

James Blake Miller, the New Marlboro Man

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In November 2004, James Blake Miller went from being an ordinary marine to a recognized, well known and idealized figure for the war in Iraq. In the midst of fighting in the Second Battle of Fallujah, Miller took a cigarette break only to have his photograph taken by Luis Sinco, photojournalist for the Los Angeles Times. Sinco's photograph of this young marine took the hearts of millions of Americans. Women wanted to marry him. Mothers wanted to know whether he was their son.¹ The overall response of the photograph was incredibly positive; the image added depth and character to the war that so many Americans were disconnected from.

¹ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, "Two Lives Blurred Together by a Photo," *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2007; Accessed September 28, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>.

This photograph created a dramatic focus on idealized virtue and the power of the Marines fighting overseas. It did not expose the reality of the situation. It is not the first time in history that this has occurred. This photograph misrepresented the war when thousands of other fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan were not young, white males.

The image of James Blake Miller moved Americans in such a powerful and astonishing way. The feelings and general response from the American public was profoundly emotive. Americans wanted to reach out and did not want to see him wounded or dead.² There have been millions of photographs taken over the course of the Iraq War; thousands of them have been impressive and moving and yet they did not receive the same attention as this photograph of the “Marlboro Marine.” The photograph of Miller conveyed exactly what the American public wanted to believe; Americans were imbued with the qualities of rugged individualism, strength, independence, heroism. However, this is a slanted representation of the Iraq War and it exposes this society with extreme and irrational favoritism. It is not just a photograph; it is a photograph that demonstrates the mindset of American standards and fantastical beliefs.

There must be ample evidence to suggest that the picture of Miller became an icon of the war in Iraq by features including being young, ruggedly handsome, male and white, and that this photograph did not sweep Americans off their feet by sheer coincidence. It is also important to incorporate the reality of war and James Blake Miller battling PTSD. Analyzing the dichotomy of this idealized image and uncovering evidence that exposes the ill-effects that a person must deal with from fighting will further express the concerns and mindsets within American society.

² Ibid.

According to Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary, idealism is defined as a person or thing conceived as embodying such a conception and standard and taken as a model for imitation, and also any philosophical system or theory that maintains that the real is of the nature of thought or that the object of external perception consists of ideas.³ Within this context, there are several people who can fit the description of this dictionary entry, fictional and real alike. One character that comes to mind is the Marlboro Man, but James Blake Miller can be paralleled to this fictional person. Because both of these people were perceived in idealistic manners, their realities were overlooked. The idealism that was perceived perpetuated reality.

The Marlboro Man was an idealistic depiction of an American cowboy whose recreational activity was smoking cigarettes. He was a young, ruggedly handsome, Caucasian, tanned and stylish man who was displayed smoking in his 'natural' environment. He was portrayed as a hard-working, individualistic, independent Westerner who had the ability to appear tranquil in the middle of a workday. The Marlboro Man creators were advertising men Jack Landry and Leo Burnett.⁴ They created this advertising slogan for the Marlboro Company which wanted to attract more cigarette smokers. Their intended targets were male cigarette smokers and non-smokers.

The 'Marlboro Man' advertising campaign began in the United States in 1954 and is still advertised worldwide today. Burnett believed that the strongest male influence in American society was the cowboy. This was exactly what consumers wanted to be: tough, strong and free.

³*The New Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House Value Publishing, Inc. 1997), 339.

⁴Allan Lazar, Dan Karlan, Jeremy Slater, *The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 2006) 275-278.

Thus the Marlboro Man came into existence, not to sell trips to Wyoming but to plant the idea that the right brand of tobacco would give you independence and strength.⁵

The Marlboro Man advertisement was created in the United States and the image eventually spread worldwide as part of the dominant Western culture. The image of the Marlboro cowboy was deemed the most popular among the ‘Marlboro Man’ campaigns, and was the most popular in the United States where this idea of a ruggedly handsome cowboy was particularly accepted, favored and well-perceived. Although the ads are seldom seen in the United States, the Marlboro Man can still be found in countries in Europe and continental Asia.

There were three men used in the Marlboro advertisements, the “original Marlboro Man” David Millar, and two other actors used for the role, David McLean and Wayne McLaren. All three of them died from smoking too many cigarettes; Millar died from emphysema in 1987, Mclean died from Lung Cancer in 1995 and the youngest of the different Marlboro Men, Wayne McLaren died of lung cancer at the age of 51 in 1992. Before McLaren’s death he dedicated himself to anti-smoking activism.

The American reference of James Blake Miller being the Marlboro Marine was conceived because of the cigarette dangling from his lips in the image that Luis Sinco snapped. The indication that Miller relates to the Marlboro Men is a very influential statement. According to the authors of The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived, the Marlboro Man was listed as number one. Aforementioned, the Marlboro Man’s attributes were identified as individualistic, rugged, independent, tough, successful, attractive and free. The American public

⁵Allan Lazar, Dan Karlan, Jeremy Slater, *The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 2006) 275-278.

and the United States media believed that Miller also had all of these qualities and received unwarranted recognition and approval from millions of people.

According to the 2000 United States Census, 75.1% of Americans said they were white or Caucasian and no other race. 12.3% were of black or African-American descent. Hispanics, who may belong to any race, accounted for 12.5% of the population. 3.6% of respondents were Asian and 2.4% of respondents said they were multiracial.⁶ There is a significant majority of Caucasians in the United States and it is recognizable, even though the percentage of whites has been in a steady decline since the mid-twentieth century mainly due to immigration.

Caucasians have been the majority race in the United States since its foundation. Because of this historical domination of whites in the United States, race as a concept became significant in determining all racial and ethnic groups of people. Whites have continuously had racial dominance in the United States and have openly used their majority to discriminate against American Indians, Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans and other minority groups. Because of the Caucasian majority, the structures of society are based around this majority race including, school and education, entertainment, advertisements, and politics and laws. It is much more accepted and understood to be an Americanized white person in the United States than to be a foreigner or a minority race.

White culture constitutes the general cultural mainstream, causing non-white culture to be seen as deviant, in either a positive or negative manner. Moreover, whites tend to be disproportionately represented in powerful positions, controlling almost all political, economic

⁶ "Race Alone or in Combination: 2000," *2000 United States Census*, April 1, 2000; Accessed November 15, 2008; Available from <http://www.census.gov/>

and cultural institutions.⁷ Whites have more opportunities in the United States in employment and in schooling. Whites are most commonly unaware of their “privilege” and the manner in which their culture has always been dominant in the US.⁸ Because of this, there is strong social and racial inequality. With whites as the dominant racial group, there is disproportional favoritism seen in several areas of society. Politics, education, media, entertainment, ideology, and employment all encompass a white-majority society with minority races and social groups in a historically predetermined position.

Miller’s photograph gained so much attention because of his race, yet over fifty percent of marines fighting in Iraq are not young, white males. Statistics from 2005 confirm that African-Americans made up thirteen percent of the Marines in Iraq, Hispanics made up fourteen percent, the representation of the racial group “other” made up eight percent, and women comprised sixteen percent⁹. This photograph disproportionately favored the white community and made it seem like they were the only people dedicating their lives overseas to this prolonged war. What this picture did not show were all the women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans and Hispanic Americans who are fighting and risking their lives for this country too. This was just another example of how American society unreasonably favors and displays the achievements of the white man, while simultaneously pushing minority figures aside.

Miller enlisted in the Marines because of the lack of opportunities in his country. His option for attaining higher education was slim, and the jobs available to young people were

⁷ Steven Seidman, “Critical Race Theory,” *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory Today, Third Edition* (2004): 231-243

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Population Representation 2005-Executive Summary “Population Representation in the Military Service,” 32nd Annual Department of Defense Report on Social Representation in the U.S. Military Services (Summary of Social Representation, accessed December 15, 2008); available from <http://www.defenselink.mil/prhome/poprep2005/summary/summary.html>

virtually non-existent. He could have imitated the majority of men that he knew by working in the local coal mines, but his lack of interest allowed him to avoid that work. He thought that joining the Marines would help him achieve the goals he wished to attain in life.

The city that James Blake Miller grew up in is an example of a city stricken with poverty. Poverty occurs all over this country and in many different racial communities. However, when Americans are asked to describe someone who lives in poverty, chances are they will not describe someone who is white. White Americans live at a lower poverty rate than African Americans and Hispanic Americans, but the Caucasian community living in poverty is still present. Whites may be sympathetic, but not empathic about another person's situation. When Miller's image captured the attention of Americans, the assumption was made that he was living the "American dream" as a young, handsome, white man serving in the military. The reality of his life turned out to be much different than the assumptions.

Miller grew up in Jonancy, Kentucky, a very small town in Pike County, Kentucky. Most of the people are poor in this area with per capita income being \$21,172 per person.¹⁰ This town is close to the border of Tennessee, West Virginia and North Carolina. It is settled near the Appalachian Mountains. Mobile homes and beater cars are scattered over the city. Marijuana is the major cash crop and many of the people are addicted to Meth and Prescription drugs. People in this town marry young and often find themselves working their whole lives in coal mines. Like Miller stated after picking up a piece of coal from the ground, "Around here, this is what it's all about...nothing else. It was this or the Marines."¹¹ There are

¹⁰ Pike County, Kentucky "Pike County Profile," Pike County Records—Hotels, Festivals, Genealogy, Newspapers (Pike County Statistics and Demographics, Charts, Figures and National Comparisons, 2004, accessed November 15, 2008); available from <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/genInfo.php?locIndex=4239>, 2002

¹¹ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, "Two Lives Blurred Together by a Photo," *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2007; Accessed September 28, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>

many places in the United States where young men and women do not think they have the option of pursuing their idealized life.

Caucasian favoritism also embraces idealism. With a white majority in the United States, idealism includes positive depictions of people doing good deeds, or gives the impression of being heroic. The photograph of James Blake Miller was relished by many Americans who saw this Marine as the face for the Iraq War. He was taken into the hearts of people all over the country. Because of this racial preferential treatment, Miller became an icon. If the image that Luis Sinco took was of a minority race, the overall response probably would have not been the same.

America invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003. The fighting in the Middle East is still continuing with more than 150,000 soldiers currently deployed in Iraq. This has been a long, arduous war with many casualties, both military and civilian. When the United States and other coalition forces invaded Iraq, it was thought that the war would be over quickly, but now that it has been over five years since the initial invasion that idea has been shattered. Tens of thousands of American troops are risking their lives everyday for our country. However, it seems that each day that the war continues, the clarity of the purpose of fighting in Iraq slips away.

There have been a few major battles over the course of this war and one noteworthy battle: The Second Battle of Fallujah, codename Operation Phantom Fury. The United States invaded Fallujah in attempt to regain control of the city from insurgents. It was also believed by a senior U.S. official that Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was located in Fallujah with an established military command structure.¹² Al-Zarqawi was on the United States wanted list.

¹² John Pike, "Operation al-Fajr," *Global Security*, November 2004; Accessed November 15, 2008; Available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org>.

The United States and coalition forces invaded the city on November 8, 2004. During this battle, over Fifteen thousand United States Marine and coalition forces fought between four and five-thousand Iraqi insurgents. Six weeks after the war began there were ninety-five U.S. marines dead and five-hundred-sixty wounded, eleven-hundred Iraqi insurgents dead and wounded, and an unknown number of civilians were killed during this battle.¹³

Miller was one of the thousands of Marines that fought in this battle. Miller joined the Marines and trained at the Marines Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina after graduating from high school. Although talented at playing the guitar and a skilled mechanic,¹⁴ Miller believed that he had no other opportunities in life except joining the Marines. He fought alongside many friends from his Marine division that were subsequently killed in battle. He served this country by fighting in the War on Terrorism and in one of the biggest and most destructive battles thus far. He saw extensive urban combat and experienced the loss of many people around him. This is the battle that stimulated his feelings trauma which eventually turned into Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

About 7.7 million adults in the United States suffer from PTSD.¹⁵ Almost one in five Vietnam veterans suffered or currently suffers from PTSD.¹⁶ PTSD generally occurs in individuals who have experienced a traumatic event or a series of traumatic events such as war,

¹³ John Pike, "Operation al-Fajr," *Global Security*, November 2004; Accessed November 15,2008; Available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org> .

¹⁴ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, "Rescue Operation Aims to Save a Wounded Vet," *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 2007; Accessed December 15, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>.

¹⁵ Ronald C. Kessler, PhD; Wai Tat Chu, AM; Olga Demler, MA, MS; Ellen E. Walters, MS, "Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, Vol. 62 No 6 (June 2005): 617-627.

¹⁶ Bruce P. Dohrenwend; J. Blake Turner; Nicholas A. Turse; Ben G. Adams; Karestan C. Koenen; Randall Marshall, "The Psychological Risks of Vietnam for U.S. Veterans: A Revisit with New Data and Methods," *Science*, Vol. 313 No. 5789 (August 2006): 979-982.

natural disasters, rape, sexual abuse and/or an accident. This is a disorder that has severe and ongoing emotional debilitation in reaction to trauma.¹⁷

Although diagnosis of the disorder is a recent phenomenon, it is believed that people have experienced symptoms of PTSD for thousands of years. Veterans from Vietnam stand out because there were many returning to the United States with PTSD or developing it soon after. Although the Iraq War has not ended, some experts estimate that thirty percent of the troops who have seen combat in Iraq will suffer from PTSD.¹⁸ Soldiers exposed to traumatic warfare have to live with the consequences of their experiences. Many develop symptoms of or similar to PTSD and many return to the United States and begin to have devastating effects in reaction to their exposure and practices of warfare. What Miller has been through is not an exclusive circumstance, but he was the familiar face and the example of U.S. treatment of mental illnesses. Miller became a hero in millions of Americans' eyes but his internal battle was not heroic by definition.

Illness has a history of not being accepted in this society. The response from the general public to someone sick is poor. Americans lack empathy toward illness. There are many debilitating diseases and conditions that affect a large portion of the population. In American society, ill health, whether it is physical or mental is usually avoided; it is not talked about. This is a major problem, as many people do not receive treatment. Idealization of life is constantly outweighing the normalcy and regularity of life's offerings. It is difficult to assist someone who is sick when the reality of illness is not embraced. This can be related back to James Blake Miller battling PTSD and the American response to his condition or to the Marlboro Men who died of

¹⁷ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Publications, Anxiety Disorders*, June 2008; Accessed November 15, 2008; Available from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>.

¹⁸ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, "Rescue Operation Aims to Save a Wounded Warrior," *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 2007; Accessed December 15, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>.

emphysema and lung cancer. These figures were so well perceived in American society, but as soon as it was public that they were unwell, they became ancient history.

In the United States, heroes get a lot of attention. Some heroes are on television or in comics, some are in advertisements, and some are professionals such as firefighters, doctors, soldiers and people in law enforcement. So much credit is given to a hero even when it is not warranted. It seems like the idealistic qualities are so limited to the appearance and type of acts that the 'hero' has participated in that many people go unrecognized. The perceptions of people are based on assumptions and ideals. When assumptions and ideals are challenged or corrected, it is difficult for a new response or outlook to be created. As an example, James Blake Miller became a hero and an idol to Americans once his picture covered over one hundred and fifty newspapers in November 2004. One year later, he publicized the reality of his life and dealing with PTSD. Americans were more than willing to help him and keep him safe while he was fighting in Iraq, but once he exposed that he had PTSD he didn't get the help he needed. The lack of help available is not limited to Miller's experience. Thousands of Marines that have been deployed in Iraq believe they also have not received adequate care for PTSD and other physical and mental problems related to serving in the military.¹⁹

There are many points to be noted about James Blake Miller's sensationalism and internal struggles. First, if Miller was not white, young or male, then the overall response of this image would have been ordinary, like other responses to images from the Iraq War. Also, Miller was looked upon as having heroic qualities even when he announced that he was battling with

¹⁹ Jennifer Fisher Wilson, Science Reporter, "PTSD Needs to be Recognized in Primary Care," *Current Clinical Issues*, Vol. 146 No. 8 (April 2007): 617-620.

PTSD and thinking about ending his life. Americans held onto their ideals and did not offer to help him.

When his face covered over one hundred and fifty newspapers, Americans wanted to do anything they could to keep him safe and healthy. Even the President of the United States reached out to him by sending him candy, cigars and White House memorabilia.²⁰ Because of the overall response of Miller's photo, General Natonski offered to send Miller home the next day. Miller did not take up the offer because, "it just wasn't right."²¹ He completed his tour of duty in Iraq and came back to the United States. Once he transitioned back into his ordinary life in Jonancy, Kentucky and began experiencing massive emotional problems.²² He began to have nightmares and hallucinations and blacked out while cleaning his shotgun.²³ He reported the problems to superiors, who promised to get him help.²⁴ His marine days ended when he was assisting in aid relief after Hurricane Katrina and he attacked a sailor whose whistle sounded reminiscent of a grenade. He was medically discharged with having a "personality disorder" on November 10, 2005—exactly one year after his picture made worldwide news.²⁵

Miller didn't feel like a hero; he dealt with traumatic events that left him shattered and that were ruining his life back at home.²⁶ He did not get help from family, friends, fellow citizens, or from his superiors in the Marine Corps; ironically, the only person who assisted him was Luis Sinco, the photographer of his infamous photograph.²⁷ Sinco drove across the country

²⁰ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, "Two Lives Blurred Together by a Photo," *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2007; Accessed September 28, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, "Rescue Operation Aims to Save a Wounded Warrior," *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 2007; Accessed December 15, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>

numerous times to help Miller seek treatment programs; he also documented the changes in Miller by taking photographs and taking audio recordings. His disclosure of having PTSD did not get the same or similar response from Americans than when his photograph became a magnificent icon for the Iraq War.

Miller had hoped to pursue a career in law enforcement. But the PTSD and abrupt discharge killed that dream. No one would trust him with a weapon.²⁸ The problem is that treatment for emotional trauma in the Military is not widely available. The Military has made a diminutive attempt to help marines who have served in the Iraq War seek effective treatment if they think they have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Funding needs to be increased in the healthcare sector of the Military because so many soldiers are returning home with debilitating conditions such as PTSD and other personality and emotional disorders. If marines were able to effectively seek treatment at no cost to them, they would probably take advantage of it. However, when they are being held up overseas anticipating their trip back to the United States after serving more than a year away from home, their interest in seeking help in the moment is reduced.

“Before [Miller] was allowed to leave Iraq, he attended a mandatory ‘warrior transitioning’ session about PTSD and adjusting to home life. Each Marine received a questionnaire. Were they having trouble sleeping? Did they have thoughts of suicide? Did they feel guilt about their actions? Everybody knew the drill. Answer yes and be evaluated further. Say no and go home.”²⁹ The mandatory “warrior transitioning” session for soldiers is a very ineffective method for treating potential PTSD victims. Marines are placed on a conveyor belt

²⁸ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, “Two Lives Blurred Together by a Photo,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2007; Accessed September 28, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>

²⁹ Ibid.

and go through the required procedures so they can go home. PTSD is a very personal issue and if someone has it or may think they have it, they need more attention and care than just this homogenizing process of forcing marines to take a class and fill out a “yes” or “no” questionnaire. The personal care for another human is nonexistent and comfort zones are completely violated when a “yes” or “no” questionnaire deems someone’s fate.

The most troubling aspect of Miller’s story was that he had the courage to fly to Washington D.C. to speak to representatives without any positive response. He dedicated time and energy into having his voice heard by people of this county who have the power and resources to make a difference. Miller asked for help and it was not received. He spoke to several government officials, including the congressman from his district in Kentucky, GOP Representative Harold Rogers.³⁰ Members of congress cannot take on every project that comes their way, but there was a sincere cry for help from a Marine who protected the United States. He wanted better treatment programs and opportunities for Marines who were suffering. Nothing came out of that trip for Miller, and because he was already in a difficult place, the rejection left him feeling empty, alone and out of control.

James Blake Miller, the face of the Iraq War and an emblem for Americans was cared about when people knew nothing of him. Americans wanted to help when they knew nothing of his story other than the sheer fact that he was serving in Iraq and was in danger by being over there. Once Americans knew he was in grave danger because of what was going on internally, they weren’t so apt to help and lost their interest. Miller went from being an ordinary marine, to a hero with a famous face, to an average citizen in a short period of time. He exposed himself to

³⁰ Luis Sinco, Times Staff Photographer, “Two Lives Blurred Together by a Photo,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2007; Accessed September 28, 2008; Available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/>

the vulnerability of the situation without receiving the response that he deserved. He was honest about his situation and expressed his urge to make a difference for himself and his fellow Marines who were battling similar war scars.

Miller became the heroic face for soldiers serving in the Iraq War and his instant infamy expressed the assumptions and interests of the American public. His story has not been resolved, but it has demonstrated the changes that need to occur to support the troops of the United States Marine Corps. Everyone who has served or currently serves in the Military deserves the best treatment upon returning home. Whether it is adequate healthcare, available counseling, or improved programs for wounded veterans, Marines need to have more support from humanity. Not every soldier becomes well-known or iconic, but they all equally deserve the acknowledgment, appreciation and hard-work that they put forth for this country. Miller's story is only one example of a Marine with PTSD who did not receive ample support, but this does not mean that future Marines must experience the same outcome. With more voices being heard and more stories being exposed, Marines may receive the help they need. Troops need to be reached out to, not just when they are overseas, but when they return home. With more support given to them in the United States, the better chance they have to breakthrough boundaries that are hindering their goals. The change will begin with constant humanitarian support.