Over the years, I have become much more impressed with the many universalities that characterize wars and their impact, than I am with the differences or unique aspects of each new war. This is quite important, in that the emphasis with each new war on what is so unique or distinctive from prior wars is used as a rationalization as to why “new” understanding and strategies are necessary to truly address the war-related problems of the new era of war veterans (and “old” understanding and strategies are considered irrelevant). Unfortunately, preoccupation with the “new” eclipses the much greater relevance of what is universal to all wars and hence contributes to not remembering the truths and utilizing the lessons that should have been learned.

Firstly, I would to briefly acknowledge that there are “variable” aspects of any current war that are important—are these the same or different than prior wars?

1. Is this a “conventional” war in which opposing forces dress distinctively and are usually clearly identifiable as foe or friend? Or, is this a non-conventional war that is guerilla, insurgent or terrorist in nature in which there is great difficulty in being able to discern foe versus friend?
2. Is the war over relatively quickly, or is it protracted?
3. Is the war in-your-face, up-close and nasty—or fought mainly from a distance with technology—and what proportion of the combatants are exposed directly to combat trauma?
4. Is the war “popular” at home, where the vast majority of the population is fully supportive of the war—or is it a divisive or unpopular war?
5. What is the length of deployment and repeat deployments?
6. Is it an all-volunteer and/or drafted military, use of reserves & guard, and combatants’ ages?

Once the relevance of each of these variable characteristics of the current war is understood, practically all else that is important to understand is largely if not entirely universal to wars in any modern era. These universal truths and lessons unlearned include the following.

There are a pair of universalities that transcend all variable and universal characteristics of war:

1. Military personnel are sanctioned by our country to be agents or perpetrators of death and maiming—acts that literally are condemned in civilian life.
2. There is a sacred covenant between society and combatants who are sanctioned to go into harm’s way and kill and maim other human beings. Our country pledges to honor and provide essential health, mental health and benefits for active duty personnel returning from deployment and for veterans and their families for problems and readjustment issues related to having served in harm’s way. And if this covenant is broken or watered-down, the impact on former combatants can be extraordinarily impacting, demoralizing and alienating.

All other universalities of war flow from the above two:

3. [From the movie, Ulysses] “War is young men dying and old men talking—it has always been that way.”
4. “Our country sends us to war, our military uses us in war, and our society forgets us afterwards.” (Ray Scurfield, in War Trauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq)
5. There is a direct, linear relationship between the amount of exposure to war-zone trauma and the likelihood of developing mental health/post-traumatic stress disorder. This means that combatants who remain in a war for protracted periods of time and/or who are redeployed for multiple tours in a war-zone are especially at-risk.
6. Front-line combatants have always been the cannon fodder for our national war policies and our battle tactics. Always.
7. Nothing is more important to the individual combatant than one’s fellow and sister comrades-in-arms—nothing. Typically, combatants fight primarily for and in concert with their combatant brethren—and only secondarily for their country.

8. Next to the welfare of one’s fellow and sister comrades-in-arms, one’s own survival is the next highest priority that most combatants fight for.

9. For many combatants, killing and exposure to the risk of death and maiming is simultaneously a combination of both an extreme adrenaline rush high as well as terrifying and horrific.

10. “There will always be wars, because war is the ultimate thrill.” (Vietnam vet)

11. Profound grief, rage, anxiety, terror, loss and blame are endemic to the experience of war.

12. Never believe it when a combatant says, “The war had no impact on me.” Bull—combat always has an indelible impact.

13. Extremely more sustained and intensive training and conditioning go into preparing combatants to kill and maim and then are reinforced day-after-day in the war-zone than ever goes into de-conditioning combatants afterwards for re-entry into civilian life.

14. The acute psychiatry casualty rate during and soon after war always is much less than the longer-term casualty rate months, years and decades later—always.

15. The military medical mission always has a relatively short-term preoccupation— to conserve the fighting strength and make decisions that are in the best interests of serving the military mission. It is not oriented to promoting the personal welfare of the individual combatant.

16. After war, it is the individual warrior who society very willingly allows to totally shoulder the blame and the anguish for what has happened on the battlefield.

17. A combatant’s beliefs in God, a higher power, fate and/or the inherent goodness of humanity always are severely challenged and enhanced, shaken or shattered by the experiences of war.

18. Big boys (and girls) don’t cry—especially in war. The military culture and survival realities in a war-zone both reinforce a “suck-it-up, soldier-on” mentality that teaches numbing of emotions, denial, detachment and tunnel-vision in order to survive war and its aftermath—and the combatant inevitably brings this home.

19. The killing and maiming of “innocents”—children, women, the elderly (and to a lesser extent, adult non-combatant males) are especially problematic for many combatants to justify or stomach—especially later. (See my “determining the percentages of responsibility” technique)

20. Sleep disturbance, numbing and denial of emotions, damaged self-esteem and issues of blame, guilt and shame are especially problematic for a number of combatants.

21. Typically, there is an inverse relationship between the distance that politicians and military officers are away from the battlefields and the amount of trust and confidence that front-line combatants have in such authorities.

22. A military unit is only as strong as its weakest link, and there inevitably are weak links—who suffer disproportionately at the time and afterwards.

23. The most dangerous person in any combat unit is the FNG (f***ing new guy)——much more dangerous both to self and to others than even someone who has been in combat for months and may be emotionally or psychiatrically hurting.

24. A war-wounded veteran means there is a war-wounded family—the combatant’s family always is seriously impacted by what the combatant brings back home from the war. However, our government provides relatively minor funding and support for families, leaving the bulk of such support to non-governmental organizations and volunteers to provide. The Department of Veterans Affairs is particularly negligent concerning families—denying meaningful workload credit and placing severe restrictions on seeing family members.

These are, to varying degrees, the universalities of war and its impact that many combatants must somehow be helped to address and resolve to a significant degree—or be haunted and tormented about for years and decades, if not forever. END