



BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION

BOOK: *Wounding Warriors: How Bad Policy is Making Veterans Sicker and Poorer*, by Daniel Gade, PhD and Daniel Huang (*published October, 2021*)

VIRTUAL MEETING DATE: April 23, 2022

The LWV Charleston book club met via Zoom to discuss this look at the Veterans Administration, and its policies as they impact the lives of returning veterans. The book has been hailed by General Jim Mattis as ‘an unflinching appraisal... a must-read for those committed to caring for our Veterans.’ For most of us, it served to raise our awareness of a complex topic we had limited knowledge of previously.

We started by talking about the co-authors. The subject matter expert is Daniel Gade, a retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel and former West Point professor, and Daniel Huang, a former Wall Street Journal reporter who participated in the many interviews for the book, and was its primary writer. Gade affiliates himself with conservative political groups, which may affect his general feeling about the social safety net, but we felt that many of the issues raised were not overtly political in their interpretation. In fact, the reform of the Veterans Administration is approached gingerly by both parties as a result of the bipartisan desire to support those who serve. But the takeaway is that a harder look needs to be given at how benefits money is distributed and used.

The thesis of this book is that the generously funded disability programs offered by the VA – and the encouragement that Vets are given to apply for them – have become a disincentive for many returning veterans to fully reintegrate and assume responsibility for their civilian livelihoods. We hear from veterans who were strongly encouraged to apply for a myriad of disability benefits, and are shown a too-busy system that grants them readily without much amount of medical testing or vetting. Moreover, in most cases there are no requirements to seek and get treatment. All agree that veterans should receive generous benefits for PTSD and specific physical disabilities that result from their service; but what about the soldier who never saw action but claims a wartime injury, or the desk clerk who develops a disease for which she was genetically predisposed, and is entitled to lifetime benefits because her symptoms developed during her period of service? There are numerous examples of cases where the system fails to catch real imposters through a lack of background checks, or people who abuse the system because of monetary incentives or a sense of entitlement. Are substantial numbers of returning veterans disincentivized to work because the military is paying them not to? Has this fed the rise in clinical depression, drugs or suicide? Has the gap between the experience of military service and the complexity of civilian society just become too wide? Is the military ‘pushing’ a culture of disability benefits over a culture of self-improvement and education? Why are disability benefits ‘pushed’ more than tuition education benefits when soldiers leave active duty? These questions emerge.

This book mixes real-life anecdotes with data, but it’s light on detailed sources. We were concerned that there are no footnotes or appendixes to back up many of the claims. The last

part of the book suggests reasonable policy solutions that would help strengthen the services
the VA offers and how we go about it. —
submitted by Cara Erickson