

HONORING, NOT PITYING, OUR TROOPS

Dr. Leonard Wong
Strategic Studies Institute

As of the end of July 2005, how many of our troops lost a leg, arm, foot, or hand as a result of the war in Iraq?

- a) Less than 300
- b) 1,298
- c) 3,423
- d) More than 5,000

Our perceptions of the military and the current war in Iraq largely are shaped by what we see and hear in the media. On the topic of amputees resulting from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, a quick Lexis-Nexis search reveals hundreds of media stories in the past 2 years. We've all seen segments on television, read stories in newspapers or magazines, or listened to pieces on the radio about Soldier or Marine amputees getting state-of-the-art prostheses, troops courageously learning how to adjust to their injuries, and even how some soldiers are skiing or running races despite their wounds.

Getting back to the question, though—the correct answer is that there have been less than 300 amputations. Surprised? If you chose a higher number, you are in good company. This same question was posed to over 50 of this year's incoming class of U.S. Army War College students—many of whom wear Iraq combat patches on their uniforms. Only a half-dozen picked the correct answer.

Why would so many people, including those in the military profession, be so far off the mark? We could blame the news media for hyping the stories. But politicians, celebrities, and even those in uniform have been drawn to (and promulgated) these stories. Or we could point to the waning popularity of the war as creating a greater focus on casualties. But that would not explain why both hawks and doves tend to misjudge the extent of amputations. Perhaps the reason the number of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM amputees is overestimated is because the perceived magnitude is influenced by two very different perspectives of these wounded warriors.

The first perspective is one of admiration and gratitude for the sacrifice that these soldiers made for their nation. While the circumstances are heartbreaking, there is something reassuring about the perseverance and grittiness of the American soldier. This point of view appreciates the willingness of the military profession to put themselves into perilous conditions on someone else's behalf. This perspective—admiring the tenacity of our troops—however, co-exists with another view.

The second and perhaps more common perspective, cloaks itself in admiration, but is really one of pity. This point of view bypasses notions of duty and service and instead dwells on misfortune and unfairness. With this perspective, soldiers are perceived not as professionals serving their nation, but as hapless victims. With our society

increasingly viewing sacrifice and service as niceties but also as something somebody else should do, magnifying the potential cost of being a soldier helps to justify that belief.

For those in the military profession, the danger lies in inadvertently fostering this second perspective, while also holding the first. There is a precarious inclination to assume that inordinate societal interest in amputees (or PTSD or divorce rates) stems from an appreciation for our soldiers' sacrifices when it is actually motivated by an increasing tendency to view our soldiers as victims.

The adversity and hardships endured by our troops should never be overlooked, ignored, or discounted. The difference between honoring and pitying our soldiers for their sacrifices, however, is significant. Much of America is still struggling with the concept of the military as a profession. Our society continues to carry much of the baggage of a draft-era Army, and cannot fully comprehend that today's soldiers are *volunteering* to join an institution that may put them into harm's way. With fewer and fewer Americans today experiencing military service, it is not surprising that many parts of our society hold this misunderstanding.

A more troubling potential, however, is that those in uniform may also unintentionally begin viewing themselves as victims. With a heavy public focus on casualties during a protracted war, it would be easy for our troops to start perceiving themselves not as professionals guided by notions of sacrifice or service, but as victims deserving compensation and entitlements. Considering the magnificent success of our all-volunteer professional Army, such a shift in attitude, however, would be a real pity.