’ struggle to return home with that of the Vietnam combat veteran. This author is preparing a review of that work, as well.

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