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# **The Role of Political Practices in Moral Injury: A Study of Afghanistan Veterans**

**Tine Molendijk**

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## *Abstract:*

While much research has been conducted on military trauma, conceptualizations of deployment-related suffering have been predominantly approached through a medical, individual-focused lens. Since the military is an instrument of the state, it is crucial to expand the conceptual scope to include political processes, particularly for the fast-growing literature on ‘moral injury’, which refers to the emotional impact of perpetrating, witnessing or falling victim to perceived wrongdoing. This article examines the role of political practices in the onset of moral injury as well as the micro-political responses of morally injured veterans. A study of the Dutch mission in Uruzgan, Afghanistan, shows that decisions and frames at the political level helped create distressing quandaries on the ground, and that in all the ways the political leadership acknowledged the problems that veterans subsequently developed, it also maintained a silence on its direct contribution to these problems, as such perpetuating them. Consequently, veterans tried to make the political leadership take a material and symbolic share in their burden. Clearly, moral conflict may exist both in the veteran and between the veteran and the political domain, and therefore, experiences of institutional betrayal and a resultant search for reparations should be included in theory on moral injury.

*Key words:* moral injury; PTSD; military trauma; war; armed conflicts; ethics

## **The Role of Political Practices in Moral Injury: A Study of Afghanistan Veterans**

Soldiers fight for themselves and their buddies. Many are hardly concerned with political questions surrounding the mission on which they are sent and little bothered by larger national debates over these missions. Studies worldwide have documented the prevalence of such political disengagement among soldiers (Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005; Bourke, 1999; Finley, 2011; Gibson & Abell, 2004; Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). So, when soldiers are asked questions pertaining to political decision-making, they may say – as some did to the author of this article – that “my job has got nothing to do with politics”, or that “politics don’t matter to me” because “I am just an instrument of the state.”

On the face of it, then, it makes sense that research on military trauma generally disregards the wider context of the suffering it examines. Trauma studies identify as potentially traumatic events combat, killing, moral dilemmas, seeing people suffering, being wounded oneself, and so on (Clancy et al., 2006; Currier, Holland, Drescher, & Foy, 2015; Nash et al., 2013; Weathers, Litz, Huska, & Keane, 1991), which gives the impression that the only political solution to military suffering is not to send soldiers to war at all. However, it has become increasingly clear that, besides the nature of war and individual vulnerabilities, contextual factors also play a crucial role in the onset of war-related suffering (e.g. Breslau & Davis, 1987; Daphna-Tekoah & Harel-Shalev, 2016; De Jong, 2005; Finley, 2011; Perilla, Norris, & Lavizzo, 2002; Stein, Seedat, Iversen, & Wessely, 2007; Suarez, 2013; Summerfield, 2000). Considering the importance of context, the question arises whether political practices perhaps do bear relevance with respect to military suffering. Indeed, the statement that “my job has got nothing to do with politics” because “I’m just an instrument of the state” is, in fact, a contradiction. Being an instrument of the state means that one’s profession is intimately linked to political practices rather than disconnected from them.

Various studies of anti-war veterans have pointed out that perceived political deception may lead veterans to become opposed to war (e.g. Bica, 1999; Brock & Lettini, 2012; Gutmann & Lutz, 2009; Lifton, 2005), which confirms that political practices may indeed play a role in military suffering. Yet, the specific ways in which this is the case have remained largely unexamined. Also, the fact that only a minority of suffering veterans become opposed to war (see e.g. Drescher, Nieuwsma, & Swales, 2013) indicates a lack of insight into the different ways in which veterans respond to perceived political failures. It thus seems worth examining, in depth, the role of political practices in veterans’ experiences and their subsequent responses.

Such an endeavor seems particularly worthwhile given the fast-growing scholarly concern with what has been called ‘moral injury’ (Currier, Holland, & Malott, 2015; Frame, 2015; Kinghorn, 2012; Litz et al., 2009; Litz, Lebowitz, Gray, & Nash, 2015; Nash et al., 2013; Nash & Litz, 2013; Shay, 2014). The term is used to describe the suffering caused by perpetrating, witnessing or falling victim to an act that violates one’s moral beliefs and expectations. While most current studies approach moral injury as an internally contained conflict (see e.g. Bryan et al., 2016; Currier, Holland, Drescher, et al., 2015; Drescher et al., 2011; Laifer, Amidon, Lang, & Litz, 2015; Litz et al., 2015; Maguen & Litz, 2012; Nash & Litz, 2013; Steenkamp, Nash, Lebowitz, & Litz, 2013; Vargas, Hanson, Kraus, Drescher, & Foy, 2013), it seems preeminently socially shaped. First, individuals develop their moral beliefs and expectations, not in a social vacuum but in interaction with their environment (Bandura, 1991). Specifically with respect to military conduct, questions about right and wrong are not “owned” by the soldier but explicitly debated and determined at higher levels. Furthermore, the fact that soldiers are “instruments of the state” implies a moral relationship of dependency between the soldier and the state. The political leadership decides where to send soldiers and what they are supposed to do, and the ways in which it frames a mission may shape both soldiers’ interpretations of the quandaries they face and the ways in which society ‘welcomes’ them back (Molendijk, Kramer, & Verweij, 2016, 2018).

As discussed elsewhere (Molendijk, 2018), when imposed tasks are impossible to execute or when they conflict with a soldier’s personal values, this may engender a moral injury, causing profound feelings of guilt and shame, betrayal and anger, and/or a deep sense of senselessness and moral disorientation. This article delves further into the question of whether and how the experience of moral injury is related to political practice. It focuses on the Dutch contribution to the NATO-led ISAF mission in Uruzgan, Afghanistan. To begin with, this article is located in relation to existing literature on moral injury and trauma’s political dimensions. The next sections describe the case study, including the methodology, presenting first a collection of experiences recounted by veterans, and second, a discussion of the ways in which these experiences are linked to particular issues at the political level. Subsequently, several fundamental issues are identified regarding the ways in which political decision-making may cause and shape moral distress on the ground. The concluding section considers the implications of this article for the concept of moral injury.

### **Moral Injury and Its (Unaddressed) Political Dimensions**

Psychiatrist Shay (1994) and veteran and philosopher Bica (1999) are both cited as the ones who coined the term moral injury (Dokoupil, 2012; Kirsch, 2014). Psychologists Litz and his colleagues (Litz et al., 2009, 2015; Maguen & Litz, 2012) played a crucial role in efforts to systematically conceptualize the idea of moral injury. They developed a much-cited preliminary clinical model of moral injury, upon which an increasing number of studies build their research (Bryan et al., 2016; Currier, Holland, Drescher, et al., 2015; Drescher et al., 2011; Frame, 2015; Laifer et al., 2015; Litz et al., 2015; Maguen & Litz, 2012; Nash & Litz, 2013; Shay, 2014; Steenkamp et al., 2013; Vargas et al., 2013). While current models of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are generally based on the assumption that trauma-related suffering is rooted in exposure to life-threat and thus in fear-responses (see e.g. DePrince & Freyd, 2002; Difede, Olden, & Cukor, 2014; Drescher et al., 2011; Litz et al., 2009), the nascent concept of moral injury focuses on the emotional damage resulting from perpetrating, witnessing or falling victim to perceived moral transgressions. That is, while PTSD is about acts that violate one's sense of safety, moral injury concerns acts that violate one's sense of morality and ethics (Molendijk, 2018).

In the concept of moral injury, feelings of guilt and betrayal are not interpreted as misplaced emotions but are instead approached as possibly appropriate emotions caused by external factors (Litz et al., 2009; Nash & Litz, 2013). In doing so, the concept has the potential to go beyond the level of intra-individual processes and include political dimensions of military suffering. However, this is not yet the case. Many studies on moral injury currently focus on how to diagnose and therapeutically treat the condition, leaving contextual factors largely unaddressed (Bryan et al., 2016; Currier, Holland, Drescher, et al., 2015; Drescher et al., 2011; Laifer et al., 2015; Litz et al., 2015; Maguen & Litz, 2012; Nash & Litz, 2013; Steenkamp et al., 2013; Vargas et al., 2013). As such, the current concept of moral injury “keeps the emphasis on the individual soldier and his or her actions and away from the political and military leaders who ordered them into combat and the civilians, willingly or not, who stand behind them” (Scandlyn & Hautzinger, 2014, p. 15).

As various studies have argued (Das, 2007; Kienzler, 2008; Kleinman, Das, & Lock, 1997; Summerfield, 2000), a medical approach tends to frame human suffering as a condition contained within the individual. Consequently, it fails to account for the wider context of suffering. Moreover, it gives suffering individuals the status of a patient. In response, a large corpus of studies has emerged on what has been dubbed social suffering (Kleinman et al., 1997), which examines the many ways in which political, economic and cultural forces can produce distress (Das, 2007; Kienzler, 2008; Kleinman et al., 1997; Summerfield, 2000). In

doing so, these studies challenge notions that characterize suffering as an internally contained disease and blur many conventional categories such as individual versus society.

As stated, the political domain shapes the ways in which soldiers are sent to conflict zones and welcomed back, and as such, political practices are of strong moral significance for soldiers. Therefore, when trying to understand deployment-related moral injury, it seems particularly important to expand the conceptual scope by adding a “social suffering-lens.” This article does so by focusing on political practices. Notably, the political practices this article discusses should be understood not as single, direct causes of experiences of moral injury, but as a specific context that made these experiences possible. When relations are drawn between moral injury and political practices, this does not automatically mean that these practices and perceptions are ‘to blame’ for moral injury or that they are morally wrong in themselves. It simply means that they formed a context that shaped the ways in which veterans experienced their deployment and homecoming.

### **Research Methods and Participants**

The study on which this article is based is part of a larger research project on moral injury. For this project, data were collected through 80 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with Dutch veterans, of which 43 were deployed to Uruzgan, Afghanistan. “Veterans” should be understood here as individuals who have been deployed on a mission as soldiers, who may or may not still be serving on active duty. The author conducted half of the interviews for the purpose of this study; the other half were selected from an existing database of interviews conducted by the Netherlands Veterans Institute as part of a life story initiative accessible to researchers. These existing interviews made it feasible to expand this study’s data and served purposes of data and researcher triangulation. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants. To help ensure the anonymity of the research participants, all names in this article are pseudonyms, except when participants expressed a strong preference for their real name to be used.

Table I reports the characteristics of the interviewees. Most of the Afghanistan veterans interviewed were infantry soldiers at the time of deployment. The infantry is a branch of the army, and its role is to engage the enemy at close range; its soldiers are thus combat soldiers. The age of the interviewees at the start of their deployment varies from 19 to 46 years, but the majority were between 20 and 30 years old. Their rank at the time of deployment varies from private to colonel. Most, however, were enlisted personnel (i.e.

private, corporal or non-commissioned officer) at the time of deployment. Approximately one third of the interviewees reported no or hardly any problems related to their deployment, one third said they had developed relatively small short-term problems (up to a year), and the remaining third reported grave problems with serious impact on their lives. To be clear, the distribution with respect to distress is most probably not representative of the Dutch military population at large. Rather, it is the outcome of this study's method of theoretical sampling, which is driven by the aim to collect theoretically relevant data (Bryman, 2012, p. 305).

A crucial part of the analytical process entailed coding the collected material. The coding process followed grounded theory guidelines that are generally employed for the analysis of narratives (Charmaz, 2006; Lal, Suto, & Ungar, 2012). In the initial coding phase, recurring phrases and other regularities were coded at a low level of abstraction, albeit with the aforementioned theoretical insights and questions in mind. In the focused coding phase, the concepts that seemed most common and/or most revealing about the data were linked and grouped into more abstract categories. Data coding and analysis occurred reiteratively, which allowed for constant revision. Also, the emerging findings were regularly presented to several veterans who served as a sounding board. Data and theory thus continuously informed one another, until an adequate understanding of the research problem was achieved.

### **Political Practices and Morally injurious Experiences**

In what follows, this article discusses the ways in which political practices played a contributing role, either directly or indirectly, in experiences of moral injury among Dutch Afghanistan veterans. It does so by first relating the mission as experienced 'on the ground', and then by discussing these experiences in relation to political practices.

#### **The Mission on the Ground**

In 2006, the Dutch mission in Uruzgan began. As will become clear, while public and parliamentary debates revolved round the question of whether the mission was a reconstruction or combat mission, the soldiers to be deployed to Uruzgan were all aware that they would most likely engage in combat. Many veterans said that prior to their deployment,

they were already skeptical of the mission's political purpose and unsure of the extent to which their presence would be of value for the local population. Yet, they emphasized, they had learned not to worry about such issues. As Mushin put it: "if a new guy comes in and says, 'I want to help the local population', we immediately say, 'fucker, you'd better not think like that. You'll come back broken'." All the veterans had looked forward to their deployment, including the prospect of fighting. Action was one of the reasons they had joined the military, and they had been trained in combat for a long time.

**Risk of Dying and Political Risks.** While most veterans spoke critically of "the cowboy behavior" of US troops "who would just go and drop bombs somewhere", they also voiced strong frustration about the reserved manner in which they themselves had to act. Many veterans suspected that their commanders' decisions were largely determined by the political repercussions they anticipated. Julian, for instance, explained how he and his colleagues once observed a man digging a hole. They reported it, but were not allowed to do anything about it. The next day, they found an IED [improvised explosive device] where the man had been digging. Julian commented: "often it's those Battle Group commanders; they're scared. They want to become colonel afterwards [and] they can't have it on their resume that something went wrong. You really see it; they really don't want to take any risks." Julian referred to a fear of the *political* risk of casualties rather than the risk of casualties as such.

Many veterans told stories similar to Julian's. Take Daniel, for instance. Daniel was always at work in Uruzgan, even at night. He was the NCO of a mortar platoon tasked with providing fire support to lighter armed units if necessary. He felt extremely responsible for his colleagues, especially since he felt he could not count on his superiors. One time, he took upon himself the decision to provide fire support to colleagues who were in dire straits, without waiting for permission.

They only had a few rounds left, they called for help on the radio: "guys we won't make it, it's over." And we were so busy trying to get permission to fire. (...) And at one moment (...) I put down the phone down and said: "I'm going to fire now."

(...) We were at that point that the Taliban were throwing hand grenades over the wall, that's how close they were. (...) I said, "I'm just going to do it, it's over. And then we'll just stand there in front of that green table [military court]. But we're going to defend this one. We could also let it go wrong (...) and then we'll see how the Netherlands will respond." And that day, we made it. It cost us "only"



one dead guy... It could have been a lot more if we had responded differently.

(...) There was always a fear – and that’s not said out loud – but there was always a fear at the higher level: what political consequences will this have? And that assessment was always made. They never said it directly, but I always felt it. Political consequences. Like, this is not why “Company the Netherlands” went here.

Back home, Daniel’s life became “a living hell.” “Everything was an obligation for me. Every decision I made, I made it in my head with the same weight as, will I fire or won’t I fire? (...) Every time I put that weight in. Well, you can’t keep doing that.” Daniel collapsed and had to seek professional help.

Former colonel Ted was one of the commanders working at the level that Daniel and other veterans complained about. Yet, like Daniel, Ted was frustrated by how he was confronted by reluctant superiors, for instance, when he initiated a particular operation. The Chief of Defense was against the operation because of the high casualty risk involved, but Ted convinced him by insisting it would actually prevent casualties by bringing safety. Still, a general was sent out from the Netherlands to tell him that “if things go wrong, you’re accountable.” Ted felt that it was probably done “so that they could say, we sent someone.” Dryly he remarked: “so I had a sleepless night because of that ‘support’ from the Netherlands.” He recalled what he was told just before he went to Afghanistan:

“Don’t move too much, just make sure the flag is planted.” That is really what was said to me. Then, you realize that this is actually the only thing of interest that counts back in the Netherlands: scoring internationally. (...) Kicking the can down the road; planting the flag; the Netherlands are in the game. What do we want to achieve in this country? That’s not an interesting question for politics.

Ted found that “in the Netherlands, the discussion was not about Afghan casualties, only about Dutch casualties, because that would make the political support go down.”

**“Is This Winning Hearts and Minds?”** While most veterans said they believed in the value of having the local population on one’s side and the importance of reconstruction, they also said that they could not get their heads round the “ridiculousness” of some of the things

they had to do. Donald, for instance, cynically related that he had to patrol highly dangerous routes “to hand out pens and shit in remote villages. That’s what they called ‘hearts and minds’.” Furthermore, Lars recalled how local Afghans often lied to them: “you would rather side with someone who kicks you than with someone who gives you a cookie. That’s what these people did. And who can blame them? (...) What does ISAF [NATO-led forces in Afghanistan] do? Well, ISAF walks around, maybe builds a water pump, and then we leave. The Taliban don’t leave.”

Many veterans perceived their mission as less focused on local achievements than on the domestic reputation of the Dutch armed forces. Former colonel Ted, who was told that the mission’s political goal was mainly about “planting the flag,” found this statement confirmed when a parliamentary commission visited him. He had been trying to “create something long-term” in an area of tribal wars and corrupt warlords, where “the Taliban was far from the only problem.” However, the commission seemed mainly interested in “how many water pumps we had installed [because] that’s nice for national consumption.” Ted also lamented the “idiocy that we weren’t allowed to work with OEF [the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom]”, because in order to “sell the mission”, the government had to make sure it was not associated with the US war on terror. “We were in the same area, and we couldn’t do business with them”, he said. He recalled how US troops would often be “pounding through villages” where he had been planning to carry out reconstruction: “you create your own Taliban like that, rather than trying to conquer hearts and minds.” And so, he did cooperate with OEF’s commander, “to streamline our operations, and prevent them from doing things that would frustrate my operations.” According to military classifications, their mutual involvement was “coordinated” but Ted called it “de-conflicted” or “support in extremis” so that officially he did not go against the politically imposed caveat regarding collaboration with OEF troops.

The story of Servie illustrates well the moral distress that may arise from politically imposed restrictions. In a Dutch TV series (Kruispunt TV, 2016), he recounts that when he was stationed in a house compound, every night he was on watch duty he heard a boy of about fourteen crying. He was a so-called *bacha* – among western soldiers known as ‘chai-boy’ – a boy sold to wealthy, powerful men for entertainment and sex. During the day, Servie often saw the boy watching him.

And then, I often thought to myself, he’s calling for help. And you couldn’t do anything. You couldn’t say, like, let’s just take him with us and protect him. And then you’re sitting at your post in the evening and you just hear the kid crying. It

was a harrowing sound. And then... you feel... so fucked up. And then, you come back, and then one of your colleagues who takes your place tells you that that kid shot himself in the head with an AK that day. And then you think to yourself, I should have done something. But, I wasn't allowed to. And later you come home, and you start to look into it – maybe I should have done that sooner – but then you start to hear that this was out of the question under the Taliban regime. Boys who are being abused, you get killed for that. And we just put a police chief there, under *our* NATO regime, and it can just happen again. These things are so contradictory, they eat at you.

(Kruispunt TV, 2016, translation TM)

Ten years after this incident, Servie wrote the following on his Facebook page (cited with permission): “I/we didn't do nothing to stop the injustice this boy was subjected to..... instead I obeyed orders like a good soldier.”

Another incident that still haunts Servie involves a major offensive operation in which he took part. The military leadership had said that the local population would be informed in advance by means of speakers, but he still saw masses of terrified injured civilians fleeing the valley. During the operation in Afghanistan, he did not think about it. Instead, he felt a great rush, and cheered every grenade that hit a house. It was only back in the Netherlands that “the emotions came up.” Back home, he developed a great sadness, which soon changed into anger and paranoia: he suspected his close ones of trying to do something to him (Bulters, 2016). Eventually, Servie sought help. He was diagnosed with PTSD and was given an assistance dog, which now wakes him up before he wakes himself with his own screams, dreaming of the events in Afghanistan. In his nightmares, dead people approach him and ask: “why did this happen?” (Kruispunt TV, 2016).

**Denial and Distortion.** Many veterans acknowledged they were not always able to see “the bigger picture.” For instance, many lower rank veterans admitted that they were not in the best position to judge the extent to which their mission contributed to the reconstruction of Uruzgan. At the same time, veterans also used the phrase “the bigger picture” cynically to explain that their experiences were not always taken seriously. They felt that their superiors evoked “the bigger picture” often only as an easy justification for dismissing the knowledge of the people on the ground.

Consider the following cynical words of a group commander who was filmed in Afghanistan for the Dutch documentary “09:11 Zulu” (Franke, 2007): “many soldiers, and I’m thinking mainly about commanders, are readily forced to do politics at their level instead of practicing their profession. (...) You see now that permission has to come from The Hague for almost each assignment, where the so-called armchair warriors have an opinion about everything.” Consider, also, the criticism voiced by an intelligence officer, in the same documentary.

When 90% of the soldiers here say, like, listen, there is an accumulation of Taliban there, then you should take that seriously. And the situation is (...) that in The Hague it is decided, no, that’s not the case, and so nothing, nothing is done about it (...) because their intelligence says it’s not necessary and it all isn’t that bad. [Our intelligence] is partially put aside and they create a politically sound story which can be sold to parliament, with all the possible consequences for the men on the ground here.

On the day the intelligence officer said this, a Dutch unit hit an IED.

The criticism voiced in this documentary resonate with this study’s findings. To turn back to the veteran who chose to provide fire support to his colleagues before he received permission, Daniel recalled that all soldiers were ordered to keep quiet about their experiences when they phoned home because information “could fall in the wrong hands.” According to Daniel, those “wrong hands” were not only the Taliban’s but also “the media’s hands” because, in the meanwhile, he and his colleagues read in a newspaper that their commander had said, “There have been sporadic engagements but it’s not that bad.” Daniel said that he and his colleagues still say the following to each other. “Our biggest enemies are not outside the gate, but above us. That’s who our biggest enemies are.” Daniel said this inspired him to write his experiences down, so that the truth was documented somewhere at least.

### **The Mission at the Political Level**

Given that many veterans had engaged in combat in Afghanistan, it was expected that inflicting harm on others would emerge in their accounts as one the main reasons for their distress. While this was the case for two of the veterans interviewed, most veterans spoke

positively about their combat involvement. By far the most reported experience concerned an *inability* to act in the face of human suffering.

Many lower rank veterans suspected that their commanders were too concerned with political demands and sensitivities, and commanders in turn blamed politicians for making such demands and having such sensitivities. They often felt that certain activities were prohibited only because they seemed too “martial”, whereas both civilians and soldiers were dying because of the opponents’ aggression. Furthermore, many veterans doubted the effectiveness of their attempts “to win hearts and minds”, which they perceived as trivial, something “nice for national consumption.” As a result, in the course of their mission, many found themselves thinking: “what are we actually doing here?” While agreeing with the combined approach of combat and reconstruction – especially in comparison with the “American cowboy approach” – many veterans felt that they were doing too little of both, thus “kicking the can down the road.”

It might be worth noting that when veterans spoke of asking themselves what they were actually doing there, they were not referring so much to the success or failure of the mission (about which their opinions ranged from “useless” to “we did a lot”), but rather, to the mission’s political purpose, and specifically, to the perceived unwillingness of the Dutch political domain to do more than “plant the flag” in Uruzgan. Many veterans used the word “puppet show” to describe their mission, which signifies not only the sense that the mission was pretend play, but also the feeling of being used as puppets in this play.

Several problems of the Dutch mission in Afghanistan can be related to unresolved issues at the political level. Below, the ones that seem to have had most impact are identified.

First, the question of what exactly was supposed to be achieved in Uruzgan remained unresolved. For the Dutch government, the decision to contribute troops to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan was motivated by the desire to present the Netherlands as a trustworthy partner and ally of the United States and NATO (Grandia, 2015; Klep, 2011). For the Dutch military, the mission provided a good opportunity to redeem its damaged reputation after the notorious Srebrenica tragedy, as well as to gain further experience in coalition operations and expeditionary missions (Grandia, 2015; Klep, 2011). Yet, the purpose of the actual mission was less clear. The decision-making process was mainly centered round how the Dutch troops would be deployed to Uruzgan – troop numbers, budget, time frame, etc. – and hardly on what they would have to achieve in the region and why they would want to achieve anything there in the first place (Grandia, 2015, p. 121–5; 206). Consequently, decisions about the required number of troops, budget and time frame were based not so much on the mission

objectives and the situation in Uruzgan, but on the political situation in the Netherlands (Grandia, 2015, p. 121–5; 206).<sup>1</sup> For the Dutch government, it appeared more important “that the Netherlands was present in southern Afghanistan, than that it was clear *what* exactly had to happen” (Klep, 2011, p. 191 emphasis in original; translation TM). The Dutch Assessment framework (*Toetsingskader*), specifically intended to guide the Dutch government in decision-making regarding military intervention, did not work as it was supposed to. The framework was mainly used as a procedure of “checking boxes” and it became an end in itself rather than a means for decision-making (Grandia, 2015, p. 149; Klep, 2011, p. 191).

Besides lack of clarity regarding the mission objectives, a second unresolved issue at the political level concerned a discrepancy between the domestic framing of the mission and its operational reality. From the start, parliamentary and public debates centered on the question of whether it would be a “combat mission” or a “reconstruction mission” (Dimitriu & Graaf, 2016; Ringsmose & Børgeesen, 2001). While the Dutch government pointed out from the start that the mission could not be categorized as either a combat or reconstruction operation, it also felt forced to underline that though the use of force might have to be necessary in some cases, the emphasis would not lie on combat but on reconstruction of the country (Grandia, 2015; Klep, 2011; Ringsmose & Børgeesen, 2001).

In principle, the combat/reconstruction binary dichotomy existed in parliamentary and public debates only, not in the military reality. However, because it had become a political and public reality, it affected military reality in its consequences. These were both formal consequences – such as the imposed non-cooperation between ISAF and the US-led OEF troops – and informal, namely the fear of political repercussions which was generally not explicated but felt at all levels of the military organization. As the veterans’ stories indicate, commanders’ reticence not only prevented casualties but also created risky situations (see also De Munnik & Kitzen, 2012; Kitzen, 2016). Yet, their fear of political repercussion proved well-founded. When it became known in the Netherlands that fighting took place quite frequently, it not only engendered admiration but also fueled existing criticism in parliament and among the public. Decreasing public support for the mission, moreover, became a reason why the mission in Uruzgan was not extended in 2010 (Dimitriu & de Graaf, 2010; Dimitriu & Graaf, 2016; Ringsmose & Børgeesen, 2001, pp. 520–1).

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<sup>1</sup> It might be worth noting that the limited number of troops was a “self-inflicted wound”. The military staff initially demanded no more than 1000 troops. However, it did so in order to assure political support for the mission (Grandia, 2015, p. 122).

A third unresolved issue concerns a lack of acknowledgment of the first two issues. In hindsight, politicians have lamented that “We haven’t been convincing enough” (cited in Grandia, 2015, p. 148). However, Van der Meulen and Grandia point out, “to suggest that in essence it was a failure of strategic communication is indirectly to claim that deep down the cause itself and its translation in a lengthy military operation, was or should be beyond doubt and discussion” while critiques of the mission were “perfectly legitimate and understandable” (Van der Meulen & Grandia, 2012, p. 29). This brings us to the experience voiced by privates and NCO’s that officers (indirectly) refuted their opinions by pointing to “the bigger picture”, while officers voiced the same experiences vis-à-vis the political leadership. The previous section quoted an intelligence officer stating in a documentary about the Dutch Special Forces that local intelligence was partially put aside and “a politically sound story” was created instead “with all possible consequences for the men on the ground here.” The documentary led to parliamentary questions. The government responded to these questions that the Special Forces “were a special unit” which “sometimes can lead to less insight into the more nuanced and sometimes more reserved method of the commander of the TFU [Dutch forces] in Uruzgan” (cited in Klep, 2011, p. 129, translation TM).

While most veterans acknowledged that they could not see the picture that higher levels saw, they said that it also worked the other way around. However, the latter was usually not acknowledged in their experience. In any case, it is true that evoking the bigger picture means invalidating the other person’s perception. To suggest that soldiers’ criticism is a matter of failing to see the bigger picture, indeed, is indirectly to claim that the purpose and successes of the mission are or should be beyond doubt and discussion.

### **Perceived Institutional Betrayal, Seeking Reparations**

The tragedy that took place in Srebrenica, the former Yugoslavia, is seared in the collective brain of the Dutch. Many Dutch peacekeepers who experienced the fall of Srebrenica still struggle with a profound sense of being abandoned by the United Nations and their own government. Recently, a still-growing group of over 200 former peacekeepers filed a legal claim accusing the Dutch state of knowingly having sent Dutch soldiers on a ‘mission impossible’ and of having failed to admit afterwards that it had done so (BNR, 2016).

The mission in Srebrenica had several problems, among which a gap between mission objectives and military means, ambiguity in the mandate regarding the status of a Safe Area, and lack of clarity about the resources available in the case of an attack. Partially, these

problems relate to the international disagreement on which approach to take to the conflict that was prevalent throughout the mission. The decisions taken would have “had less to do with the reality of Bosnia-Herzegovina than with the need to achieve a compromise in the Security Council and with the wish to diminish the tensions that had arisen between the United States and Europe concerning the right approach” (Blom, 2002, p. 1; see also NIOD, 2002; Rapporteur Report, 2015). The results of these compromises have been called ‘muddling through’ scenarios (Blom, 2002; NIOD, 2002, pp. 671, 1371–1471; Rapporteur Report, 2015).

In several ways, the Dutch soldiers in Afghanistan were placed in considerably better circumstances than their colleagues had been in Srebrenica. Afghanistan soldiers were deployed with a clearer mandate, more authorizations and resources, the support of partner nations and the possibility of air support. These improvements are no coincidence. The Srebrenica tragedy and other failed peace operations, such as the one in Rwanda, had led the United Nations to extend the opportunities and activities of peace missions, as documented in reports published in 1995 (“Supplement to an Agenda for Peace”) and 2000 (“Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations”, often called “the Brahimi-report”). Among other recommendations, these reports advised that peace operations should be more “robust”, meaning that peacekeepers should be authorized to defend not only themselves but also the mandate, and that they should be properly equipped to execute and defend their mandate (Johnstone *et al.* 2005). The Dutch government’s insistence on being assisted by partner nations and having air support at their disposal in Uruzgan, furthermore, seems a direct result of the Dutch experience in Srebrenica (Grandia, 2015, p. 128).

However, as became clear, these improvements did not mean that the mission in Afghanistan was without problems. In fact, at a fundamental level, some of the mission’s problems are comparable to those of the mission in Srebrenica, and as became clear, when problems remain unresolved at the political level, they will likely affect soldiers at the micro-level.

Both the Srebrenica and Afghanistan mission demonstrated:

- discrepancies between the why (overarching purpose), what (objectives) and/or how (authorizations and resources) of the mission;
- ambiguity regarding the why, what and/or how of the mission;
- discrepancies between soldiers’ operational reality and domestic political narratives, before, during and/or after the mission;



- lack of political acknowledgment of such issues and thus of the role of political practices in distressing experiences.

It seems that, in both missions, these issues were partially the result of political compromises, for instance between different countries (Srebrenica) or between government interests and public demands (Afghanistan). Yet, while compromises smoothen conflict between political actors, they may not truly solve them but instead create new conflicts. That is, in practice, compromises may not mean that actual synthesis is achieved – that conflicting views and interests are truly reconciled – but instead, that conflicts are left to the lower levels to deal with.

Furthermore, conflicts and resultant problems may be surrounded by a certain political silence. That is, the political leadership may either deny criticism by evoking “the bigger picture”, or acknowledge problems in such a way that its responsibility is limited to not having “been convincing enough.” As such, veterans’ hardships are taken out of a narrative of political blame and put back into one of virtue and progress (cf. Edkins, 2003 for a similar argument about state violence in general).

Considering the veterans’ experiences in relation to these political issues makes it possible to better comprehend their responses. Being confronted with political failure and intentional silence, veterans developed the sense that they were part of a “puppet show.” This feeling, which Lifton has aptly called the experience of a “counterfeit universe” in his work on Vietnam veterans (2005), indicates both a sense of political artificiality and the experience that this artificiality is denied by the political domain. Notably, veterans both with and without deployment-related problems used the term “puppet show”, presumably because political practices had not adversely affected them. For veterans wrestling with their deployment experience, however, the sense of being part of a political puppet show often became a vital issue. For them, it meant an inability to find meaning and justification beyond the direct experience of injustice, and a sense that they were being used and abandoned while all of this was denied. As a result, these veterans developed the sense that they were betrayed by the political and military leadership. To borrow a term introduced by trauma scholars Smith and Freyd (2014), they perceived “institutional betrayal”, entailing the violation of a relationship of reliance by an institution against one of its members. As Smith and Freyd also argue, such violations are particularly traumatic when members depend on the institution for

their safety and well-being, and when they trust in it to care for their lives (Freyd, 1996; Smith & Freyd, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Having one's dependency and trust betrayed is indeed what many of the interviewed veterans describe. In response, these veterans sought reparation from the political domain at least at one point in their lives. Some still followed all the news on their mission and were preoccupied with a search for 'the truth' that would force the government to admit their failures; others were less concerned with finding truth but did feel strongly that the government owed them compensation for the conditions they were put in; yet others were mainly looking for peace and quiet, but only after having spent a long time cursing the television whenever their mission was misrepresented and the government when it evaded answering critical questions. Some veterans could not accept their PTSD diagnosis and the accompanying Military Invalidity Pension as sufficient compensation. They filed a legal claim against the government, believing that it owed them more than a work-related disability pension, as their suffering entailed more than that. To them, their suffering was not caused by risks that are simply part of the job, but by avoidable political failure.

### Conclusion

For many soldiers, a certain political disengagement seems to serve as a preventative coping mechanism to deal with potential clashes between political reality and military reality. However, as became clear, political disengagement cannot take away the fact that a soldier's profession is directly linked to political practice. Of course, as long as there is war, there will be moral injury. Yet, political decision-making and framing can increase the risk of moral injury and adversely affect its consequences, which, moreover, may not be recognized and acknowledged at the political level. The problem of this silence is twofold. First, it means that insufficient attention is paid to the ways in which political practices can cause or prevent distressing situations. Second, it means that the biggest part of the burden of moral injury is loaded onto the shoulders of individual (ex-)soldiers, which may be felt as (yet another) institutional betrayal and thus perpetuate their distress.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Jonathan Shay's influential work 'Achilles in Vietnam' (1994). In this work, Shay describes a similar experience of betrayal among Vietnam soldiers by their military commanders, which Shay calls "the betrayal of 'what's right'." According to Shay, such an experience is traumatic because military commanders physically and symbolically represent the military organization, and thus form a central moral authority in the soldier's world (1994, p. 71).

What about the fact that military mental health care is gaining more attention? While this focus is a positive development, in fact, it maintains the certain silence. To focus on mental health care is to stress that soldiers would have to get better training, good aftercare, and if necessary, therapy. The focus of such interventions thus lies only on helping the soldier to become more resilient and/or heal from personal problems, not on improving the mission's mandate and the political narrative of the mission. Looked at through a mental health care lens, it is the soldier who needs to work on him- or herself, not the political leadership.

So, a moral conflict may exist both within the veteran and between the veteran and the political domain, which makes it important to include in moral injury theory potential experiences of institutional betrayal and resultant efforts to seek acknowledgment and reparations. More generally, it is important to consider deployment-related suffering as both a mental disorder and a response to political disorder. Doing so is not only important in itself, it also assures that trauma research does not reproduce and normalize existing silences in daily life.

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## The Role of Political Practices in Moral Injury

19

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