Clay Evans: Inside Brian Williams' white lie

By Clay Evans

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NBC news anchor Brian Williams has been suspended for six months without pay, after falsely claiming that a helicopter he was riding in over Iraq on March 24, 2003 was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade.

The public has been savage in practically demanding the newsman's crucifixion for telling a "white lie" — for that's what it was — particularly considering that pretty much everyone has told such lies about themselves, if not typically about combat. Chris Kyle, peppered his memoir, "American Sniper," with false boasts, including that he killed two men in a carjacking and shot more than a dozen people from the roof of the Superdome after Hurricane Katrina, and he's lauded as a hero by many calling for Williams' head. Bill O'Reilly of Fox News lied about being in combat, to barely a peep.

I don't believe Williams, 55, succumbed to the "fog of war"; he simply lied. But his transgression wasn't material to his job, and really, I'm touched by a nation that so despises and distrusts journalists it now seems to think they should be immune to the near-universal human trait of telling white lies. I think his savage excoriation is a reflection of America's extremely unhealthy, even dangerous, adulation of all things military.

So I don't defend Williams. But I think I might be able to explain him.

In research for a book over the past five years, I've interviewed scores of active-duty military and veterans. I've also spoken to many men around my age and younger (down to perhaps mid-30s) whose internal conflicts mirror what I think was going on with Williams.

Williams came of age, as I did, in the immediate aftermath of Vietnam, when military service was anathema to the vast majority of young American men. This was, despite the criticism of men from the draft era, a pretty sensible judgment at the time.

Yet as we grew older, things changed. Starting with Ronald Reagan's efforts to restore the reputation of a military tarnished by losing a brutal war, accelerating with bogus "interventions" like Grenada, exploding with the "successful" (if not politically) Gulf War, and reaching the stratosphere after 9/11 and two more disastrous, dubious wars in the George W. Bush era, millions of men who did not serve witnessed the rise of not just
respect, but overweening, unexamined worship of the troops. The guilt, the inadequacy... perhaps those not in our situation can't understand.

Through interviews and working on military-related projects, I have come to believe that many of "us" seek, unconsciously or otherwise, to soften the blow by touting some faint "connection" to things military. It manifests as guys telling soldiers how they "almost" joined after 9/11; a fetish for military hardware and weapons; "chickenhawk" belligerence and blind support for military action; playing "Vietnam R&R" overseas getting drunk and hiring pitiful third-world prostitutes — I've seen it; boot-camp style competitions like the Muddy Buddy; offensive incidents of "stolen valor" — men pretending they served and claiming medals they bought online; or, in my case, mentioning the fact that I have a war hero grandfather a little too often, hoping it somehow buys me a little cred. And for Williams, an exaggeration of danger faced in the field.

I believe most of this is unconscious. Military prowess is too much a measure of "manhood" in our culture; veterans abused by the military and forgotten by the government naturally band together and attack the hapless strategies of millions of men who cannot reconcile that we will never face this supposed "ultimate test" of manhood. However foolish, it is more deserving of understanding than approbation.

But the military has its own hierarchies. World War II veterans trash Vietnam vets for "losing their war"; the Vietnam guys trash modern troops that do not have to face brutal, up-close combat; there is a totem pole of "legitimacy" — Did you see combat? Special forces, Rangers, SEALs, trump Marines, which trump Army, trump Navy, trump Air Force and on down, true or not.

We need soldiers. But we also need a new kind of support for the troops: A more responsible citizenry willing to examine our violent, war-loving — yes — culture and question leaders who count on our support to wage perpetual war. We need definitions of "masculine" that include not just the war hero or firefighter, but moral heroes who stand up for the weak, for justice, for what's right.

Williams harmed mostly himself, but NBC as well; his suspension is justified. But maybe for the rest of us, a little compassion is in order.

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