

# John Judge: On War and Its Human Costs to Veterans: **C.H.O.I.C.E.S.**

Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation  
Harvard University Kennedy School  
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mp3 file (6.9+ MB) of complete film (7:40)

This is a transcript of John Judge speaking at a one-day conference, [A Better Welcome Home: Transformative Models to Support Veterans and Their Families](#), on November 2, 2011 focusing on nonpathologizing ways to help veterans. John was the third up of twenty-eight speakers. The playlist of [all 28 talks is here](#). Paula Caplan, Ph.D. (Associate, Hutchins Center, Harvard University), the driving force and coordinator of the conference, shared her recollections about this event:

When my book, *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How All of Us Can Help Veterans*, was published in 2011, John called me and said he loved that I was promoting a nonpathologizing approach to helping veterans. John suggested that there be a conference including that and other nonpathologizing approaches. I took it from there and, with Christina Marchand, did all of the planning and organizing, though I consulted with John at one or two points about some people to invite to speak. The one I remember vividly whom he recommended was [Shad Meshad](#), because I always have recalled John saying that Shad had created “the whole model for the Vet Centers.” He may have recommended others, but I cannot recall the details. I reached out to quite a few people for suggestions and did a lot of research on my own to identify a wide range of people geographically, whether they were in the government or private sector, and what approaches they used. I decided on the format (each speaker speaking no more than 10 minutes, all being videotaped and later put on the HKS website, each speaker avoiding pathologizing and jargon), had an initial meeting with Christina to broach the idea of doing it at the Ash Center. She did all of the administrative work to get approval, arrange for the meeting room and food for the day of the conference, and I gathered the names and bios of all of the speakers, and brought in a director and cameraperson to film all of the talks.

**C.H.O.I.C.E.S.** (Committee for High School Options & Information on Careers, Education and Self-Improvement) brings veterans and military family members together to tell schools and communities about military, war, and veterans’ problems. [This summary on the youtube page was written in 2011. John Judge was the prime mover of C.H.O.I.C.E.S. The DC-based volunteer group died when John left us in 2014. —[Editor](#)]

## How You Can Help:

1. Realize this is our military, and how it treats recruits, enlisted members, and veterans is up to all of us;
2. Encourage Washington, DC-area veterans and military family members to join C.H.O.I.C.E.S., to talk in our high schools to about military life, combat, and veterans’ issues;
3. In other cities and states work with or create similar groups. See National Network Opposing the [Militarization of Youth \(nnomy.org\)](#) to find groups and more information.

Since I'm the person who's guilty of having thought up having this conference it might surprise you who I am. And it wouldn't have happened without what Paula and Christina did. But I was the one that got them in trouble.

My father and his brothers were veterans of World War Two and my family worked as civilians for decades at the Pentagon. I was, and still am, a conscientious objector to war.

In 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War I was a draft counselor talking to young men about their rights under the Selective Service Law. About a year earlier I started to see AWOL soldiers so I had to learn military law and regulations and work with them. In '68 I started seeing the returning veterans from Vietnam and I also that year started taking them into high schools so that they could talk to young people about the realities of military law and about combat. I counseled, probably during that period, about ten thousand active duty and veteran members and I still do work in those areas. So while I opposed the war I actually support the troops. I've learned some things from doing that and I had a few to say today.

Modern war is different. The noncombatant casualties of World War One were about four percent. People fought across trenches in no-man's land. By World War Two, twenty-five percent. Korea, 56%. From the Vietnam War forward the noncombatant casualties, civilian casualties, are 94 to 96 percent. In other words the situation is completely reversed.

Modern war is also ethnocide. It disrupts and destroys cultures. And it is ecocide. It toxifies and destroys the planet. And wars don't end. Mercury, rising from German World War Two submarines, is threatening fisheries off of Norway today. The Vietnam soil, because of Agent Orange and the bombing that was done there, eighty percent of the arable land is destroyed. The toxins of Agent Orange and Depleted Uranium continue to poison people and cause high levels of birth defects in war zones whether the war is going on or not. And unexploded munitions also continue to kill people in all modern war zones.

They don't end for veterans either. I remember veterans from Vietnam telling me who had Agent Orange diseases, 'I died in Vietnam, I just didn't know it.' Shorty, a veteran in the film [Vietnam Requiem](#), recalls killing a Vietnamese family that was hiding in the bushes in cold blood, in angered revenge for losing many people in his unit to a firefight with the North Vietnamese troops. I see them every night before I go to sleep. Their faces come to me. If I live to be a thousand years old they will always be with me, he confesses. Veterans often take the dead with them.

Historically troops would not fire at each other as they got close. From Vietnam forward they've been training troops to fire first and think later. But that break, on a normal human reaction to killing, has not been put back when they are discharged. So there's a rising level of violence in the society from returning veterans. The victims in battered women's shelters, since the Vietnam period, have almost exclusively been the wives and girlfriends of military members, veterans, and police, people sanctioned to do violence in the society. Many veterans don't commit violent crimes until after they come back from war.

War has always created stress for troops and civilians. Why wouldn't it? Civilian civilization itself tends away from that kind of behavior and religions preach against it. But suddenly young men and women are thrust into combat zones where it seems the rules are off.

There's always been stress that was debilitating and they've had terms for it. From the time of World War One when neurologists went out to treat troops for their nerves, it's been called shell-shock, combat fatigue, and now PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder. But these become less descriptive of reality over the wars. For the military they're matters of retention and redeployment. Once stressed troops leave a battlefield they know that it's not likely they will come back to it and that the more deployments required by a war, and the length of them, the more stress there will be.

In the 1970s I worked in a growing movement of people who had been victimized by psychiatry; forced drugging and toxic drugs, lobotomies and insulin, electro shocks. I held workshops on VA and Military Psychiatry. We learned some lessons from that. One is that the ostensible reason people are locked up in a civilian mental ward—that you'd be dangerous to yourself and others—is often the opposite: in the military, it would refuse to. We also learned that in any given month from eight to ten thousand people in the VA were being tested with drugs including psychiatric drugs that had sudden death as one of the side effects. And one military psychiatric journal distinguishes between combat fatigue and pseudo combat fatigue. The distinction is your willingness to go back to war. The ultimate catch-22. In other words the only cure for combat fatigue is more combat. And that's implemented now by military psychiatric intervention teams on the field.

Suicides are still a major problem during and after wars. There were 150,000 suicides—three times as many as the combat deaths in Vietnam—in the first six years. Afterwards they cut off the statistics. Now suicides are rising among reservists, among women, climbing in the active duty to where they're beyond the combat death rate, and increased in one recent year by 600%. And these are suicides that are being tracked. I was told when I worked in Congress, by a mental health assessment team from the Army, three months after discharge they stop tracking. Most people don't hit stress point til six months.

I think the way out of this situation is to let veterans talk to other veterans and also let them have a place where they can talk about their experience without being attacked. I take them into schools and I think that that's useful for them. I worked with them on discharge upgrade and it was cathartic the first two nights when we just let them talk to each other as peers about their war experiences. Most of us haven't ever seen a war. Nine-eleven is about the closest we get but we ask other people to volunteer and I think that we need not to speak falsely ourselves now or live in denial.

But in the end it's not going to be enough to create a perfect safety net at the end of the cliff that veterans are falling off of. At some point we must go up to the heights of that cliff and address what's pushing them to the brink. And the best way to honor veterans, in my view, is to end war.

Video Credits: Mark Harris, Producer; Allie Humanuk, Camera; Erika Simon, Camera Ass.; Fred Burnham, Sound.