# Introduction

The study of Civil War veterans has been a stepchild of scholarship on soldiering. It could scarcely have been otherwise: the singular event that produced a mountain of participants' testimony carries more urgency than do the seemingly amorphous experiences of ex-soldiers. By the end of the twentieth century, historians of soldiering in the Civil War had developed that hallmark of a field's maturity, an interpretive controversy. Did the accumulated horrors of warfare embitter the men who served, or did their immanent patriotism see them through the ordeal? Scholars have taken positions on one side or the other of this question.[1]

[1] For overviews that describe the debate and guide readers to relevant works, see Reid Mitchell, "'Not the General but the Soldier':

But research on veterans has caught up. Early studies concentrated on public policy and organized activities, but in recent years more historians have focused on the experience of veterans themselves. This development was influenced by social historians' interest in ordinary people, but it also reflects the current solicitude for veterans of twenty-first-century conflicts. This connection has given veterans' history a controversy of its own. The essential issue is presentism, the imposition of today's judgments on interpretations of the past. Several studies of Civil War veterans have found evidence that corresponds to posttraumatic stress disorder, commonly known as PTSD. Critics contend, however, that foregrounding psychological damage imposes current antiwar sentiments on an era that did not share them and on the majority of veterans who did not suffer the damage. According to one critique, "readers who do not know much about the war might infer that atypical experiences were in fact normative ones."[2]

The Study of Civil War Soldiers," in James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, eds., *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 81–95; Michael Barton and Larry M. Logue, "The Soldiers and the Scholars," in Barton and Logue, eds., *The Civil War Soldier: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 1–5; Aaron Sheehan-Dean, "The Blue and the Gray in Black and White: Assessing the Scholarship on Civil War Soldiers," in Aaron Sheehan-Dean, ed., *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 9–30.

[2] Gary W. Gallagher and Kathryn Shively Meier, "Coming to Terms with Civil War Military History," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4

We take seriously the conflicting judgments about veterans and their fate. As with most debates, each side has virtues and flaws; the challenge is sorting out which is which. As in most disputes, one's first step implies a taking of

(2014), 492. On the evolution of veterans' studies, see Larry M. Logue and Michael Barton, *The Civil War Veteran: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 1–6; Robert Cook, "The Quarrel Forgotten? Toward a Clearer Understanding of Sectional Reconciliation," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6 (2016), 413–436. Studies that find psychological trauma among Civil War veterans include Diane M. Sommerville, "'Will They Ever Be Able to Forget?': Confederate Soldiers and Mental Illness in the Defeated South," in Stephen Berry, ed., *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 321–339; Eric T. Dean Jr., *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Katherine K. Ziff, *Asylum on the Hill: History of a Healing Landscape* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 19, 40–41; Michael C. C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Diane M. Sommerville, "'A Burden Too Heavy to Bear': War Trauma, Suicide, and Confederate Soldiers," *Civil War History* 59 (2013), 453–491; Michael W. Schaefer, "'Really, Though, I'm Fine': Civil War Veterans and the Psychological Aftereffects of Killing," in Lawrence A. Kreiser and Randal Allred, eds., *The Civil War in Popular Culture: Memory and Meaning* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 11–23; Eric T. Dean Jr., "Reflections on 'The Trauma of War' and *Shook over Hell*," *Civil War History* 59 (2013), 414–418. For other criticisms of recent soldiers' and veterans' history, see Yael A. Sternhell, "Revisionism Reinvented? The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3 (2013), 239–256; Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, "'Go to Your Gawd Like a Soldier': Transnational Reflections on Veteranhood," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5 (2015), 551–577.

sides. Our first step in *Heavy Laden* is a focus on Union veterans' psychological disorders, but we appreciate the skepticism urged by critics. Their implication of presentism carries weight, and we address it in two ways. The obvious approach is to attend to context, to recognize the distant and different world in which Union veterans lived. In this study we make every effort to evoke the forms in which veterans and their communities understood mental illness and suicide.

But presentism can be evaluated as well as mitigated. A central goal of this study is to appraise the incidence of veterans' psychological disorders and suicides, partly in response to contemporary insinuations about the past. The coining of PTSD was accompanied by assertions that its symptoms were unique to Vietnam veterans, a notion that was demolished by a study of Civil War veterans in an Indiana insane asylum. The uniqueness claim has receded, but the assumption remains that recent wars have generated unprecedented amounts of psychological distress. Admitting that some posttraumatic stress is common to all wars, one writer sums up the prevailing presumption:

> Today, warfare has become more deadly, debilitating, and "invisible" than ever. This is due to the high numbers of available combatants around the world; the transformation of civilians into acceptable targets; and modern weapons that inevitably kill civilians, destroy infrastructure, poison the environment, annihilate millions in a blow, and can strike anywhere on the planet without even being manned.

> We can surmise that the greater the destructive reach of our weaponry, the greater the moral stress and burden on troops and the nation, and the more penetrating yet mysterious the invisible wound will be.

This assertion is convertible into a question: Did a war that seemingly had less of this devastating force produce less postwar mental illness and suicide?[3]

[3] On coining PTSD and the Indiana evidence that refuted the Vietnam War's uniqueness, see Dean, *Shook over Hell,* 180–209; Dean, "Reflections." See also works cited in note 2. Quote from Edward Tick, *Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul after War* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2014), 102. Paul A. Cimbala makes a point related to this paragraph's topic, though with an inverted argument. Cimbala cautions about a focus on Civil War veterans' mental illnesses, suggesting that "research now beyond the expertise of most historians might very well complicate how scholars judge and assess Civil War trauma" (Paul A. Cimbala, *Veterans North and South: The Transition from Soldier to Civilian after the American Civil War* [Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015], xv). This caveat would carry more weight if the research were not riven by doubts about what PTSD is, how it manifests itself, and how common it is. For a sampling of the uncertainty that surrounds PTSD research, see James C. Jackson et al., "Variation in Practices and Attitudes of Clinicians Assessing PTSD-Related Disability among Veterans," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 24 (2011), 609–613; Lisa K. Richardson, B. Christopher Frueh, and Ronald Acierno, "Prevalence Estimates of Combat-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Critical Review," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 44 (2010), 4–19; Josefin Sundin et al., "PTSD after Deployment to Iraq: Conflicting Rates, Conflicting Claims," *Psychological Medicine* 40 (2010), 367–382; Richard J. McNally, "Progress and Controversy in the Study of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Annual Review of Psychology* 54

Some of the immoderate claims about current wars may come from conflating the two meanings of "incomparability." Because conditions of combat are not directly comparable between present and former conflicts, the current prevalence must be beyond compare. We are not so certain. Strict comparability is out of the question, but the context of the late nineteenth century offers a guide to assessing the surmise expressed in the above quote.

Critics' objection to slighting veterans' readjustment also deserves a fair hearing. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are largely devoted to examining readjustment from multiple perspectives. They indicate that drawing a sharp line between "readjusted" and "troubled" veterans is unrealistic at any given time, and made more problematic as circumstances shifted over the decades. A skeptic might nonetheless point out that all the psychological disorders and suicides taken together affected nowhere near a majority of Union veterans. This is, however, a quantitative claim without an anchor. It implies a threshold of 50 percent for significance, but why is this preferable to 40, 30, or 10 percent? Our study does not presume an answer, choosing instead to estimate benchmarks for the delayed human cost of the Civil War's psychological traumas.

(2003), 229–252; Bernice Andrews et al., "Delayed-Onset Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Systematic Review of the Evidence," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 164 (2007), 1319–1326.

Benchmarks offer an additional approach to the question of significance. Readjusted veterans are one possible reference group in a study of ex-soldiers' psychological disorders, but civilians provide an equally meaningful comparison. Did Union veterans and their families, and civilians in general, experience mental illness and suicide at different rates and in different ways? Since these were recognized as important social problems, an answer offers insights about the Civil War's aftermath.

Chapters 4 and 5 trace the toll of these traumas through the initial postwar years and the remainder of the nineteenth century. Most of the findings in these and the preceding chapters apply to white veterans, though African Americans are included where evidence permits. Black veterans encountered trials of their own, however, and Chapter 6 examines the postwar struggles of the enlisted men who joined the US Colored Troops and their officers.

Drawing on a trove of statements by pension applicants transcribed as part of the Early Indicators project (see the appendix), we allow ex-soldiers to speak about their own conditions whenever possible. Much of this study's findings on suicide come from the exceptionally complete death records of Massachusetts. We return to the Bay State in Chapter 7 to compare past and present veterans' suicides. The comparison is a reminder that however alarming the current plight of veterans may be, we have passed this way before.