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"Low-Intensity Warfare" in the Inner City: Veterans' Self-Control Strategies May Ameliorate Community Violence Among Youth

by

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But there is another set of lessons learned by the men and women who served in the war: resilience, working under pressure, knowledge of teamwork, leadership, tough-mindedness, and aspects of maturity (Parson 1989a).

The use of weapons in various inner-city communities in America is comparable to Nicaraguan "low-intensity warfare" whose objective was the mass terrorization of civilians by the Contras. Low-intensity warfare theory is defined as "total war at the grassroots level" (Summerfield and Tosser 1991, 85). Violence in the inner cities has been defined in similar ways by many authorities and observers. Although urban violence may not damage the infrastructure of communities to the same extent that low-intensity warfare does, its immediate and long-term impact is nonetheless devastating to human life and to a sense of security. In essence, it is a war being waged within the minds and souls of our youth, and in the concrete jungles of our urban centers. In inner-city low-intensity warfare, the most likely candidate to successfully teach survival skills is perhaps one who has "been there."

While there is a social epidemic of violence raging across the landscape of the nation and world (Ford and Rushforth 1983; Parson, in press), in society's search for meaningful approaches to solving the problem of violence, there is one group of individuals who is ostensibly missing from the discussions where the issue of violence and its control are contemplated. I am referring to veterans who served America in Vietnam as teenagers.

The point of view of this article is that veterans, given their own exposure to violence in their late teens, have a point of view that may be useful to society—to the violent and would-be violent youth and families, to communities, to law enforcement officials and to public authorities. Veterans should be allowed to serve America—once again—this time by using their knowledge about inner self-control of violence to help communities being overrun by a ferocious epidemic of violent incidents.

The Epidemic of Violence

Person-on-person violence is the focus of this article. This form of violence is interpersonal violence seen in acute or chronic spousal and child abuse, "gang-banger" violence, and the wanton, random violence in the streets, parks, schools, playgrounds, and homes taking place in many inner-city communities.

Violence is America's number one social problem. It is also this country's number one public health problem, due to the adverse health effects it generates for men, women, boys, and girls within the context of family, community, school, and friendships. Violence may be distinguished from aggression and anger. Aggression refers to nonphysical, coercive action to harm, while anger is an emotion that may motivate adaptive action or fuel aggressive responses.

Violence is the egregious behavior used by an individual that, in effect, exerts great noxious force against another person with the malevolent intent of injuring, damaging, and destroying physical integrity through harmful behavior. Like a huge, roaring inferno injuring, maiming, damaging, and destroying everything in its path, violence devastates our inner cities as crimes of murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and burglary rise.

The number of deaths by violence exceeds deaths caused by emphysema, bronchitis, and asthma combined (*Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 1984). So violent has America become that in 1974 it was said that a boy born in this country was more likely to die from murder than an American GI in World War II (Morris and Hawkins 1977). West (1984) used the term, "epidemic of violence" to capture its utter pervasiveness. After a period of decline, statistics on homicide in the inner city among African-American males show that murder has increased dramatically since 1985 (Bell and Jenkins 1990).

In their discussion of the psychological impact on children who witness violence, Bell and Jenkins (1991)

mention a Washington, D.C., politician, who, projecting from the first six months of homicide statistics in 1990, referred to that year as the "bloodiest year in American history" (estimated to have 2,000 homicides over the previous year's figures).

Bell and Jenkins also reported that "the homicide rate among black males is seven times that of white males; homicide is the leading cause of death for black men and women ages fifteen to thirty-four, showing a 39 percent increase for black males since 1984" (p. 177). The Uniform Crime Reports and the National Criminal Justice Information Service (for the United States), the European Committee on Crime Problems, and Criminal Statistics (England and Wales), Statistics Canada, and other international crime reports, reveal that violence is an international problem of great significance. The United States continues, however, to lead the free world in terms of the "chronically dysfunctional environment" (Dyson, 1990) social and community violence spawns.

Wornie Reed (1991), in a *Trotter Institute Review* article, "Crime, Drugs, and Race," compiles a number of alarming statistics associated with inner-city violence. He writes that despite the fact that blacks comprise 12 percent of the general population, they produce the following unfavorable violence statistics:

•40 percent of death row inmates are black;

•50, or 43 percent, of persons executed in the 1980s were black;

•Blacks are 42 percent of the jail population and 45 percent of the state and federal prison population;

•Blacks are 31 percent of arrestees;

•Blacks are 49 percent of all murder and non-negligent homicide victims;

•Black males in the United States are incarcerated at a rate four times higher than black males in South Africa—3,109 per 10,000 in the population compared to 729; and,

•In 1986, the total number of black men of all ages in college was 426,000, while the number of black men between the ages of 20 and 29 under the control of the criminal justice system (incarcerated, on parole, or on probation) was 609,690 (p. 3).

The Violent Veteran: Myth and Reality

What about veterans, where do they fit in? Of relevance here is Ron Armstead's (1992) research on the formation, development, and general viability of black veterans' service organizations. He found veteran organizational leaders to be very concerned about their community, and saw their current service-delivery models as having continuity with their past military service. These leaders also saw "organizing and servicing black [and other ethnocultural group veterans] as a continuation of their efforts at addressing community problems" (p. 4). Like many other veterans, these leaders demonstrated their natural philanthropic impulse to serve others and to better their communities and the world (Parson 1989b).

Contrary to the commonly accepted stereotype, the veteran is a model of courage and self-management. In May 1992, Parson testified before Congress on inner-city

African-American veterans and the positive role models they may make for our inner-city youth. He noted that:

The inner-city African-American veteran needs to be included in solving our nation's violence. I have said this many times before: only few persons have more experience than veterans with violence. Veterans have had to generate violence in war; they've had to protect themselves and their friends from violence meted out by the enemy. And, most importantly, they have had to control violence within themselves to maintain equilibrium. The inner-city veteran remains an untapped human resources pool, with skills and talents in leadership and in team-building (Parson 1992, 6).

The War Experience

Like all wars, the Vietnam War was a violent encounter in which young men and women were exposed to a hostile environment. This milieu produced unspeakable suffering and violence that affected both Americans and Vietnamese. In the war, soldiers experienced ubiquitous environmental violence lurking even in the least suspected places, making "the constant threat of annihilation" an ever present possibility (Lipkin et al. 1982; Parson 1984). Soldiers experienced the horror of violent deaths, the intense terror of life-threatening fire fights, and enemy assaults with rockets, mortars, booby traps, punji sticks, snake pits, land mines, snipers, and sapper attacks. Some soldiers were wounded, others were killed. "Trucks drove up to buildings…and blew them up with plastique, kids threw grenades into your jeep…mines blew up your truck on a road that had been safe for a year…(Lipkin et al. 1982, 909).

As Lipkin also noted, "…everyone learned watchfulness. In the daytime watching the trees, watching the paddies, the grass; at night watching the dark. In the towns and cities, watching all the people: who had the grenade? Watching the children: who had the grenade?" (p. 909).

Applying the Experience

Many soldiers who made it back home have never forgotten the lessons they learned in the war. In addition to having learned so much about such highly valued human qualities as resiliency, competence, discipline, self-respect, regard for others, leadership, teamwork ability, and enhanced functional perceptiveness (i.e., making successful adaptation to the war's terrain and reality), the soldiers internalized into their psyches the "logic" of the war's socioecology. This internalization may have adaptive value as we seek to discover the logic inherent in America's violent environments. To function successfully in this dangerous environment required control—control over one's self. As one veteran put it, "Control was everything." Therefore, loss of control could have had disastrous consequences.

Surviving the hostilities taught veterans certain truths about themselves, and about others—profound lessons about human relationships, about courage under fire, about human resourcefulness and the capacity for change

and survival. Most of these veterans learned to put personal terror, societal disapproval, institutional neglect, moral uncertainty and confusion, shame, guilt, and pride into some kind of tolerable personal perspective.

This gives veterans an edge in terms of teaching America's youth the techniques of violence control within themselves. They had to struggle against the forces of violence in Vietnam to remain alive, and then had to survive the bitter experiences of institutional neglect and cultural vilification at the homecoming. This has strengthened many veterans who are today eager to share their experiences with our youth.

The building of effective barriers within the self against the expression of violence against other people is a lesson most veterans have had to learn over the years. This has been revealed in many studies (for example, Robert et al., 1982) which have failed to support the stereotype of the violent veteran by showing a higher incidence of violence among veterans compared to nonveterans. Even studies (such as Strange and Brown, 1970) which showed that combat-experienced veterans may have more violent thoughts than others, veterans were less likely to act on these impulses, demonstrating control over these feelings and impulses. This level of self-control is consistent with what is known about the veteran's successful transfer of military experience to the civilian sector (Armstead 1992; Parson 1989a; Hall-Sheehy 1984). As Parson (1989a) notes:

Since the Vietnam War, veterans have been digging new trenches and courageously making it though a dense jungle of a different kind—the contemporary economic jungle. This jungle required the same skills in hypervigilance, attention to details, self-confidence, and commitment demanded by Vietnam's guerrilla milieu (p. 3).

Learning self-control over violent feelings requires extraordinary effort, both in the war and after the war. Society can be reassured that veterans' self-management skills may be extended to contemporary sociocultural affairs. This is because lessons learned are never truly lost. For "the brain that learned so much about trauma and pain [in Vietnam] is the same organ that stores . . . positive and valuable skills" (Parson 1989a, 3).

Gaining psychological equilibrium and putting personal bitterness aside has not been easy for many veterans (Lipkin et al. 1982). Many worked hard at self-rehabilitative efforts in the absence of government-sponsored debriefing programs. Many other veterans, however, did reach out for help; they realized they could not do it alone.

Given this experience, veterans are in the position to help solve the problem of violence in two ways: first, through "hardware technology" (i.e., active instruction and guidance in violence-management); and secondly, through "software technology" (i.e., using the "personal lessons of control" approach for violence regulation). The latter strategy is the preferred one, and the focus of this article.

The negative image of veterans seems to be the one lingering concern that may have the potential to derail veterans' efforts towards ending violence in their communities. Although studies have shown that "controls against violence can be deconditioned by warfare" (Haley 1978, 278), no study has as yet conclusively demonstrated that veterans of any era are more violent than their nonveteran counterparts. The negative image of veterans in recent years has been shaped more by harmful, unfortunate stereotypes partly propagated by the media functioning as the right arm of a culture which has sought and found exculpatory targets—scapegoats—in its veterans in order to shield itself from the painful realizations surrounding the nation's war experience.

Principles of Violence-Management: Self-Control Strategies from Veterans' Experience in the Military

Violence against people may be seen in terms of the motivational intent behind the expression of violence behavior. Zillman (1979) mentions two classes of motivations: "Annoyance-motivated" violence and "incentive-motivated" violence. Annoyance-motivated violence accounts for three-fourths of all homicides. They are the result of acute conflict or trivial arguments stemming from such conflicts as lover's quarrels, jealousy, narcissistic insults and injury, and personal humiliation. If individuals involved in annoyance-motivated violence could learn how to control their fiery emotions there would be less explosive incidences causing injury and harm. The following control principles are an outcome of this writer's clinical observations of veterans, and of the clinical and nonclinical strategies they employ to gain control in their own lives. These control principles have sound theoretical and applied bases in cognitive and behavioral psychologies, known for their value in assisting people gain control and perspective in their lives.

These violence-management principles are: creating a sense of belonging; transforming self through change in thinking; self-abuse management; courage under fire; overcoming the me-first cultural orientation; and coming to terms with emotional hurt caused by parents and authority persons.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

Inner-city children and youths are often described as alienated, confused, bitter, and economically and politically disenfranchised. The association of large-scale drug abuse and random violence with inner-city youth has led many Americans to see these young people as subhuman. Actually, these descriptions are, to some extent, accurate: people who murder and engage in lawlessness and wanton disregard for life and the general welfare of others are in deep trouble. They behave as though they have lost their humanity and all "natural affection" for humankind.

Like survivors of European death camps described by Terrence Des Pres (1976), these American youths have lost faith in the capacity of human beings for goodness.

Moreover, there is a "broken connection" (Lifton 1980)—a "severed connectivity" (Parson 1988) between self and other. This lack of faith and trust in family, church, community, nation, and world, makes it "easy" to be violent, and to use the option of violence in solving problems and in regulating self-esteem.

When this degree of bankruptcy in human connectivity occurs, nothing less than radical departures from "ordinary" programmatic procedures will suffice. Although a specific program for assisting urban children and youth is beyond the scope of this article, this writer believes that any program organized to help inner-city youths must include opportunities for Buberian *I-Thou dialogue* between veterans and youths. Such a program would call for engaging young people on a one-to-one basis (I-Thou), and later in a group-interactive format. The I-Thou form of human relating originates in the philosophical writings of Martin Buber (1970).

Buber's I-Thou concept highlights a form of human relating in which two people as a basic unit are free to be themselves, engage the other in meaningful dialogue, and derive mutual impact and benefit. Moving beyond empathy (a feeling "into" the other person's experience), the I-Thou mutuality offers a humanizing experience for both. For "There is no 'I'...only the basic word 'I-Thou'" (p. 54).

Over the years, many veterans have expressed to me their regret that there were no opportunities for such dialogue when they came home over twenty years ago from the war in Southeast Asia. Human communication is vital to managing violence in youth, and clearing up miscommunications is a key to dealing with violence-generating inner turmoil. The "Big Brother" model is one of several that may be adopted here if such a program for inner-city youth were to be developed.

Another important tool in establishing a feeling of belonging is the collective group setting. Veterans know the value of the family feeling, as well as the life-saving value of a cohesive group of people working toward shared goals and objectives. They also know that without discipline very little constructive action is possible. The core organizing principle here has to do with human relationships. After or in conjunction with I-Thou dialogue, the group interactive component becomes very important. Organizing meaningful academic, recreational, and cultural trips may also offer youths an alternative to feelings of isolation and to the "conviction of expendability"—the feeling that no one cares for them.

Acquiring the sense of belonging is one step in assisting young people to manage reactive rage and violence. Feeling cared for, confirmed, and respected precedes the acquisition of discipline and self-control. Veterans can assist young individuals to establish closeness in an environment of trust, safety, and positive mutual regard. The group may also become a source of pride, self-worth, and positive group identification for these youths.

Veterans may also be able to help young people to develop a sense of competence. Many violent young people often tell of feeling incompetent in just about everything they do. As young Americans in the war zone, veterans were given a great deal of responsibility, and many "proved" themselves to be competent and efficient. These feelings of incompetence and a lack of effective behavior for coping with the real world may propel young people towards violence.

Transforming Self Through Change in Thinking

Based on their own experience, veterans believe that people can change and have an intuitive appreciation for transformational processes. They have experienced first hand how military training transformed the young, naive recruit into a combat-effective individual through a change in thinking. The drill instructor, sergeant, and commanding officers were the agents of this change. This article suggests that veterans can potentially become these agents of change for our young people.

Military service also taught veterans that achieving an objective may require more than one way of thinking; it may require multiple strategies. This ability to generate options, or possibility thinking, opens up a whole new world to individuals who feel they have little or no options in life, are frustrated, and feel "boxed in."

Teaching techniques of self-instruction to inner-city youths may provide yet another avenue to regulating potentially violent ideas and actions. Most people talk to themselves to give self-instructions, directions, and guidance in solving problems and self-soothing. This is a normal process. Meichenbaum's (1977) theory of self-instruction holds that direct verbalizations of meaningful and positive self-instruction can manage aggression and violence. Veterans have used this and other techniques to maintain self-control and perspective while on dangerous and frightening military missions.

Veterans may also be able to engage young people in healthy mutual disputations on specific issues to help them acquire trust and comfort with older persons who respect their views. Disputation sessions may focus on issues of burning importance to young people pertaining to their families, communities, and to the society at large. This procedure has been found to lend itself to various forms and levels of moral reasoning (Garbarino et al. 1991; Tapp 1971), and to the amelioration of rage, cynicism, and suspiciousness.

Finally, urban youth with impulsive tendencies believe that they have no choice but to react to stimuli in an all-or-none manner—in total extremes—with no intermediary gradations of emotional expression. They are often oblivious to options in their lives. The technique of scaling teaches individuals to see emotional expressions on a continuum in order to help them gain control and perspective. The veteran had to use this principle to operate safely and effectively in a guerrilla war environment.

Self-Abuse Management

Violence toward others begins with violence toward oneself. Youth who experience psychological hurt, abandonment, physical abuse, and humiliation, will force others to experience the same. Taking drugs to quell the torment within, "living on the edge," along with a general

absence of self-caring skills are precursor signs of violence against others. Many inner-city children and youth this writer has seen in clinical therapy were taught how to abuse themselves by negative, harmful interactions with significant people in their lives.

Self-abuse is a consequence of chronic self-hatred, self-punishment, self-pity, self-blame, depression, and the rigidifying of one's perception of the world as a persecutory, oppressive place to live. The resultant guilt, anxiety, and apathy flare up into violence in order for the individual to cope with self-abuse in its many forms. Veterans may have the ability to challenge the young person's irrational beliefs about self and others, and to teach skills that will help them manage the taunting, haunting thought that "you're no good, you'll never 'mount to 'nothin."

Young people, like most adults, have a number of ideas about self, other people, and situations that may be called irrational. Examples of irrational beliefs are: "Everyone should love and approve of me"; "I am mad with everybody because they all see me as no good"; or "I am black; white Americans owe me a lot." Such ingrained beliefs shape attitudes and values toward self and others.

Racism is a form of American institutional violence against the ethnic minority person. Obviously, this is a reality that cannot be negated. However, when it comes to assisting urban youth in violence-management, only individual responsibility (as opposed to the collective responsibility of society) will produce the needed controls. Irrational beliefs generate anxiety, tension, inner stress (Ellis 1985), and self-abuse, resulting in the erosion of internal controls. This makes it highly probable that, with little instigation, violence will flare up.

Violent people have irrational beliefs which make their capacity to control violent impulses very difficult. Veterans have had to deal with society's irrational beliefs about them, and their own irrational beliefs about their self-worth and value to a society which lost its ability to distinguish between the soldier as a human being and the flawed policies of a war machine gone out of control. Developing rational thinking bolsters self-esteem and helps strengthen internal controls.

Cognitive psychological theory expounds the idea that an individual's dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs get them into emotional trouble, and once in this state of mind they are vulnerable to violent explosions. Stopping a nagging, anxiety-provoking idea makes it possible to focus on control-bolstering thoughts and actions. Here too, veterans have the ability to instruct youth in the procedures that help promote self-control through suspension of the flow of anxiety- and depression-provoking thought processes.

Socially anxious youngsters tend to become aggressive to protect themselves from feelings of internal weakness and vulnerability. Assertiveness training gives instruction in the social techniques of asking others for whatever one needs; this makes it unnecessary to get angry and violent in response to the frustration of not getting one's needs met. Many veterans have had to adopt these techniques in

order to overcome self-abuse in their lives. For many, self-abuse led to spousal abuse, child abuse, and to chronic dysfunctional behavior. Veterans know about self-abuse; they may be able to help our young people because they have credibility.

Courage Under Fire

Undertaking dangerous military assignments requires a high level of self-confidence and intrepidity. It may take the communication of this level of danger-defiance to assist your youth to successfully "just say no" to powerful peer pressure to use drugs, join violent youth gangs, and commit violent crimes against people and property.

Overcoming the Me-First Cultural Orientation

Me-first behavior is learned from parents and others in the young person's life. Many of them see themselves as me-last in terms of parental and societal priorities. The me-last feeling generates a me-first orientation in young people. Me-first fixated youth are probably most likely to act violently when situations thwart self-gratification. Veterans, particularly those with combat experience, have had to put aside the me-first orientation in an effort to protect their buddies.

Coming to Terms with Hurt and Disappointment Caused by Adults and Other Authority Persons

Most violent youth learn violence through their interactions with people. Often they are victims of psychological and physical violence, and of witnessing violence. Neglect by fathers and mothers, and by society in general, creates alienation, rage, and vendetta preoccupations against adults and authority persons. These children and youth are easy prey for drug dealers, gang-banger recruiters who reward violence and offer them prestige, status, and a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, these negative, violent elements have often eclipsed the positive influence of fathers, mothers, pastors, teachers, principals, law enforcement officers, and public officials.

Veterans are idealizable to young people; they are, for the most part, admired and respected by many. This statement is one that many see as incredible. This is in part because, though there are studies on veterans' deficits in social, mental, and occupational functioning, no similar interest in understanding the positive view young people. have toward veterans has been demonstrated. Evidence comes from anecdotal reports from people who have worked with and observed veterans directly for decades. Dr. John Wilson, a psychology professor at Cleveland State University who is highly acclaimed for the historic Forgotten Warrior Project of 1970, states on the idealizability of veterans to young people: "These veterans are natural teachers; I use them to teach my classes every year." He went on to state that students admire and "look up to" veterans as a special group of people with unique experiences that have relevance for teaching courage, tenacity and success. In searching for meaning in their lives, many of the "twenty-something"

generation view veterans as trustworthy—as a group that "didn't sell out" but has maintained incorruptibility and non-materialistic values when compared to a group they claim to despise for their narcissism and wanton materialism: the so-called "baby boomers."

This makes it possible for the veteran to serve as a kind of bridge between alienated youths and the world of adults and authority figures. Most youth feel they have little or no reason to trust adults, whom they see as narcissistic. Most veterans of the Vietnam era now live in the "age of authority" by virtue of their location in the life cycle. This makes them not only adults who are in the enviable position to impart valuable knowledge to our young people about courage and self-management, but who are themselves authority persons in their own right.

Veterans have learned life lessons in relating to and appreciating authority; they have suffered the torment of distrusting their elders, of feeling disconnected from adults while secretly longing for better relations with them. Perhaps random, wanton violence in youthful populations is incompatible with healthy adult-child relations. A good, supportive, and trusting relationship with adults is the best antidote for self-hatred and a diminished ethic of caring. Mutual trust and respect between youth and elders could have the potential to usher in a "violence-modifying influence" among lost, bitter, alienated, and violent youth.

Summary and Conclusions

Veterans comprise a hidden resource pool America needs to use in order to address and help solve the problem of violence. Violence is an epidemic in our nation and world. The random violence of the inner cities cries out for effective solutions. Because veterans were trained for national defense purposes, they have learned much that may be of value to violent and potentially violent youth. Most violent episodes between individuals resulting in the loss of life are of the "annoyance" variety, and are referred to in the courts and legal system as voluntary manslaughter—"the unlawful killing of another in a *sudden heat of anger*, without premeditation, malice or depravity" (Wolfgang, quoted in Zillman 1979, 301). Through sharing their experiences and teaching specific self-management skills veterans may have the capacity to make a major contribution to what Egendorf has referred to as "community healing" (Egendorf 1982), and to the installation of hope, confidence, discipline, control, responsibility, and self-worth in our young people.

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