



Review of *Prisoners after War: Veterans in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. By Jason A. Higgins, 2024. University of Massachusetts Press

**BOOK REVIEW**

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**ABSTRACT**

A review of the book *Prisoners after War: Veterans in the Age of Mass Incarceration*.

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While reading the stories recounted in Jason Higgins' (2024) *Prisoners after War: Veterans in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, I was struck by the depth of the collected narratives. Higgins doesn't stop at the sort of Gladwellian thin slice that proves a quick point. Rather, the history of this work comes through in his pursuit of his subjects' full stories.

Chapter 1 begins with the story of Henry D. Burton, a Vietnam-Era veteran who was incarcerated after service. Higgins explains, "Following the American War in Vietnam, oral historians published a plethora of accounts of Vietnam veterans ... many of these compilations focus exclusively on battle experiences and conclude with the veterans' homecoming" (p. 22). This treatment of the Vietnam-era veteran, which Higgins obviously explored thoroughly, as is borne out in the book's exhaustive notes section, leaves out one of the most important aspects of the stories of Vietnam veterans, the part where most of them didn't really have a "homecoming." That's the part that Higgins' work does so well at recovering. Not only does he write about Burton's and other veterans' struggles after returning from war, but their biographies are treated in a wholistic way, as Higgins excoriates the military carceral state in the defense of these forgotten veterans.

It is surprising to learn that Higgins, a Digital Scholarship Coordinator and Assistant Professor of History at Virginia Tech, does not list military service among his achievements. His interest in US military veterans comes from encountering veterans in a state of injustice. As a first-generation college graduate, the particular plight of the working class with which he is familiar, is easy to see in the indignities suffered by formerly incarcerated veterans. *Prisoners after War* started as Higgins' dissertation project. He conducted an oral history project, mostly with formerly incarcerated veterans who were available in his community. This was not Higgins' first time exploring veteran stories as an oral historian. For his master's thesis, he wrote about Vietnam veterans' stories as an extension of his work with the Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Program. Extending that work at UMass and working with Christian Appy and Samuel Redman, he created the Incarcerated Veterans Oral History Project, from which both his dissertation and this book were later produced (Higgins, 2017). From all the stories Higgins collected, the injustices that his subjects faced became clear.

His subjects faced dehumanization on two fronts: "Because both wars and prisons dehumanize people, this book is written from the perspectives of individuals, contextualizing their personal experiences to produce a multibiographical history of veterans in the criminal justice system" (p. xviii). Even though oral history figures largely in this work, Higgins' focus on the narratives

themselves, leaves room for interdisciplinary work, which is a hallmark of Veterans Studies. Each chapter provides examples of veterans discriminated against on the basis of race, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and of fundamental humanity. As difficult as it is to face the numbers that Higgins provides for things like wardens denying mental health services, his exploration of these subjects confronts the reader with realities that are easily feared true. After all, in order to impose order in the military, recruits are deprived of dignity. When deprived of dignity, humans seek a restoration, sometimes in temporary chemical fixes, and sometimes in other ways. But if the dignity is restored, control and discipline break down. The same is true of prisons. When prisoners feel dignity or pride they are willing to risk disobedience to preserve it. But if denied or dehumanized they tend to be more tranquil.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the idea that the War on Drugs from the 70s and 80s and the carceral pipeline for Vietnam-era veterans were linked. Vietnam-era veterans were members of a still highly segregated fighting force, wherein veterans of color faced more stringent punishment than others. While Dr. King was leading the Civil Rights movement in the United States, soldiers were being unfairly treated for their race. Higgins cites this as background for the beginning of one of his subjects' drug use. Availability plus opportunity led to drug-addicted veterans returning to the United States and being arrested for behavior that was developed as a coping mechanism for military-related trauma. The cycle of drug-addicted prisoners being medicated rather than rehabilitated continued above and beyond the plight of veterans and exacerbated their situation. Higgins writes, "The rise of the modern carceral state can be traced back to policies enacted during the Vietnam War era" (p. 65). Essentially, when the war in Vietnam became a failure, politicians needed a win. Their win became the War on Drugs, which consequently punished veterans of the Vietnam war who had not helped those politicians save face. By the time the Reagan administration came to power, the harms of the War on Drugs were amplified by directionless Narco Wars, which further exacerbated the moral injury of yet another generation of veterans.

The rest of Higgins' book focuses primarily on the ways in which veterans are moving toward a restoration of justice. In Chapter 4, the story of Patrick Welch is recounted. Welch is a Vietnam veteran who was an officer in the Marines. An accident led to the death of some of the men under his command and his own severe wounding. In the hospital he became addicted to Demerol. He began to lose weight and his doctor decided to help him retain some of the weight by prescribing beer. He became addicted both to Demerol and Alcohol. As he began to be tapered off the

medication, depression set in, along with suicidal ideation. He suffered many of the same indignities at the hands of The Department of Veterans Affairs as many other veterans do, incarcerated and otherwise. This mistreatment led Welch to an interest in veteran advocacy. He and other Vietnam veterans joined a movement starting in the late 70's and early 80's of peer-to-peer counseling groups, veteran's legal advocacy, and veteran's treatment courts that seek to restore justice and help veterans reintegrate into society with dignity.

In Chapter 5 the focus turns to veterans of the "Global War on Terror." Higgins writes, "Multiple deployments are the defining feature of post 9/11 veteran experiences, leading to a mental health crisis in and beyond the military" (p. 115). With a smaller portion of the overall population of the nation serving, not only were more deployments per soldier needed, but also the number of people who could empathize with the plight of veterans reduced. Higgins recounts the story of Ken Ogo who deployed multiple times with the Army's 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division. Ogo's experiences led to mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and incarceration. Ogo had the unique opportunity to serve in a Colorado prison that housed him in a veterans' unit that promoted the values of the military to increase safety and rehabilitation. This, of course, led to better outcomes. He is now an advocate for other veterans.

Chapters 6 and 8 discuss other issues faced by contemporary veterans, ranging from the opioid crisis to Military Sexual Trauma (MST), while Chapter 7 explores the author's description of the various veterans programs that coalesce into a movement to restore justice to veterans and understand them on a level that is more sympathetic and less hawkish.

The conclusion is just as convicting as the rest of the text. Higgins claims, "The national story of incarcerated veterans is not exclusively about mental health and

drugs; it's part of an ongoing history of racial inequality, punishment, and state violence" (p. 212). This last statement of the conclusion, before the even more visceral stories that accompany it, perfectly encapsulates the thesis of the text. Through his painstaking labor and devotion, Higgins has brought the systematic mistreatment of veterans into stark focus and eviscerated the usual suspects along the way. I recommend *Prisoners after War* as a text for classes on veterans, war, or criminal justice.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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