

PACKER PROTESTS, NATIONAL ANTHEMS, AND WHY DESPITE HIS AUTISM, GREEN BAY'S GREG CLARK EXEMPLIFIES ALL VETERANS

BY MICHAEL JOHN CARLEY

Though it has not completely healed, the city of Green Bay recently survived an almost unheard-of trauma: Its football team and the town actually experienced a disagreement – a strong one actually, and one that played out on national television.

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a year – with media stories about football players not standing during the national anthem. It started in 2016, when

In response to the nation-wide tumult surrounding the Star Spangled Banner, the Green Bay Packers and star quarterback Aaron Rodgers had asked the town to lock arms with them² as a show of unity during their September 28, 2017 game against the rival Chicago Bears. But instead of Green Bay's usual "ask, and ye shall receive" relationship with the team, the Lambeau field crowd booed the interlocking players during the song.³ A clear majority of fans rejected the team's wishes and instead placed their hands over their hearts in the traditional manner. Respect for veterans, and veterans' concerns were cited as the fans' primary reasons for dismissing the players' request, and one wonders if the whole team – front office, concessions, sales, etc. – was at all in favor of the request. Coach Mike McCarthy, just for starters, has very strong and well-publicized feelings⁴ about the national anthem.

Whether we like it or not, we've been inundated – for almost



GREG CLARK, 2004: His drill sergeant at boot camp first alerted him to the possibility of a spectrum diagnosis.

Wisconsin-born, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, refused to stand for the anthem⁵ as a means to protest of the killing of unarmed African-American civilians by law enforcement. But the actual focus of the story, over time, became suspiciously blurred. As Kaepernick's methods underwent more scrutiny than his topic, the topic then changed to Kaepernick himself, and then changed again to being about respect for the flag, and about veterans. Whether this was an organic segue of issue-hopping or a successful diversion* remains to be seen. But Donald Trump certainly enjoyed chiming in,⁶ media outlets had their content needs met for quite some time, the NFL was scrambling for a (non-existent) response that would please everyone, and one could even argue that a small, opportunistic, economic market⁷ had even been created.

**Patriotism has often been used as a political strategy to deflect attention away from other flaws. Hence, the phrase, "Down in the polls? Start a war!"*

Though the true subject of the protests (Racism? Patriotism?) has yet to be identified, the fact remains that while Rohingya people were butchered, while mass shootings in the US continued, and while Bitcoin's rise threatened to cause market upheaval over the long run, our news outlets instead smothered us with non-stop coverage of what, when you boil it down, amounts to a labor dispute; i.e. what you can and cannot do at work. *Can you order an employee to stand for the anthem?* Yet isn't *playing the anthem at work* a clear violation of civil rights? The story is not at all without its unprecedented angles.⁸ For starters...

Wait a minute... Now it's happening to *me!* *See?* I too, just got my attention diverted – I'm 400 words into this article, and I haven't even mentioned who this story is about!

Green Bay resident, Greg Clark, served in the United States Army where he developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Yes, Greg Clark also has autism. Oddly enough, it was his drill sergeant at boot camp who first alerted Clark to the possibility of a spectrum diagnosis. Clark was struggling one day, and the drill instructor said, “*You're autistic, aren't you?*” Clark replied:

“*What's 'autism'?*”

The two then sat down for an hour to discuss it.

Fast forward over a dozen years to a cold, fall night as Greg and I sat at the Blackstone, a well-known local diner west of the Fox River on Walnut Street. I asked Clark – a short, stocky, wintry, 32-year-old “sconnie” – what he'd thought of the whole arms-locking ordeal at Lambeau.

To Clark's credit, he didn't have a knee-jerk reaction to it, and even struggled to find an answer. Like many, he eventually felt that while he didn't like Kaepernick's stance, he believed that Kaepernick had the right to take it.

Further discussions with Clark revealed him to be a young man with the potential to have a family of his own some day, but also one who does not want the pressure to adhere to that life any time soon. The necessary higher income, and the ability to juggle more complex relationships are simply not attractive enough goals right now.

His PTSD is controlled. And like all others who have it stabilized (the vast majority, by the way), he doesn't come across as threatening whatsoever. Clark is extremely gregarious in our meeting, perhaps a little nervous, but whatever his challenges are, he retains the ever-important ability to trust.

Now, the idea of a spectrum individual serving in the armed forces should not come as a surprise. I've been writing about it⁹ and speaking about it¹⁰ for over a decade – and I'm not alone. Yes, the pressures and the physical demands of boot camp and combat, if not the ability to immediately process instruction, will cause most spectrumites to run for the hills. But some of us will paradoxically find the military to be a paradise. How? Well, in the military, we won't have to interpret *a thing*. In most jobs you need to do a lot of “reading between the lines,” which we can suck at; but in the military, they are going to tell you how to behave from the moment you wake up until the moment they turn the lights out at night. They will teach you exactly how to



BIG BOOTS TO FILL: Greg had a father who had served in the military, and for whom the military seemed to have done well by. So he followed in his dad's footsteps.

address this person, and that person. They are *clear*. They may not provide context all the time, but they are communicators – there are no Midwestern dirty looks and cold shoulders when you err in the military: they will *tell you* what you did wrong – and that life is *heaven* for some people on the autism spectrum.

As a result? I'd wager that our armed forces are stock full of undiagnosed or undisclosed spectrumfolk, and that this is not only a good thing, but also that the ones who stay are actually *very good* soldiers.

Clark is unique, though. He acquired his PTSD through two long-term exposures (as opposed to short-term incidents) while serving. But neither of the two experiences included Iraq, Afghanistan, or even combat.

Academically and socially, Clark struggled as he grew up in the Green Bay area, arriving at East De Pere high school around the turn of the millennium. There, he was picked on by the jocks and misunderstood by the administration. But thanks to “band geeks” he wasn't without friends. He did not have grand plans for college, but he did have a father who had served in the military, and for whom the military seemed to have done well by. So Clark followed in dad's footsteps; and in 2004, he enlisted right out of school into the National Guard.

He struggled in basic training at Fort Benning, even to the point where he had to do the first half over again. And because he couldn't latch on to instructions or concepts as fast as others,

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he was picked on. His fellow recruits even duck-taped him to his bed one night; mouth, head – everything, and hit him with padlocks wrapped in bath towels (similar to the harrowing scene in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*, though in the film they used lighter soap bars inside the towels). A second drill instructor walked by but said nothing, and Clark to this day, cannot remember how he got out of all the tape.

through boot camp. But needless to say, his boot camp experience contributed mightily to his PTSD.

The other contributing exposure came from his deployment to Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in 2005. While most of his unit left from there to go to Iraq, Hurricane Katrina changed Clark's plans. He was ordered to stay behind and help, and as a result, never went to Iraq. But while spared combat, no one could

but he only sees a social worker (no therapist) irregularly. And when I press him on those missing benefits, he is reluctant to wonder what is available to him, or what he is entitled to. I wonder if by making peace with (what only I am calling) his inadequate treatment, he is succumbing to feelings of second-class citizenship. But that can't be right. Emotionally, he's doing too well. Some closure from the army about his friend might have been nice (to put it mildly), but he has come to terms with his situation in ways that I might not be able to measure up to... were I in his shoes. And it's his choice.

He also really comes across as a great guy.

So what makes Greg Clark embody all veterans if he's so unique? No big surprise, but it's because of the very fact that he's unique.

We tend to lump all veterans as though they're one, unified group that all thinks alike. They're not, and it's both intellectually and morally inexplicable to think of them that way. My father's Marine Corps helicopter squadron¹³ fought in Vietnam and pretty much votes to the right. And my old colleagues at Veterans for Peace¹⁴ (where I worked for ten years¹⁵) pretty much vote to the left. But even "pretty much" is an unfair pigeon-holing of both of them. Newer veterans organizations – composed of just Afghanistan and Iraq veterans¹⁶ – seem to have even more complex opinions; ones that admirably defy categorization.

All veterans have opinions and feelings that are just as disparate as those that you and I feel. Yes, we need to listen to veterans. And the majority of them might have supported the fans at Lambeau, but it is by no means an overwhelming majority. There are many other veterans¹⁷ (particularly those of color¹⁸) who strongly support Colin Kaepernick.¹⁹ There are those who support the wars they fought in, and there are those who denounce the wars they fought in; those who still believe in "my country: right or wrong" and those with strong feelings about democracy; and all these vets have the audacity to confuse things further by not conveniently fitting into the camps of right and left.



SERENITY, COURAGE, WISDOM: Greg now senses what he can and what he cannot change. He has accepted the dysfunction that surrounds him.

He and a friend, one Michael Forbes, were referred to as "Dumbass 1" and "Dumbass 2." And a few days before graduation, by Clark's account, Clark stumbled upon Forbes' body, slumped alongside a wall, an empty pill bottle next to him. Clark was whisked away. The army never confirmed for him that Forbes had indeed died, nor did they provide him with any contact information for Forbes' family. What Clark was offered was the excuse to not attend graduation. He turned it down.

"I'd worked too hard."

That first drill sergeant who knew about autism, Clyde Harris, was the person Clark cites for having gotten him

imagine how infamously careless, and inefficient – if not also cruel – those so-called relief efforts would show themselves to be. Exposed daily to families that had lost their homes, Clark felt culpable for the government's failure, and took the overall inadequacy personally.

Today, Clark is okay. I wouldn't say "great," but okay. After an endless stream of jobs that didn't work out, he now feels – like previous "Autism Without Fear" subject, Scott Hacker¹¹ – as though he finally works for people that get him (at the St. Vincent De Paul Thrift Store). That has meant a lot to him.

It should be noted that PTSD requires a treatment regimen¹² that combines both medications and therapy. Greg Clark is satisfied with the medications he receives,

If we were to ideologically go further, did a child who lost her father in Iraq not sacrifice²⁰ times more for this country than a two year, rear-echelon Navy officer? Is the female corporal less of a veteran because she “ratted out” the army colleague who sexually assaulted her? Do all vets enlist straight out of high school? Do all vets have Ivy League Master’s degrees? Don’t veterans, just like us, succumb to varying abilities to both think critically, and yet need simplicity? Should the right-leaning veterans organizations carry more clout because they have larger memberships, or should the left-leaning veterans organizations carry more clout because they have higher percentages of combat veterans amongst their memberships? Is Greg Clark less of a veteran because his PTSD wasn’t the result of a Taliban assault?

One thing that vets *do* have in common is that the vast majority of *non-veterans* – us – always want to use them.²⁰ We cherry pick them for our stories, or our campaigns, and we appropriate their suffering for our politics until our need has passed. Furthermore, we ask them to separate from their families, to experience trauma, to die – fine. They agreed to do it, and often wanted to with the full support of the families they were separating from (whether due to economic necessity or patriotism).

But to deny them medical and therapeutic assistance when they come home... I feel (though this may be *my* baggage) is to throw them in the garbage.

If we got emotional – in either direction – about those NFL protests, then let’s ask ourselves this: When we’re exposed to harrowing stories of gross inadequacy²¹ in our treatment of combat vets back home, do we care as much? When we see the destruction of military marriages as a result of ill care²² back home, do we care as much? When we see the disproportionate amount of homeless²³ who are veterans, do we care as much?

Football?

Do we need veterans who have sacrificed so much for this country to want salutes, parades, and a “thank you for your service” more so than proper medical and psychological care? And if so, is that need based in guilt, or economics?

You could argue that herein I’ve actually short-changed how awful Greg Clark’s experiences have been, maybe even the influence of his autism. But although he wants his story told, he now senses what he can, and what he cannot change. Remarkably, he resists my prods to be angry at his lack of access to proper therapy, perhaps even my as-yet veiled offers of advocacy. He has accepted the dysfunction that has, and continues to surround him. It may be autism-related, Stockholm Syndrome-like discouragement; it may be autism-related, Mr. Spock-like pragmatism. And it may also not be related to his autism. But Greg Clark will not let others, like me (even if he likes me), use him.

Green Bay has not completely healed from that night, no, but 90% of said healing was accomplished within 3 hours. I wouldn’t want to anthropologically analyze why – the results would be too scary – but nothing unites this town like a (35-14) beat-down of the hated Chicago Bears. Those boos became loud cheers quicker than human behavior would argue possible. I’m

not sure that’s a compliment to us, but it sure is Green Bay.

Still...

My buddy Stephen Shore invented a great phrase about the autism spectrum: “*If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.*” Vets could really use something similar.

Oh, and by the way, I emailed the local VA office in Green Bay for an interview, and my appeal went unreturned. And what I’d hoped was a good call with the National Guard (trying to get the process rolling to get Greg access to his friend’s family)?... Became dead air immediately after.

Military service has costs – both necessary and unnecessary – that Greg Clark (dare I say it, Greg?) seems to have made his courageous peace with. Clearly, the rest of us aren’t there yet. •

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