

U.S. Soldiers After World War II

The accounts from soldiers describing combat in general present an image of a hellish nightmare where all decency and humanity could be lost. For men who fought under these conditions, coming home was a very difficult transition. Above all, these men wanted to return to "normalcy", to come back to a life that they had been promised if the war was won. This would turn out to be harder to obtain than first expected, problems ranging from the availability of jobs in the work force to child raising and post-traumatic stress would make this return to "normalcy" very troublesome. This laborious task of reintegrating into American culture would eventually lead to problems in the gender relations in post war America.

One of the major problems that G.I.'s faced upon their return to the States was the availability of jobs. During the war, the U.S. government encouraged women and minorities to enter the industrial work force due to labor shortages and increased demand for war goods. By 1944 a total of 1,360,000 women with husbands in the service had entered the work force. This, along with the migration of African-American workers from the south, filled the wartime need for labor. This attitude toward women in the work force changed dramatically at the end of the war. The propaganda promoting "Rosie the Riveter", suddenly changed, focusing on the duties of women as a homemaker and a mother. Even with these efforts and those of the G.I. bill passed after the war, returning soldiers had a difficult time finding jobs in post war America. This independence given to women during the war and its removal with the advent of the returning men, had a definitive effect on gender relations in American society and which one of the seeds of the women's rights movements in later decades.

Another hardship encountered by returning soldiers was the reactions of the children they left behind. Most of the fathers that returned from the war were concerned with how they would fit into the family system. Some fathers were determined to take an active role in the family and they did by becoming the master disciplinarian. Returning fathers came to home to find undisciplined and unruly children, a far cry from ordered military life they had led during the war. Some children even resented the strangers who had re-entered their lives, lives that seemed complete without him. One of the roots of these feelings was that children that lived in extended families during the war enjoyed being pampered and disliked the determination that some returning fathers had to fulfill his paternal role and impose discipline. The fathers' return disrupted the home front in various other ways also. Some children feared that their fathers would not stay and as a result didn't want to become too attached to them, in fear that they might again leave. Other children were angry that the fathers had left in the first place. The homecoming was especially hard on both father and child in a family where the child was born during the war or was very young when the father left. Most of these children hardly recognized their fathers and were fearful of these new strangers. Another problem faced by returning fathers was their belief that their son had become "soft" in the absence of a strong male-role model. The return of the father in the domestic life also effected the gender relation after the war. Most children found their lives complete without their fathers and some even found that they had more freedom

when their father was gone. Girls that found their mothers working and performing what was before considered male role, were found to develop less traditional feminine sex roles. It could be said that the working mom inspired the children of the era to be more independent themselves. This also could serve as an origin to the feminist movements in later decades.

Post-traumatic stress, "shell shock", was common among the returning soldiers. Most wives and children noticed behavioral changes in the men that they knew before the war. Veterans returning from the battlefield would suffer nightmares and flashbacks of combat along with alienation and loneliness, desperation and withdrawal. These results of combat and the increase in alcoholism among the returning G.I.'s lead to an upward spiral in the number of divorces that occurred after the war.

The return home for many soldiers was not at all comfortable. After fighting under unbearable conditions for years, the return to domestic life was undoubtedly not what was expected. With the problems of finding work and those encountered on the family scheme, this reintegration was anything but smooth.