



Psychiatry Goes Back to the Future

The New York Times' Benedict Carey reported this week that the Army "plans to require that all 1.1 million of its soldiers take intensive training in emotional resiliency." The Times says it "learned of the [psychological resiliency training] program from Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, chairman of the University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center, who has been consulting with the Pentagon."



The training is being billed as "the first of its kind in the military," with a goal to "improve performance in combat and head off the [mental health](#) problems, including [depression](#), [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and [suicide](#)," allegedly affecting "one-fifth of troops returning from Afghanistan and Iraq."

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First to receive what is essentially psychological training will be "active-duty soldiers, reservists and members of the National Guard," then it will be "made available to family members and to civilian employees." The term "made available" implies that something is voluntary, but when government uses it, the word "mandatory" soon follows.

Ah, how quickly people forget the lessons of the past!

First off, this would not be "the first [training] of its kind in the military."

In 1943, psychiatrist and British military officer, John Rawlings Rees, head of England's famous Tavistock Clinic, an outgrowth of the Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology, provided such "training" to American and British soldiers, ostensibly to prepare them for combat and capture or interrogation. What he wanted to ascertain, however, was whether, under conditions of induced or controlled stress, groups of normal individuals could be made to behave erratically. In particular, he wanted to find out whether they would "let go" of firmly held beliefs under pressure, including peer pressure, in order to conform to a predetermined set of "popular" beliefs. Like political organizer and activist Saul Alinsky later on, Rees believed that one of man's worst fears was ridicule and ostracism, so his experiments centered on what we now know as "encounter"-style strategies — high-stress, spirit-breaking, psychological "conditioning."

Rees also field-tested various techniques of inducing "mass neurosis," based on methods established by — of all people — *German* psychologist Kurt Lewin ("thought reform" strategies) and infamous *Soviet* psychologist Alexander R. Luria (the "artificial disruption of behavior"). Luria's defining book centered on "the artificial disruption of behavior," in which he praised Kurt Lewin as being among the first to succeed in provoking "acute disruption of the psyche" by alternately applying stress and reassurance until individuals and groups became so confused that they couldn't sustain their train of thought — i.e.,



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“emotional chaos.” Rees, upon applying Lewin’s method to soldiers, boasted that he could turn an adult population into the emotional equivalent of little children.

So successful was Rees’ “Tavistock Method,” based upon a combination of Lewin’s and Luria’s work, that at the close of the war, Rockefeller Foundation Medical Director Alan Gregg toured the clinic and asked whether anyone would be willing to apply the Army’s enemy-analysis research in social psychiatry to *civilian populations*. Tavistock was not only willing, but able, and it received a Rockefeller Foundation grant that redirected its work and changed the clinic’s name in 1947 to Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.

Among the first visible successes attributable to this redirected “preventive psychotherapy” was the rebellion and protests of the 1960s. In an astounding turnabout, children of high-functioning, patriotic, and mostly religious World War II veterans — men and women who had sacrificed life and limb to protect their country and families — were suddenly “letting go” of the values they had been taught to cherish. These youngsters embraced, instead, an essentially foreign counterculture of promiscuity, drugs, virulent anti-Americanism, and irresponsibility. Their parents, for the most part, never knew what hit them. They didn’t realize that their kids were being “turned,” if you will, in school. Anti-authoritarianism was a psychological tool developed by Lewin, and colleagues like Erich Fromm, that undermined parental discipline, applied “social pressure” via songs, surveys, and encounter-style class “discussions.” These were takeoffs on wartime psychological experiments that, used with children, set the kids up to need their peers more than they needed their principles. Suddenly, young people did not want to be seen as mavericks or as sticking up for themselves; they wanted only to “fit in” and “be popular.”

The *New York Times* article reveals that the “new” \$117 million psychological program, similarly aimed at “preventative psychology” for soldiers, will “be introduced at two bases in October and phased in gradually throughout the service, starting in basic training.” Then in a telling statement, the article states that the program “*is modeled on techniques that have been tested mainly in middle schools.*” (Italics mine.)

In the early 1990s, I exposed one of those programs in Pennsylvania schools under the banner of “assessment testing.” I pointed also to an infamous psychological training ground for teachers called the National Training Laboratory in Bethel, Maine. It was eventually run under the auspices of the nation’s largest teacher union, National Education Association, which lured teachers to undergo (and emulate) encounter-style, high-stress tactics, and take them back into in their classrooms. Teachers taking the course still have to sign a disclaimer prior to enrollment, absolving the NEA of all liability in the event that they experience an emotional breakdown while pursuing their studies at the NTL!

In a major article (Oct. 20, 1993) for *Education Week*, the primary newspaper of the education establishment, I wrote “It’s About Mental Health, Stupid!” describing the shift toward psychological calisthenics over academics. I explained how both test questions and curricula were increasingly focusing on personal opinions, emotional temperature-taking, “coping skills,” “self-esteem,” and “finding one’s own value system.” I explained how this instant-success concept was, in reality, having a demoralizing effect on the students, causing them to become apathetic with the lack of real, substantive challenges. I noted that teachers were becoming frustrated and emotionally drained from spending their days as babysitters and entertainers and that many were changing professions as a result.

Due to the outpouring of reader response to my article — including one irate bluster from the former head of Pennsylvania’s Division of Testing, who I named as complicit in the psychologizing of



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educational testing and curriculum — I wrote a follow-up on December 15 of that year, adding (in response to his demand), that I was submitting copies of everything to *Education Week* to provide “evidence substantiating that psychological curriculums had been devised to improve scores on the psychological tests” out of his office — all passed off to the public as “academics.” The federal monetary connection was often right on the covers.

Thus, it’s no surprise to me that this latest brainstorm in “emotional resiliency training” emanates from the [University of Pennsylvania’s](#) Positive Psychology Center.

As Jay Leno has famously quipped, “Gee, who could have seen *that* coming?”

“Resiliency” is not something learned in a “crash course.” It’s a backdrop for what we used to call “character,” something parents and religious organizations instilled over years. You can have all the “resiliency” classes and role-playing and “conflict resolution” strategies you like, but if it is not in keeping with the underlying personality of the individual, it won’t work in the end. Let’s face it: people are extremely complicated, which is why so many are enticed by psychology as a field of study. Yet, while behavioral “scientists” have concocted hundreds of labels to describe and categorize human behaviors, and devised manipulative strategies, some of them successful, to make folks amenable to suggestion (or “stimuli,” in technical parlance), nobody can quite explain why one person can hold up to years of torture and abuse, while the fellow next to him falls apart upon seeing a dead body in the road. This phenomenon speaks to the existence of “individuality,” or “soul,” which serves as an inborn antidote to manipulation and brainwashing. Mind-altering drugs can break down this inherent check, which is why the military (and terrorist training camps) sometimes resort to them. Drug-induced effects are heightened in children, vulnerable individuals and fanatic groups, who are easier to provoke into acting impulsively (for example, in response to surreptitious or inflammatory marketing campaigns). But the fact remains, most people in the end will “default” to their individual wiring — i.e., to conduct in keeping with their unique personality. This is what psychiatrists like Rees, Lewin, and Luria tried desperately to alter, with disastrous results, and which the U.S. Army, under the pretense of “teaching resiliency” now apparently is attempting to modify again.

As we pass the 60th Anniversary of World War II and the Holocaust — with its time-honored shouts of “never again!” — highlighting the grisly discoveries, critical milestones, battles, armistices and accords, let us also call on any American and British soldiers who may still be alive to attest to their ordeals at Tavistock in the 1940s. Now is the time for them to speak up, as it appears we are about to repeat history.

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