

**Political Soldiers: Sources of Iraq War Veteran  
Support and Opposition to War**

by

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To Ceciclê,  
*and in memory of my mother Estela*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the sources of divergent political understandings, focusing on veterans of the Iraq war who emerged from the conflict as pro- or anti-war activists. Despite coming from similar class, cultural, and social backgrounds, and also entering the military with comparably sympathetic views toward the war, some veterans emerged as committed pro-war activists while others became anti-war activists. The question is why? Specifically, what was it about the experience of military life and combat in particular that led to such divergent political understandings? Challenging the conventional focus of political sociology, which explores how parties, socially embedded interests, and ideology shape politics, this study investigates the role of agency in contributing to divergent political understandings of warfare. Probing the experiences of veterans, I conducted in-depth interviews with activists from both camps: 40 members of Iraq Veterans Against the War, the leading anti-war veterans organization, and 28 members of Vets For Freedom, the major pro-war veterans organization. The analysis reveals how prior expectations about the military interacted with each recruit's experience of military life, from basic training to deployment in the field, and active participation in combat. Soldiers who ultimately turned against the war began doing so after their idealistic views of the military were shattered by practices that they regarded as inconsistent with their vision of service. With their faith in the military shaken, anti-war veterans experienced a major rethinking of their military service upon

entering combat where they were ordered to carry out acts they regarded as unjustified, counter-productive, or ethically questionable. In contrast, soldiers who remained pro-war were never so profoundly disillusioned by their exposure to military life, and went to war without any serious reservations, allowing them to employ an interpretive frame that justified and reinforced their pro-war views. In sum, this study integrates and empirically grounds recent theoretical work on events, experience, and framing, producing a promising new perspective about the sources of political beliefs.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*America is not at war. The Marine Corps is at war; America is at the mall.*

— written on a whiteboard at the Marine Corps Civil Affairs office, Ramadi, Iraq, February 2007

The near decade-long war in Iraq continues at this writing. But walking through the streets of America, it is difficult to imagine that we are a country at war in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Some soldiers have returned from Iraq frustrated with the lack of public discourse about the war. But if America as a nation seems indifferent or forgetful about the conflict, the same cannot be said of its soldiers returning home.

Brad and Gary, two men whose experiences and understandings are examined in this study, illustrate this point well. Both were serving as reservists at military police units in Columbus, Ohio, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Both were raised in the Midwest and did very well in school. Brad won an ROTC scholarship upon graduating high school and joined the Army reserves in order to attend college full-time. Gary also attended college and joined the Air National Guard after graduating with a Bachelor's degree in criminal justice. They both came from educated families and

neither of their parents served in the military. In early 2004, Brad's military police reserve unit deployed to Iraq to replace soldiers who had abused prisoners at the now infamous Abu Ghraib prison. One year later, Gary's military police reserve unit deployed to Iraq to provide security for a neighborhood in Baghdad's Green Zone.<sup>1</sup> Both men deployed to Iraq in support of the invasion, but their experiences of war once there set them on opposing trajectories: for one, the experience affirmed and strengthened his support for the war; for the other, the experience challenged his prior views and led him to oppose the very war in which he served.

On August 26, 2002 Vice President Dick Cheney delivered a speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) national convention in Nashville, Tennessee. In this speech, Vice President Cheney made the Bush administration's first official declaration for the invasion of Iraq since the attacks of September 11, 2001. In many ways, it is not surprising that the Bush administration began its political campaign for the Iraq War at an annual meeting of military veterans. Veteran organizations have historically exerted considerable political power (Holcombe 1999; Jensen 2003; Skocpol 1993), particularly in support of campaigns for military interventions. Furthermore, the nation's 22.7 million military veterans tend to vote at higher rates than most of their cohorts, and comprise more than 10 percent of the voting electorate (Teigen 2006).

The conventional view of military veterans is that they are overwhelmingly conservative and more pro-war than the general population. This widely-received image

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<sup>1</sup> The Green Zone is a commonly used name for the International Zone of Baghdad. It encompasses 3.8 square miles of central Baghdad and is heavily fortified with high concrete blast walls. Once used by Saddam Hussein as the administrative center of the Ba'ath Party, it is now used as the central operating base for the new Iraqi government, U.S. government, coalition forces, and contractors.

rests on scholarly research (Holsti 1998; Ricks 1997; Suid 2002), popular accounts (see, for example, *The Washington Post*, “Brothers in Arms Hit Road to Rally Support for McCain,” September 29, 2008), and polling data (*Gallup* “Who Will Get Veterans’ Votes This November?” October 19, 2004; *Gallup* “Military Veterans of All Ages Tend to Be More Republican,” May 25, 2009). The following study complicates this conventional view by examining how the experience of war causes some veterans to sustain conservative pro-war political beliefs, in contrast to those veterans who embrace a more liberal anti-war stance.

This study advances research on the growing rate of military veterans within the population, the resulting electoral clout that veterans exert in our political system, and the increasing ideological polarization among military veterans that has emerged since Vietnam. The military is the most common governmental institution, apart from education, with which American men have experience. Men and women enter military service at a young age during a very formative time in the life-cycle. Yet, we know little about how military experiences effect political attitudes later in life. Moreover, there are a growing number of veterans who have experienced warfare over the past ten years reentering society and participating in the electoral processes. The experiences of Iraq War veterans in this study reveal the influence of military service and warfare on political attitudes and the emergence of veterans’ participation in political activism after returning from the battlefield.

Thus, this study investigates the experiential sources of divergent political understandings, focusing on the contrast between veterans of the recent Iraq war who emerged from the conflict as pro- or anti-war activists. Despite coming from similar

social backgrounds, and also entering the military with comparably sympathetic views toward the war, some veterans emerged with completely opposing political attitudes and activist behavior toward the war. The question is why? In particular, why do Iraq War veterans from similar social backgrounds, who initially supported the invasion of Iraq and participated in the same conflict, come to embrace such opposing political attitudes and activist behavior toward the war? To answer this question, I conducted in-depth interviews with activists drawn from both camps: 40 members of Iraq Veterans Against the War, the leading anti-war veterans' organization, and 28 members of Vets For Freedom, the major pro-war veterans' organization. As a former Marine, I was able to establish a level of trust and rapport with my subjects that enabled me to assemble an extraordinarily rich body of data.

In the following study, I examine how prior expectations about the military as an institution interacted with the ways in which each recruit experienced military life, from basic training to deployment in the field, including active participation in combat in many cases. Soldiers who ultimately turned against the war began doing so after their idealistic views of the military were shattered when they witnessed and/or participated in behaviors and practices that they regarded as inconsistent with their vision of service and national duty. With their faith in the military shaken, some veterans experienced events that triggered an anti-war stance upon entering the field of combat, where they were ordered to carry out acts that many regarded as unjustified, counter-productive, or ethically questionable. In contrast, soldiers who remained pro-war were never so profoundly disillusioned by their initial exposure to enlisted life. While they were often frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of professionalism and weak leadership, they were never so

idealistic to feel the profound sense of betrayal reported by anti-war veterans. As such, pro-war soldiers entered the field of battle without any serious reservations, allowing them to interpret their experiences, including the horrors of combat, through an interpretive frame that justified their actions and reinforced their pro-war views.

This study thus links political understandings to the expectations and experiences of actors. Rather than focusing on how parties, socially embedded interests, and ideology shape politics – the standard focus of political sociology – I explore the role of agency, particularly the transformative impact of traumatic events like combat on the interpretive frames and resulting political understandings and behaviors of actors. Studying experiences of warfare provides added insight into the ways in which motivation, power, and violence impact political thinking and decision-making through such globally important issues as war and peace (Winter 1993, 2004). In sum, this study integrates and empirically grounds recent theoretical work on events, trauma, and framing, producing what I believe is a fresh and promising new perspective for thinking about the sources of political beliefs and commitments.

### **Gary and Brad: Divergent Political Attitudes**

When Gary entered the military in August 2002, he adapted well and excelled in his training. His educational level and slightly older-than-average age helped place him into leadership positions immediately upon arriving to basic training. He later became a military policeman, a position that enabled him to apply his education in criminal justice to his military service. When he deployed to Iraq in 2005, Gary was in support of the war and believed that overthrowing Saddam Hussein and establishing a democracy in Iraq

was a just cause. When I interviewed Gary at his home in Columbus, Ohio, in 2009, he described events in Iraq that reinforced his support for the war. He stated:

There were many instances where Iraqis would say “my husband or my wife was killed by insurgents because she tried to find a job in the Green Zone, or just registered to work with Americans...” There was this kid who had tattoos all over his body, and said that under Saddam’s regime many were in prison, and so tattooed tribal or family names so if a family member finds an arm or leg they can identify who they are. And talking to older Iraqis that said now my children have an opportunity to succeed. They wanted what we had, so, I was like, you know, we’re giving these people opportunity – this rare opportunity.

Gary went on to describe his experiences working in the Green Zone and how he saw thousands of military personnel, government agencies, and contractors working twenty-four hours a day to help rebuild Iraq and develop a democratic society.

Gary’s overall positive experiences in the military and during the war reinforced his unwavering support for the U.S.’s involvement, despite the fact that he also experienced negative events that did not fit into his pro-war cognitive framework. He explained:

Yes, there were some angry Iraqis and the Army in a sense screwed stuff up and went into red areas. There were some incidents where there was a major engagement in the city where people were caught between the fire of the insurgents and the overwhelming firepower that we've got. In a way it made me question our presence. But, you know, I just kept in mind that these people are getting an opportunity and better life by having self-determination and self-government.

Throughout our interview, Gary emphasized the importance of bringing freedom and democracy to Iraqi children, whom he believed had the greatest opportunity to thrive as a result of America’s presence in Iraq.

Brad joined the Army reserve on February 19, 1999, and similar to Gary, he supported the war when he deployed to Iraq. He stated that his unit was proud to go to

Iraq, and that soldiers performed amazingly well under very dangerous and stressful circumstances. But when his unit was assigned to Abu Ghraib prison, Brad grew frustrated with the level of negligence toward prisoners on the part of his chain-of-command and the U.S. government more broadly. I interviewed Brad in July 2009 at a coffee shop in Columbus, Ohio, where he described events at Abu Ghraib prison that turned him against the war:

We were getting mortared every day. I mean that happens in Iraq, whatever. But, we had thousands, and thousands, and thousands of detainees living in t-shirts and tents outdoors. There's certain laws that we have agreed to where we say that we're gonna take care of those people and treat them like humans. I was trained that you have to maintain your prisoners in the same living condition as the people that guard them. But we gave them like bad water that we weren't even allowed to brush our teeth with.... There were obvious divisions between them as humans and us as humans. Even though we weren't living the highlife or anything, we had it bad too. But at least they weren't trying to have us die, but not so much for the prisoners.

Brad went on to describe how the poor conditions at Abu Ghraib led to continued neglect and abuse toward prisoners, and how these events triggered an anti-war stance. Brad later befriended a BBC journalist by the name of Yunis Khatayer Abbas who had been falsely arrested for planning an assassination attempt against British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The friendship that Brad developed with Yunis over the course of nine months also influenced his thinking about the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Moreover, Brad argued that he felt completely abandoned by his chain-of-command. He described how, during his year-long tour at Abu Ghraib, he and other low-ranking soldiers were left alone to guard prisoners during constant mortar-fire attacks while senior officers remained in well-fortified buildings. Brad and other soldiers were also left on their own to put down revolts from prisoners who protested the poor living conditions. Brad explained:

By the time I left that place I had no confidence in my chain-of-command to support me as an individual soldier on the ground in Iraq. And I knew for a fact that they weren't holding up their end of the bargain on detainees. I didn't have any question about that.

When Brad returned to Columbus, Ohio, he found that the American public had absolutely no idea how military personnel were treating the Iraqi people. Soon after Brad was discharged from the Army, he began speaking publicly about his experiences at Abu Ghraib prison and became an anti-war political activist.

Before delving into the process through which Iraq War veterans develop opposing political attitudes, the following section describes my contribution to the field of political sociology. First, I review studies on political attitudes that emphasize how shifts across large political structures influence political views. I then explain how theories of events and experiences can be used as analytical frameworks to understand the development of political attitudes.

### **Political Attitudes**

Sociologists and others studying political outcomes generally focus on three sources that shape political attitudes: party alignments, socio-demographic characteristics, and political socialization. Thus, the sources of contentious politics are often traced to the way in which political parties shape issues and realign the electorate (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Aldrich 2000; Baldassari and Gelman 2008; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Chen et al. 2008; Key 1955; Mayhew 2002); to the demographic characteristics of voters such as race, class, gender, religion, age, and educational level (Greeley and Hout 2006; Howell and Day 2000; Watts 1999; Walters 2001); or to

“socializing agents” such as the family, friends, or schools (Bender 1967; Hyman 1959; Torney-Purta 2000, 2004). What is missing from these dominant perspectives is any attention to the impact of experience and events on the formation of political attitudes.

### *Political Realignments*

One of the earliest schools of thought in research on political attitudes is realignment theory, which emphasizes the role of political parties and the ways in which they shape the electorate. Realignment theory recognizes that significant political events can lead to “critical elections” in which voters switch from one political party to another, potentially creating a new political hegemony and altering political attitudes (Bass 1991; Brooks 2000; Burnham 1970; Clubb et al. 1990; Key 1955; Seagull 1980; Sundquist 1983). For example, the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, by President Johnson resulted in the realignment of southern states from solidly Democratic to Republican (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Valelly 2005).

Political realignment theory is useful for understanding how blocks of partisan voters shift their loyalties between political parties in response to critical events such as war, economic collapse, or controversial social policies. But given its emphasis on decisions made by political elites, this approach offers little to explain how individuals experience these macro-level events in ways that change (or fail to change) their political attitudes (Chen et al. 2008). Moreover, realignment theory does not address the meaning voters draw from significant political events that change their attitudes in one direction rather than another. For example, theories based on the realignment of southern states from Democrat to Republican emphasize quantitative shifts in voter blocks, rather than

qualitative analysis of the complex and multiple ways in which voters that shift their political allegiance are influenced differently. In sum, macro-theories of political realignment are not fine-grained enough to explain shifts in individual political attitudes. For the purposes of this study, political realignment theory cannot adequately address why the experience of war causes some Iraq War veterans to embrace dominant pro-war political attitudes, while similar experiences led other veterans to later adopt an anti-war stance.

### *Demographic Characteristics*

Sociologists and political scientists have come closer to addressing the individual-level correlates of political attitudes by focusing on demographic influences such as race, class, gender, region, and age. This literature takes groups as the basic unit of analysis. For example, comparisons across race show that blacks overwhelmingly vote Democratic and constitute a critical sector in limiting and sometimes even reversing dominant Republican strongholds in southern states (Clawson and Clark 2003; Jewett 2001; Walters 2001). Similarly, studies of political participation by class demonstrate deep-seated political differences based on income, whereby higher income is correlated with more conservative voting (Brewer and Stonecash 2001; Hout et al. 1993; Stonecash et al. 2000; Weakliem 1991). Indeed, since the founding of the study of political partisanship, some scholars have argued that party politics can be reduced to disputes between the haves and have-nots (Key 1958). More recently, political scientists have defined the differences in political attitudes between men and women as the “gender gap,” whereby women are more likely than men to possess more liberal views and identify as Democrats

(Howell and Day 2000; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004; Inglehart and Norris 2000).

Measurements of political attitudes across the life-course follow the pattern of an inverted “U-curve,” characterized by more liberal political commitments that begin in the early teenage years and peak during young adulthood, before tailing off into greater conservatism after middle age (Watts 1999). Such demographic pressures help to elucidate the “social basis” (Lipset 1981) of contemporary politics and bring us closer to learning how the social position of different groups shapes their political understanding.

However, political demography can do no more than infer how individual experiences shape political attitudes. It assumes that political attitudes are relatively stable within race, class, gender, and age cohorts, without examining individual life experiences (Davis 1980; Glenn 1974; Heath et al. 1985; Weakliem 1991). Although public opinion may change, Page and Shapiro conclude that “group differences in policy preferences usually stay consistent or alter very slowly” (1992, 318). But the focus on groups is simply too crude to explain how similarly-located groups of actors can experience and understand events in ways that yield politically different outcomes. The following study demonstrates how veterans’ experiences in the military can challenge group durability, and how events during war can alter political attitudes among members of the same group.

### *Political Socialization*

Individual-level politics are perhaps best explained by the tradition in political psychology that emphasizes “political socialization” – a term coined by Hyman (1959) to emphasize the importance of primary (family) and secondary (schools) agents of learning

among children in relation to politics. Political socialization became defined as a process through which “the individual internalizes politically relevant attitudes, beliefs, cognitions, and values” (Bender 1967, 392). The focal point of political socialization centers on a strong and durable link between the political attitudes of children and parents (Langton 1969; Torney-Purta 2004). In spite of growing interest in the field of political socialization during the 1960s, it reached its height in the 1970s, then sharply declined in the 1980s, before experiencing a revival in recent years (Haste and Torney-Purta 1992; Niemi and Hepburn 1995; Owen 2000; Sherrod 2003)<sup>2</sup>.

The resurgence in political socialization research today remains fixed on the transmission of political attitudes to children from primary (family) and secondary (education) agents. As a result, political socialization theory relies on relatively stable agents of socialization to explain the development of political attitudes. Moreover, political socialization theory maintains that attitudes learned during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood remain stable throughout the life-course. Consequently, similar to other variants of socialization theory, political socialization tends to assume a relatively passive actor who has values and attitudes imparted to him/her, but does little in the way of agentic, let alone critical interpretation (Wrong 1961). Thus, political socialization does not capture the role of lived experiences and

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<sup>2</sup> Torney-Purta (2000) argues that interest in this research area weakened due to critiques of flawed methodologies, spurious effects between civic education and long term political identities, the public’s increasing lack of trust in government, and a reduced interest among political scientists and sociologists in studying youth education. However, Owen (2000) contends that there is a renewed interest in political socialization research due to concerns about the lack of knowledge and interest in political activities like voting among young people.

significant events that may reinforce or change political attitudes otherwise believed to remain stable.

This study departs from the theory of political socialization by positioning experience at the center of analysis to argue that events in war can trigger a break in the transmission of political attitudes from primary and secondary agents of political socialization. While not abandoning the concept of socialization altogether – indeed, it remains an important part of my analysis – I examine socialization as a more complex, ongoing process in which actors actively reinterpret and reassess such socialization in light of events and experiences. Therefore, I aim to open a space for the role of agency and subjectivity among political actors, rather than reducing them to mere reflections of larger political structures or groups. I argue that a focus on the role of events and experience within the subfields of political attitudes, and more generally political sociology, will ultimately provide a more refined understanding of political outcomes.

### **Theorizing Events and Experiences as Mechanisms**

For the veterans in this study, the Iraq War marks a critical juncture that shaped their political trajectories toward pro- or anti-war political activism. Using a path-dependent approach, I am sensitive to the way in which veterans are socialized into a pro-war military mindset, and how subsequent events and experiences in the military and during the Iraq War specifically either break or reinforce their support for that war. In addition, I trace the way in which, once their experiences set them on a path in support of or opposition to the war, these paths also set into motion deterministic causal patterns that are difficult to reverse. Moreover, although other confounding variables such as race,

class, gender, and age may serve as good measures for explaining why Iraq War veterans may have joined the military in the first place, they do not adequately describe why veterans from similar demographic groups go on to develop opposing views in support of or in opposition to the war. Therefore, I argue that events and experiences before, during, and after war serve as the social basis for veterans' opposing political outcomes.

Research on the sources of political attitudes can be found in political sociology's comparative historical origins (Gould 1991, 1993, 1995; Tilly 1964; Walder 2006, 2009). Studies on the sources of contentious politics are abundant in the subfield of comparative historical research, in which deviant cases are analyzed to construct theoretical puzzles. There are multiple examples: Gould's (1996) study of evolving social networks in revolutionary mobilizations; Traugott's (1985) analysis of the class origins and political orientations of Parisian working-class insurgents and the militia that suppressed them; Bonacich's (1972) example of ethnic political mobilization; and Kimeldorf's (1988) explanation for the (non-)existence of labor militancy in the United States. Each of these studies systematically maps out the social roots of political orientations and asks, arguably, an even more urgent question in political sociology: how do events and experiences shape political attitudes?

To begin mapping out the sources of political attitudes of Iraq War veterans, this study employs an analytical framework that theorizes events and experiences as mechanisms that shape political outcomes. Borrowing from a comparative historical methodological approach and applying it to interview-based data, I examine how events and experiences of guerilla warfare in particular, shape political consciousness.

Comparative historical studies share an appreciation for periods in which social changes are marked by significant events; this is particularly so with periods associated with warfare. For example, in the fields of history and sociology, the end of World War I marks the beginning of the Russian Revolution and the rise of communism in the twentieth century (Hobsbawm 1994); World War II marks the beginning of industrial expansion in the U.S. and shifts in the production of sociological knowledge (Steinmetz 2007); and the Vietnam era marks a period of social and political change that included an unprecedented number of poor people's movements (Piven and Cloward 1979). But rather than using the event of war to mark a period of time, this study emphasizes the event and experience of war itself, specifically the Iraq War, and how a series of events in this war have shaped the political consciousness of its participants.

Using a path-dependent approach, comparative historical sociologists explain social change by finding patterns across cases, down branching paths, or within complex sequences of events in order to explain "constellations of causal mechanisms" (Steinmetz 1998, 177). Events are used to capture the contexts, meanings, and conditions under which actions are carried out, and to understand how "similar actions have different effects in different times and places" (Stinchcombe 2005, 5). For example, comparative historical sociologists use events to explain differences and similarities across macro-social outcomes such as revolutions (Skocpol 1979), state-formations (Anderson 1974; Tilly et al. 1975), or a single world-system (Wallerstein 1998); as well as to explain micro-social outcomes, such as the divergent political trajectories of the French working poor following the French Revolution of 1848 (Traugott 1985), or the deviating political evolution of longshoremen's unions in New York and on the West Coast from the 1930s

through the 1950s (Kimeldorf 1988). They explain the reordering of political, economic, and social life by framing the above macro- and micro-sequences of events during or between periods of war, without examining how participation in warfare by rank-and-file members may have shaped political outcomes. In sum, historical comparative studies of political development rarely consider how events and experiences in war influence political outcomes.

In order to trace the ordering of events that shaped the political attitudes of Iraq War veterans, I employ “path dependence,” which refers to the ways in which happenings at an earlier point in time affect outcomes at a later period of time (Mahoney 2000; Stinchcombe 1968). By using a path-dependent approach, this study emphasizes the importance of contingency and how contingent events set into motion patterns that have deterministic properties, which lead to divergent outcomes of pro- and anti-war political attitudes. Path dependence is premised on the argument that causal outcomes are determined by sequences of events, in which each step in the sequence is dependent on and a reaction to temporally antecedent events. In other words, each event in a chain of events is causally connected and seen as a step in the path leading up to a particular outcome (Abbott 1983). Path dependence offers no single, underlying factor to explain the development of political outcomes. Instead, it highlights the combination of complex, multi-causal historical factors grounded in early contingent events that produce a series of reactions. Hence, the pathway to understanding how events shape political outcomes is complex and never one-dimensional (Wagner-Pacifici 2010). There are multiple modalities working at the same time creating a dynamic network of meanings. From the experiences of Iraq War veterans in this study, my analysis identifies the

multiple meanings of events and experiences during warfare that developed into divergent paths toward pro- or anti-war political activism.

### *Experiences*

The category of experience is difficult to analyze given its often contradictory uses and multiple interpretations from religious, humanist, and scientific perspectives (Jay 2004). As a result, the use of personal experience in scientific inquiry is generally critiqued as simplistic or as mere opinion, rather than a certainty of science (Scott 1991). Nonetheless, race scholars (Christian 1988; Joyce 1987) and feminists (Kruks 2001; Smith 1987) defend the importance of experience, particularly in the new social movements and “identity politics” of the 1980s and 1990s (Bernstein 2005). In this study, I make use of the latter argument and employ experience as a mechanism to capture the ways in which social consciousness could be altered by experiences of warfare. Significant events such as war can produce experiences where knowledge is constructed by living actors who reflect upon what is happening to them and the world around them. Therefore, inferring that the use of experience in scientific inquiry is simplistic only inhibits research from drawing on these pockets of knowledge, which can be used to explain shifts in political attitudes and behaviors.

This study specifically analyzes the experiences of Iraq War veterans under the social conditions of guerilla warfare. Unlike conventional wars such as World War II, the Iraq War is a guerilla war, insofar as it is not always clear who the enemy is, and exposure to the horrors of warfare is not necessarily through direct combat (Roxborough 2007). In other words, experiences of warfare in Iraq are multi-dimensional and can

include any combination of combat experience, the witnessing of abusive violence, and/or participation in abusive violence.<sup>3</sup>

For Iraq War veterans, the social conditions of fighting a guerilla war on urban terrain created a complex environment in which it was not always clear who the enemy was, and fighting included hit-and-run strategies from insurgents who hid among the civilian population. As a result, American soldiers who later became anti-war activists underwent a major rethinking of their idealistic views toward the invasion of Iraq when their experiences included events such as killing and abusing innocent civilians, as well as fighting on the ground with unclear objectives from military and political leaders who pressed for a quick and decisive victory. In contrast, soldiers who sustained pro-war political attitudes deployed to Iraq lacking patriotic ideals of spreading freedom and democracy, and their experiences in Iraq met or exceeded their minimal expectations of military service, which abated any questioning of their participation in combat. For pro-war veterans, a major rethinking did not materialize, allowing them to continue supporting the war and political status quo.

Nonetheless, Iraq was an equally strange and dangerous place for both pro- and anti-war veterans. Their movement from a modern western society they knew, and whose parameters they intuitively understood, into a developing country with a predominantly Muslim culture where words, feelings, and behaviors had to be consciously organized while fighting an urban guerilla war, was a profoundly unsettling experience. Moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> Studies of trauma amongst WWII veterans (Stouffer et al. 1949) measured war trauma directly with the level of combat exposure, where high combat exposure resulted in an increased level of war trauma. This, however, is an inadequate measure of war trauma for Vietnam veterans who participated in a non-conventional guerilla war (Frey-Wouters and Laufer, 1986), and I argue that this is also an inadequate measure of trauma for Iraq war veterans.

American soldiers came to Iraq empowered to avenge the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and to make changes in a society they comprehended barely if at all. At the same time, however, they were trained to fight a conventional war in which the objective was to defeat the Iraqi Army, capture the capital city of Baghdad, and be greeted as “liberators” by the Iraqi people.

Indeed, the initial invasion of Iraq did include many of the ingredients of conventional warfare, and after the fall of Baghdad, political and military leaders rushed to declare the end of major combat operations. However, within one year, fighting turned toward urban guerilla warfare among various factions of Iraqis and foreign insurgents. The incongruousness of this rapid transition created a very complex social environment that exceeded soldiers’ understanding of war. In other words, the meaning of going to war and engaging in combat seemed evident to American soldiers when they deployed to Iraq – defeat the Iraqi army, win the war, and be greeted as liberators. However, their conventional understandings of warfare were inadequate when measured against their actual experiences on the ground. The changing character of the war in Iraq over time, the inability to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, as well as effective deadly strategies used by insurgents against a more technologically advanced American army, triggered divergent meanings soldiers drew from their experiences of warfare. Because participating in a war is a relatively powerful social experience that shapes an individual’s worldviews, the cases of pro- and anti-war veterans are particularly well-suited for an eventful explanatory argument that describes the sources of political attitudes and activist behavior.

## **Research Problem**

The methods for studying political attitudes in the field of political sociology provide little insight into how individual life experiences shape political thinking. The veterans who participated in this study volunteered for military service and initially supported the military's mission of removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, and establishing a free democratic society in the Middle East. They volunteered for a variety of reasons, and with different expectations of being a soldier. For anti-war veterans, the military failed to meet their idealistic expectations of service, and precipitated a critical stance toward the military and war. With their ideals of military service thrown off balance, events in war such as combat, participation in abusive violence, and/or witnessing abusive violence were jarring enough to trigger a major rethinking of their initial support for the war. For pro-war veterans, becoming a soldier exceeded their minimal expectations of service, which averted any rethinking of their participation in warfare, and affirmed their support.

### *Anti-war Veterans*

My research found that anti-war veterans entered military service with the desire to fulfill a very idealistic image of patriotic service and being a professional soldier. Thus, they reported to their first unit in the army with high expectations of military service and professionalism. However, the actions of fellow soldiers, and leaders within their chain-of-command contradicted their idealistic views, and failed to meet their very high expectations of military service, which precipitated an anti-war stance. In Iraq, anti-war veterans experienced a disconnection between their patriotic ideals of spreading

freedom and democracy, and actual military practices on the ground that included indiscriminate killing, violence, and abuse toward Iraqi civilians. Thus, for anti-war veterans, developing an anti-war stance is contingent upon a disruption in their idealistic beliefs of military service, and events in warfare that were powerful enough to trigger a major rethinking of their support for the war.

At the time of the invasion in 2003, the Iraqi army was the fourth largest military in the world. Thus, American soldiers were prepared to fight a conventional army, capture the capital city of Baghdad, win the war, and be greeted by the Iraqi people as “liberators.” Indeed, within four days, they defeated the Iraqi Army and captured the capital city of Baghdad. But soon after, American soldiers were thrust into the complexities of fighting a growing insurgency for which they were ill-prepared (Roxborough 2007). The guerilla war that ensued for the next ten years was fraught with unclear military objectives and uncertain outcomes. Moreover, insurgent fighters constructed roadside bombs and blended in with the civilian population. As a result, all Iraqi males of military age were quickly reframed by American soldiers as potential insurgents, and soldiers turned their confusion and frustration against Iraqi civilians.

The conditions of fighting an unconventional war with unclear and constantly changing objectives against the Iraqi people led to events and experiences that were jarring enough to challenge some veterans’ ideals of military service, which later produced an anti-war stance. Put simply, American soldiers were prepared to fight against enemy combatants who were equally trained and equipped to fight against them, but when the social conditions of combat included fighting, witnessing, and participating

in abusive violence against a weaker enemy that included civilian noncombatants, they could no longer justify the war or their participation in it.

### *Pro-war Veterans*

For veterans who maintain unwavering support for the military and war, events before, during, and after the war confirmed their pro-war political attitudes. In contrast to anti-war veterans, they held more instrumental expectations of military service that were based on military training and strategy rather than idealistic notions of patriotic duty. Therefore, when they deployed to Iraq and defeated the Iraqi Army, their expectations of the military and war were easily exceeded in the field, which abated any questioning of military practices on the ground, and allowed them to maintain their support.

It is important to note that, similar to anti-war veterans, pro-war veterans also acknowledge deficiencies in military practices and failed leadership, but their lack of ideals about military service assuages any speculation of the war as a just cause. Thus, it is less complicated to continue to support the war and political status quo than to begin developing criticism toward the overall mission. As a result, to justify fighting under unclear military objectives, killing and abusing possible enemy insurgents, and participating in abusive violence, pro-war veterans argue that these events are simply unavoidable happenings in any war, and not unique to the war in Iraq.

The meaning that pro-war veterans draw from significant combat events is that the enemy can be vastly more destructive and oppressive toward the Iraqi people. Therefore, these veterans justify their pro-war stance by arguing that insurgents can be so brutal against their own people that there is simply no alternative to military force. In

contrast to anti-war veterans, throughout this study, pro-war veterans frame events such as combat, participating in abusive violence, and/or witnessing abusive violence in Iraq as significant events that solidified their support for the war, rather than trigger an anti-war stance. For pro-war veterans, their unwavering support for the war is driven by a lack of idealistic views toward military service, and easily exceeded expectations, which provide a cognitive space for avoiding any scrutiny of military practices while on the battlefield.

The following analysis employs an eventful form of explanatory argument that identifies the sequence of events that leads veterans from the same war to form oppositional political attitudes and activist behaviors. By analyzing collective experiences, paired comparisons between pro- and anti- Iraq War veterans are used to draw parallels between the two groups. Moreover, I employ “path dependence,” which posits that “what happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time” (Sewell 1996, 262-3). In other words, I do not consider events as isolated incidents, but rather as important sequences of incidents (and interpretations of incidents) that form an interconnected pathway to current political attitudes toward the Iraq War. Because participating in a war is a relatively powerful experience that shapes an individual’s worldviews, the cases of pro- and anti-war Iraq veterans are particularly well-suited for an eventful explanatory argument that gives rise to divergent political outcomes.

## **Data Collection and Methods**

I joined the Marine Corps in July 1993 and was released from active duty as a Staff Sergeant in January 2000 before I entered college. Thanks largely to my own status as a Marine Corps veteran, I was given full access to veterans' organizations to conduct in-depth interviews and attend organizational events. Moreover, I served in the Marine Corps during roughly the same period as participants who joined the military before the invasion of Iraq, which facilitated an immediate bond, trust, and rapport with my subjects that would have otherwise been difficult to develop. For example, in October 2009, I interviewed a group of Marine Corps veterans in Oklahoma City who agreed to conduct interviews with me only because I was a former Marine. Moreover, veterans repeatedly told me that they no longer talk about their experiences in Iraq, but confide in me because I have the background to understand the uniqueness of their military experiences and will not negatively judge their participation in warfare. As a result, throughout this study, veterans provided me with in-depth details about their experiences in Iraq, and in particular their participation in combat, which provided the raw data upon which this study is based.

My sample contains 68 in-depth interviews of Iraq War veterans who are political activists in support or opposition to the Iraq War (see Appendices C and D for a more complete description of the sample). The sample is drawn from two veteran organizations that represent extreme opposite political attitudes and behaviors toward the Iraq War: 40 members of Iraq Veterans Against the War and 28 members of Vets For Freedom.

Research participants include veterans from predominantly working-class to upper-middle-class backgrounds. They are mostly white males between the ages of 19 and 25, with the exception of two retirees over the age of 55. Racial and ethnic groups such as African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are underrepresented in both Vets for Freedom and Iraq Veterans Against the War and, therefore, are also underrepresented in this study. Women are also underrepresented in Vets for Freedom and Iraq Veterans Against the War. Nonetheless, four African Americans, nine Latinos, one Native American, and five women are represented in my total sample.

I rely on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation at group meetings, rallies, and other key events from August 2008 to December 2009. I clustered my interview samples in major U.S. cities where chapters of these organizations are most active, such as Washington, D.C., Boston, New York, Chicago, Oklahoma City, and Los Angeles. I also conducted interviews with veterans in Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, located near my home base of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Interviewing took place at state chapter meetings, national organizational gatherings in major U.S. cities, and at homes, restaurants, bars, and coffee shops throughout the country. By conducting in-depth interviews, I was able to examine how individuals make sense of their experiences, and how those experiences have shaped their worldviews (Young 2004). The interview was composed of open-ended questions that were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, providing the data used for the textual analysis (see Appendix A and B for interview instruments). Using qualitative data analysis software, I employ issue-focused coding (Weiss 1994) of narratives to analyze how veterans describe events and experiences before, during, and after their deployment to Iraq, in order to capture the

contingent process through which they developed their political thinking. I used a life history format and took the respondent through her/his life prior to their entry into the military, their military service and experiences of warfare, the readjustment period after leaving the military, and their turn toward political activism.

My pro-war sample is gathered from Vets for Freedom, a Political Action Committee (PAC) that was founded on November 11, 2007, (Veterans Day) by a group of four Iraq War veterans who felt that the progress they had witnessed in Iraq was going unreported in the media. Reports from the media of political breakdown, car bombings, suicide missions, and overall chaos in Iraq overshadowed the progress they had witnessed during their tour, and which was also a result of the 2007 “troop surge” orchestrated by General David Petraeus. Within one year, Vets for Freedom became the most outspoken Iraq War veterans’ organization in support of the war. Members of Vets for Freedom employ a variety of strategies, including lobbying Congress, supporting pro-war candidates, touring the country, and appearing regularly on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC and various politically-oriented talk shows. They have also launched aggressive “pro-mission” television ads in states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada.

The anti-war sample is drawn from Iraq Veterans Against the War, which was founded on July 30, 2004 at the annual Veterans for Peace convention in St. Louis, Missouri, by seven Iraq War veterans whose military experiences turned them against the war. The membership of Iraq Veterans Against the War has steadily grown to hundreds of members who have returned from the war believing that they were involved in an illegal occupation and whose experience in Iraq has taught them that the only way to

bring freedom to the Iraqi people and end the bloodshed is for a complete withdrawal of American military troops. Their political strategies include testifying about the atrocities they committed and/or witnessed in Iraq, participating in anti-war marches, staging street theater performances in military fatigues reenacting the abuse of Iraqi civilians, as well as making media appearances on major cable news and public news networks.

My strategy throughout this dissertation is to present variations between members of political groups – Vets for Freedom and Iraq Veterans Against the War – and within single groups, such as their individual political trajectories as a consequence of their different military experiences. The between and within group differences are presented in proportional form. The findings are generally presented in life history format as vignettes of comparable experiences before, during, and after participating in war. Thus, my presentation of interview cases is bivariate in terms of the relationship between political outcomes.

There are of course limitations to this study. To begin with, my sample uses a purposive sample of respondents who are political activists. Therefore, the study is not a generalizable national probability sample of Iraq War veteran political attitudes. The political attitudes of veterans who do not participate in pro- or anti-war political activism are not reported in the findings. I sampled activists from opposing political groups because interviewing political activists offers the following advantages: first, it is more clear to determine their attitudes toward war based on their organizational affiliation; and second, activists are arguably the most firmly committed to their views toward the war. Thus, selecting cases with maximum variation on the dependent variable enables me to

identify common themes in the data that are sensitive to how experience and events create divergent political outcomes.

Secondly, I interviewed veterans during their post-war political involvement since the resources for a study that sampled political attitudes before, during, and after the war were not available at the time. Therefore, their views toward the war are retrospective, and arguably, respondents are telling stories that fit their respective political attitudes and activist behaviors. Nonetheless, I am less interested in historical accuracy of accounts and more interested in the meaning that veterans draw from their deployment to Iraq. For respondents, their experiences of war are real, and the rich and complex process through which events in war shaped the political attitudes of the sixty-eight veterans in this study serve as the data used to explain their divergent political outcomes.

The final limitation that deserves mention is the underrepresentation of women veterans and veterans from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. Members of both Vets for Freedom and Iraq Veterans Against the War are predominantly white males and hence highly represented in my total sample. During the process of conducting this study, I learned that women veterans and veterans from racial/ethnic groups tend to be more involved in civic, local politics, as opposed to international issues such as war.

The following analysis consists of three substantive chapters. The next chapter examines the military as a total institution with an emphasis on the ways in which expectations of military service during war shapes political outcomes. Chapter 3 analyzes combat events as turning points that shape the political consciousness of veterans. Chapter 4 turns toward post-war events and experiences, and the diverse

motivations for becoming a political activist. Chapter 5 concludes the study and further elaborates on how events and experiences in warfare set veterans on divergent paths toward pro- or anti-war political attitudes and activist behavior.

## Chapter 2

### Expectations and Experiences of the Military and War

*I don't care if people oppose the war. But don't mischaracterize what actually happened in the war. I know what happened. I was there. I saw it with my own eyes. So you can't tell me that we weren't greeted as liberators when we were.*

Carl (pro-war veteran)

*We'd actually talk to the people in the streets like the women, the older men, and the children. They would come up to us so not problems with that. But off to the side, we would see young men in their early to mid or late teens and early twenties. They weren't smiling. Even at this early stage, they were not happy about us being there.*

William (anti-war veteran)

The two army veterans quoted above were both involved in the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and experienced similar events there, yet they have come away from their experiences with completely opposing views toward the war. Carl became a soldier at the age of nineteen because, at the time, his wife was pregnant and the army offered a salary, health care, and better benefits than a civilian job. Carl held minimal expectations of the military, and his view of the army was that it was simply another job. He planned to fulfill his enlistment obligations and later return to civilian life with better job skills. However, his experiences in the army were overwhelmingly positive and he later

reenlisted because the army exceeded his minimal expectations of military service. When Carl deployed to Iraq, he strongly believed that the war was just and that the military was on a righteous mission. As his unit drove across Iraq, they were greeted jubilantly by Iraqi civilians, something which reinforced his belief that the war was a just cause. These positive events and experiences were fundamental to influencing his ongoing political support for the war after returning from Iraq.

In contrast, William joined the army with very high expectations toward professional military service. But his experiences in Iraq failed to meet his expectations, which generated negative views toward the military and the war. William explained that, before his deployment, he questioned the justifications being made for the war, but believed that political and military leaders would not have invaded Iraq without a well-designed plan for winning the war and establishing a democracy. When William deployed to Iraq, he was dismayed by the military's lack of planning and the incompetence of some of its leaders. He returned from Iraq after the initial invasion frustrated with the belief that political and military leaders were continuing to carry out two poorly planned wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, witnessing the difficulties that soldiers and their families experienced due to repeated deployments influenced his questioning of the war and later solidified his turn toward anti-war political activism.

Both Carl and William came away from their experiences of war with differing views toward military service. In the case of Carl, the military exceeded his expectations and positively influenced his experiences in Iraq, which allowed him to continue supporting the war when he returned. In contrast, for William, the military failed to meet his expectations, and precipitated his anti-war views. In this chapter, I argue that a

critical juncture leading to veterans' pro- or anti-war political outcomes are based on their expectations toward military service. I analyze the way in which events and experiences before, during, and after their deployment to Iraq shape and constrain the development of political attitudes. For veterans who oppose the war, their failed expectations of the military and its leaders prior to and during their deployment to Iraq, set them on a path toward anti-war political activism. In contrast, for pro-war veterans, their met or exceeded expectations of the military before and during the war became central to their ongoing support. In the following section, I examine the military in American society and the expectations that Americans have of military institutions. I then focus on how events and experiences influence the development of political attitudes, specifically with regard to the justification for war.

## **Military Service and American Life**

### *The Military as a Total Institution*

The theoretical starting point for this chapter relies on Goffman's (1961) concept of a total institution: "defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (xiii). Ordinary social arrangements of a modern society, such as where one sleeps, plays, and works, typically take place within separate social spheres. But a total institution breaks down these barriers, and "various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution" (Goffman 1961, 6). Those "official aims" typically include the surveillance, transformation, and handling of

large blocks of people by a small supervisory staff in order to reform or ultimately “improve” their lives (Wallace 1971). Four central features of total institutions include: 1) daily life is conducted in the same place and under the same authority; 2) members are treated alike and daily activities are carried out within a large mass of others; 3) activities are rigidly scheduled and imposed from above; 4) activities are brought together to fulfill institutional goals of resocialization. According to Goffman, mental hospitals, monasteries, prisons, and military barracks are just some of the entities that qualify as total institutions using these criteria. Unlike members of other institutions such as the family, schools, or commercial industries, members of total institutions are completely excluded from decisions regarding their fate; they are isolated from wider society and forced to live a regimented lifestyle.

The military is traditionally characterized as a total institution due to its rigidly stratified and authoritarian structure, argued to be necessary for members’ instant obedience to orders during times of war. Within the confinements of basic training, military recruits are socialized to embrace a common military-mindset where they are trained to follow instant obedience to orders from military commanders and political leaders (Huntington 1957). As C. Wright Mills put it, “In the military world, debate is no more at a premium than persuasion: one obeys and one commands” (1956, 196). As a result, soldiers are trained to uphold a high level of trust and confidence in military and political leaders who are responsible for sending them to war. Some veterans in this study deployed to Iraq with an ideal notion of service and trust in military and political leaders. But once in Iraq, leaders failed to maintain trust and confidence in the rank-and-file, which challenged expectations of military professionalism and service.

But today's all-volunteer force also requires the military to recruit young people from every sector of American society with diverse experiences and perspectives. In order to meet the recruiting demand of 200,000 enlistments each year, and maintain an enlisted military force of about 1.2 million, the military has turned from patriotic incentives to offering young people market-driven incentives for joining the military such as competitive salaries, educational benefits, technical training, and job security (Sackett and Mavor 2003). Nonetheless, market-driven benefits are secondary motivational factors for the youth who enlist; rather, more idealistic notions of dignity (personal achievement, respect for self, and respect for others) and fidelity (duty to country, leadership, and teamwork) remain primary factors for enlistment (Eighmey 2006). Furthermore, rank-and-file soldiers who enlisted due to intrinsic motivations such as loyalty, sense of obligation, physical and mental challenge, and discipline are more likely to commit to the ideals of military service than "materially motivated" soldiers who joined for pay, educational benefits, or job training (Griffith 2008).

There are of course soldiers who acknowledge that signing bonuses and educational benefits greatly influenced their decision to join the military. Nonetheless, more idealistic purposes such as duty, service, and patriotism remain the primary motivations for enlistment into the armed services (Griffith 2008). In addition, a study conducted by the National Research Council's Committee on Youth Population and Military Recruitment found that ideals such as "patriotic adventure," physical challenge, doing something for the country, and doing something of which to be proud were stronger indicators for propensity to serve in the military than "external incentives" such as money for college, good pay, or job security (Sackett and Mavor 2003). Hence,

today's military draws young people from diverse class, race, religion, and educational backgrounds who volunteer for military service for financial incentives, but who also volunteer to fulfill idealistic notions of patriotism, duty, and service to country. Although both groups of activists in this study were attracted to the military by a strong sense of duty, those who became anti-war activists report ideals of patriotism and service that far exceed those of veterans who continue to support the war.

### *The Presence of the Military in American Society*

The military's presence as a central institution in American society has diminished since WWII; and following the end of the Cold War in 1989, political leaders began to question the importance of maintaining a large standing army during peacetime (Gottlieb 1997). But the military has by no means become a peripheral institution in American society (Burk 2001). On the contrary, the military maintains a large presence, and American soldiers today, according to public opinion polls, are hailed as heroes and highly revered in the United States (Gallup April 25, 2007).<sup>4</sup> Both materially and in relation to citizens' rights, the military has played a significant role in American society. Materially, in response to wars and prolonged threats during and after the Cold War, the size and budget of the military has increased and remained high over the years. In terms of citizens' rights, the military has played several roles in mitigating the historical effects

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<sup>4</sup> A Gallup Panel report titled "Eight in Ten Say Leaders Pay Too Little Attention to Veterans" accessed July 1, 2011 stated: "A recent Gallup survey tested Americans' perceptions about the relative political influence of various groups in the United States, by asking whether "the political leaders in Washington pay too much attention, about the right amount, or too little attention" to each group's needs. Of the 14 groups tested in the poll, military veterans are thought to be the most in need of increased government attention. On the other hand, the public is most likely to believe political leaders pay too much attention to big corporations and Hollywood movie executives."

of discrimination based on race (Moskos and Butler 1996), gender (DeGroot 2001), and most recently, sexuality (*New York Times*, “Senate Repeals Ban Against Openly Gay Military Personnel,” December 19, 2010).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the military’s large presence penetrates into disparate corners of American society, and holds tremendous influence over the development of political attitudes for young people who are drawn into its rank-and-file.

Nonetheless, some scholars argue that the link between ideals of citizenship and military service were severed after the Vietnam War and the end of conscription (Abrams and Becevich 2001). Americans were no longer expected to serve or “sacrifice” for their country, and service in the military became redefined from being an obligation of citizenship to being simply a job (Segal 1989). Moskos (1977) argues that the shift to an all-volunteer force replaced the “citizen-soldier,” who served as an obligation to the nation, to soldiers motivated by individualistic opportunities such as job training, salary, and educational benefits. Moreover, accompanying this shift, the military itself promoted individualistic motives for soldiering in order to maintain a large voluntary standing army. Corporate marketing of the military played a significant role, with the help of U.S. Army slogans such as “Be All That You Can Be” and “An Army of One,” both of which spoke to the individualistic motives of America’s youth (Bailey 2009). This “institutional to occupational” (Moskos 1977) shift during the transition to an all-volunteer force raised concerns over the loss of civic virtue and the dilution of American citizenship (Cohen 2001). However, other scholars have found the idealized rhetoric of a pre-all-volunteer force composed of highly patriotic “citizen-soldiers” to be greatly

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/19/us/politics/19cong.html>

exaggerated; indeed, they find that today's all-volunteer soldiers cite a very strong sense of serving as a moral obligation and duty, to an extent even more in keeping with the "citizen-soldier" ideal than was the case for earlier conscripts or draftees (Krebs 2009).

In the case of Iraq War veterans, their expectations of military service were shaped by both the large presence of the military in American society, as well as the shift from conscription to an all-volunteer force. Thus, although veterans are not coerced into serving in the military, throughout this study, they report that the military's presence in the media, schools, politics, their families, and throughout their childhood greatly influenced their decision to become soldiers. For many soldiers, they entered the military with powerful ideals of fulfilling a sense of obligation and service, which led to admiration toward military leaders that they were trained to follow. But in Iraq, the complex social environment of warfare led some soldiers to question their deep seated idealistic views of military service.

The literature above provides a snapshot of the military's historical presence in American society, but more importantly, it describes the multiple ways young people are motivated to become soldiers. This literature makes two principle assertions: 1) the military continues to maintain a large presence in American society both materially and socially; 2) despite major marketing campaigns advertising the military's occupational benefits, young people are more likely to join the military for more idealistic reasons such as patriotism, service to country, and trust in government. Hence, the literature implies that people who enter the military tend to be a self-selected group who are strongly influenced by idealistic views toward patriotism and service. However, this

literature falls short of capturing the attitudes and beliefs of soldiers whose views may be uniquely shaped differently by experiences of warfare.

### *Case Selection*

The following cases explain the trajectory of four Iraq War veterans whose experiences in the war set them on paths toward political activism, albeit different kinds. The life trajectories of Paige, William, Scott, and Carl are unique, resulting in divergent political outcomes. The first two cases, Paige and William, represent instances in which veterans turned against the war after their deployment to Iraq. During the war, the institution of the military failed to meet their idealistic motivations for joining and their high expectations of military professionalism; these experiences, in turn, influenced them to question the war and its justification. In the case of Paige, she felt excluded from the army's dominant masculine culture, and in Iraq, she grew frustrated with the army's incompetence dealing with Iraqi civilians. For William, civilian and military leaders failed to meet what he saw as their responsibility toward troop welfare. On the ground in Iraq, he observed how lack of planning from political and military leaders led to catastrophic results for his soldiers.

The other two cases, those of Scott and Carl, represent the experiences of pro-war veterans whose service prior to and during war exceeded their expectations of the military and solidified their support for the war. Scott's experiences in the Marine Corps went beyond his expectations of military service. Thus, when he deployed to Iraq, he was able to bracket experiences that contradicted his support for the military and war as exceptional, and thus remain focused on events that conformed to the military's more

positive narrative of liberating Iraqis. In the case of Carl, he entered the army with low expectations of military service, and soon after joining, his positive experiences easily exceeded his expectations. Thus, throughout his deployment to Iraq, Carl was able to maintain his support for the military and its patriotic narrative of America fighting a just-war for freedom and democracy.

Taken together, these four cases reflect multiple ways in which Americans are influenced by the military and how such influences early in life compel people to become soldiers. Individuals enter the military with differing ideals of being a soldier and expectations toward military professionalism. During wartime, some veterans are able to maintain support for the war and stave off negative interpretations of events in Iraq that might lead one to question military professionalism. Other veterans are exposed to similar negative events, but experience them in ways that challenge their expectations of military service, and lead them to question the justification for war. The following table outlines two separate pathways toward anti- and pro-war political attitudes and behavior.

**Table 1: Expectation of Military Service and Warfare**

	<b>Prior Ideals of military service</b>	<b>Experience in Iraq</b>	<b>Political stance after service</b>
<b>Paige</b>	High	Failed expectations	Anti-war
<b>William</b>	High	Failed expectations	Anti-war
<b>Scott</b>	Minimal	Met expectations	Pro-war
<b>Carl</b>	Low	Exceeded expectations	Pro-war

The chapter traces the life trajectories of these four veterans, as they describe their entry and exit from the military, and how intermediary events and experiences set in motion their support or opposition toward the war. I begin with their views toward the military and war before volunteering for the armed forces, in order to identify their prior attitudes toward war and the military. I then trace the experiences of each veteran through their deployment, in order to examine how their political attitudes toward the war either began to shift or were reinforced. Finally, I summarize the sources of political attitudes for each veteran, and how their overall pre-war, during-war, and post-war experiences set them on their respective paths toward pro- or anti-war political activism.

### **Experiences that Failed Expectations of Military Service**

*Paige (anti-war veteran)*

Paige joined the Illinois National Guard<sup>6</sup> at the age of seventeen. When she was a child in Carbondale, Illinois, the river near her home flooded and National Guard troops came to sandbag the area and provide needed services to her community. Paige and her mother brought the troops cakes and snacks. She admired what the National Guard was doing to help her community and it was then that she decided that she wanted to join the military. She held the military in high regard and looked forward to belonging to a group of well-trained professionals.

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<sup>6</sup> The National Guard is a reserve military force composed of state National Guard units federally recognized as an armed force service of the United States. Although other branches of the military have reserve components, the National Guard is the only branch composed entirely of reserve forces. As a consequence, the National Guard often receives older, outdated equipment, while newer, more high-tech equipment is funneled to full-time active duty branches of the military.

Paige's actual experience in the National Guard, however, was the complete opposite of what she had expected. Similar to many other National Guard troops interviewed for this study, she described going on training exercises with outdated and broken equipment, such as radios that didn't work, vehicles that often broke down, and combat gear that dated back to the Vietnam era. In addition, Paige described the many difficulties of being a woman in the military and feeling excluded from camaraderie among fellow soldiers.

Paige is now twenty-six and I interviewed her in a coffee house on the west side of Chicago five years after she had completed a tour in Iraq. While sitting across from me, wearing a gray, hooded sweatshirt and blue jeans, Paige explained to me her disillusionment with the military and with her service in the National Guard:

We would set up our little training exercises and it was really... half the time, the shit didn't work. Also, I really thought I was doing a really cool thing, being a young woman joining the military. [But], I felt it didn't really make me feel proud. But then, I'm 18 years old in this National Guard unit and these old men are like, "Oh, let's go drink. Let's go. I'm gonna go buy some beer blah blah blah." It really is hard for young women in those kinds of environments.

Paige began her service in the National Guard with very high expectations toward patriotic duty and military professionalism. However, when she began actually participating in training exercises, she became disappointed with the lack of professionalism and the lack of resources available to soldiers. Although she made very good friends in the National Guard, she was excluded from the camaraderie of many fellow soldiers due to her gender. The dominant masculine climate of her National Guard unit, along with her damaged expectations of the military, gradually moved her to begin to think differently about her service.

Approximately one year after Paige joined the National Guard, the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks on the United States took place. Following the events of 9/11, Paige's National Guard unit became increasingly serious about their training. However, with one year of disillusionment already behind her, Paige was beginning to doubt and question the military, and the justifications being made for going to war were not resonating with her.

In response to the 9/11 attacks, the United States began sending troops to Afghanistan. From 2001 to 2003, Paige's National Guard unit prepared for the moment that they would be activated to go to war. By 2003, Paige had been serving in the National Guard for three years and had thought much about her negative experiences in the military. Finally, her disillusionment toward the military congealed when her unit was activated in 2003 and they learned that they would be deployed to Iraq, rather than Afghanistan. But even her negative experiences in the National Guard before her deployment were not powerful enough to deter Paige from supporting the war effort.

Paige stated:

When 9/11 happened in '01, I remember my views at the time honestly were, "Here is the excuse we need to go into war." So I don't know if I really talked about it much but that's definitely what I was feeling and I'm pretty sure my friends are feeling the same thing. And then when we invaded Iraq, honestly, everyone in my company, in my National Guard company, were all.... Everybody I knew in the Army even, was like, this has nothing to do with 9/11. It was a really common sentiment. But we got called up in March of '03. I was kinda like, "This is bullshit. Whatever." But then, in the end, I was like, "Okay. I wanna go. I wanna go help rebuild democracy; whatever the hell." You know, shit. I didn't even know what that was. I was like twenty.

At the age of twenty, and without a college education, Paige did not have a broad sense of how the war in Iraq fit into larger processes concerning geopolitics, natural resources, and

globalization; contrasts she herself draws today. At first, she justified the war within the same mental framework that influenced her to join the military in the first place. She wanted to “go help rebuild democracy” in the same fashion that the National Guard had helped to rebuild her own community when the river had flooded near her home in Carbondale, Illinois. Despite her disillusionment with the military, deploying to Iraq offered an opportunity to restore her high expectations in order to construct her experience as a soldier in a more positive way. As a result, before Paige’s deployment to Iraq, she was able to cognitively accept the military’s mission of freeing the Iraqi people of a ruthless dictator and establishing democracy in the Middle East.

Immediately upon arriving in Iraq, however, Paige experienced another break in her expectations of military service. She described feeling disillusioned by superiors who had originally motivated soldiers to go to war by affirming that they were going to Iraq to “liberate” the Iraqi people. Paige explained how the rhetoric shifted once actually on the ground in Iraq:

When we got there everything was bombed to dust already, pretty much. But there's still people everywhere, just with nothing. We would drive through some roads that were just like, I mean, thousands of people just trying to sell whatever they could. Stuff like that, and it was really surreal..... And then we had this General. I remember him saying, “We gotta spin some artillery so we can get rid of these merchants” and shit. It's just fucked-up shit, you know. These are just mostly kids and stuff trying to sell soda.

*Interviewer:* At the time, did you think it was fucked-up, or is it something that you now reflect on?

Paige: At the time, I thought it was totally fucked-up.

Paige experienced several events prior to her deployment that did not support her purpose for becoming a soldier, but it was her experiences in Iraq that shattered her ideals of the

military. In other words, a sequence of events leading up to the war, and then the war itself, ruptured the value that she had placed on being a soldier. A multitude of experiences throughout her year-long service in Iraq increased her scepticism toward the justification for the Iraq war, which she had believed was to establish democracy, free the Iraqi people, and bring peace and justice to the Middle East. In her mind, the military was no longer the group of heroes she had admired as a child. Instead, she viewed the military as unprofessional and oppressive. In addition, the war became nonsensical, it no longer had meaning, and it was not what she had expected.

During our interview, Paige lit a cigarette, and began nodding her head in disbelief as she described multiple events that influenced her thinking about the war. She described how the U.S. military was working to hand security over to the Iraqi people:

We're on a convoy with people from my unit bringing supplies to a team. And I remember we saw these kids standing outside one of the compound's somewhere. It was between the checkpoints somewhere. These kids have flip flops and guns and they're running and one is like, standing by this guard thing and I'm like, "What the fuck is that?" These are Iraqi kids. They look so young. They couldn't have been eighteen years old. You know so...I'm like, "What the hell is that?" And this woman from this team, she says, "Oh yeah, they're training them to be the Iraqi police." And I'm like, "can they at least have fucking boots?" What's that? I mean, you know, these kids were so young! There's no way they were eighteen years old. I'd say about thirteen to fifteen.... And that was really hard to see that. It's just that...every Iraqi person that I met or saw was just a normal person. It just seemed so abrasive and fucked-up to me.

Paige's negative experiences in Iraq finally ruptured how she had previously framed the military and war in order to justify her participation in it as a soldier. In the event she describes above, Paige was unable to situate her experience within her ideals of patriotism and military service; she reacted, instead, by asking "can they at least have fucking boots?" in an attempt to organize or make sense out of the situation.

After one year in Iraq, Paige could no longer find a justification for the war when she returned to the U.S. in 2004. Becoming politically active after returning from Iraq began as a gradual process of frustration, anger, and trying to make sense out of events during the war. Similar to many of the Iraq veterans whom I interviewed, Paige experienced a “honeymoon period” in which she was just happy to be home and did not think critically about the war. But though her year-long tour in Iraq had ended, the events that influenced her way of thinking about the war returned home with her. She was forced to deal with her experiences in Iraq and struggled with how to organize those experiences cognitively in order to make meaning out of them. She entered a period of intense frustration and anger as she tried to find a way in which to reframe her thinking of the war. For example, she described to me arguments she had with her parents when she returned from the war, over their support for President George W. Bush. Paige explained:

It was like, you're so happy just to be home and see grass and shit. And then reality settles in. I used to be in a lot of fights with my parents about politics and stuff. 'Cuz...my mom voted for Bush the second time. I was like, “How did...how can you do that?” And she said, “he's gonna protect us from terrorists.” I mean, “what the fuck?” where did I just spend a year? I would call them always and tell them what's happening, so how can they really say that they didn't know? It was so weird. And I used to scream at the TV...I was angry. Like, mood swings were insane. I'd be like, happy, crying, screaming every time, you know. It was really, really hard.

Paige later found a new way in which to frame her experiences through political activism. Her anti-war activism began after she enrolled at the University of Illinois, Chicago, where she met other Iraq War veterans with similar experiences who also oppose the war. Through meeting with veterans, speaking at peace rallies, and becoming involved in anti-war political actions, Paige has learned to think more critically about events that she experienced in Iraq.

*William (anti-war veteran)*

William joined the army on April 29, 1968 after growing up in a small town in southern Minnesota. His family has a long history of military service that he traces back to the Revolutionary War and through every major war up to Vietnam. In addition, William has three brothers who have all served in the military. When I interviewed him in August of 2008, both his sons were serving in Iraq. He retired a First Sergeant in the Army Reserve in 2005. William is also a retired police officer and became active in the peace movement after returning from Iraq because of his anti-war political attitudes.

At the age of fifty-nine, William is an older veteran in the anti-war movement and views his role vis-a-vis younger anti-war veterans as similar to his role as a First Sergeant in the army. He cares tremendously about the effects of war on soldiers and is passionate about helping younger veterans. In addition to his age, his height and rugged demeanour command respect from other activists in the peace movement. William held high expectations of military service, and his overall experiences in the military up until the beginning of the Iraq War were positive. Moreover, the improvements that he had seen in the army since the Vietnam era led him to believe that political and military leaders were genuinely concerned for the welfare of soldiers. For William, the army was his family, and he was the father of his unit. In 2003, when war was declared against Iraq, William thought first about the well-being of his troops, and felt that politicians declaring war were thinking of their own economic and political gains without any concern for the soldiers they were sending to war. In a very matter-of-fact way, he described to me his views toward President George W. Bush's justification for going to war with Iraq:

In the summer of 2003, everyone said that this was unstoppable and they had their mind set on going to Iraq. My attitude with Bush was I-didn't-trust-a-damn-word-he-said. He talked about weapons of mass destruction and I thought of it as bullshit. I didn't believe it for one second. He's a lying sack of shit.

William did not believe in the political rhetoric being used to justify the invasion, but once he was deployed to Iraq, he felt responsible for the welfare of his troops. As a senior member of his unit, he felt compelled to file his personal feelings away and focus on his unit's mission. William deployed to Iraq during the early phase of the war before the threat of IED's and when American troops felt relatively safe walking the streets of Baghdad. As a result, William and the other senior members of his army unit had the rare opportunity to carry out meaningful interactions with Iraqi civilians before the insurgency of 2004. These interactions provided William with on-the-ground insight into the seeds that planted the insurgency after the U.S. invasion. As William stared off into the distance, he described to me his experiences interacting with Iraqi civilians during the initial phase of the war:

We'd stop and talk to Iraqis because back then there were no roadside bombs or IEDs. So we could stop and talk to them. Then when we got to the Baghdad airport, at the time it was the Saddam Hussein International Airport. They switched the name to Baghdad International Airport. We stayed there and we could go into town unescorted, basically. We didn't have any fear of them then. We went there and talked to people in the streets. We had no fear for our safety. I mean, with my being a police officer, I'd feel a lot more danger here than what I had in Baghdad at the time. We'd actually talk to the people in the streets like the women, the older men, and the children. They would come up and talk to us so no problems with that. But off to the side, we would see young men in their early to mid or late teens and early twenties. They weren't smiling. Even at this early stage, they were not happy about us being there. And they felt "This is our land!" you know? They were not happy about that, you could tell. None of them smiled at us.

As an older member of his unit, William was constantly taking note of the attitudes of younger people around him. In addition, his experience as a police officer caused him to

be keenly aware of his surroundings in Iraq when interacting with Iraqi civilians.

William's framing of the war was and is grounded in his over thirty years of experience as a soldier. Although he questioned the rhetoric used by politicians to justify the war, this questioning was not powerful enough to cause a major rethinking of the war in his own mind prior to being deployed. He was proud to serve in Iraq with his fellow soldiers.

Nonetheless, a sequence of daily events on the ground steadily increased William's questioning of the war. He removed his glasses and rubbed his forehead as he explained to me events during his deployment that escalated his frustration toward the war:

First of all, when we went north from Kuwait into Iraq, there were munitions bunkers all over the country. We didn't have any people to guard, or explode them or get rid of them. And even when we went to the Baghdad airport, there was row after row of munitions bunkers that were already filled. And we didn't have the people to take care of them. At least at the airport we could guard them, but all over the country, those munitions we left unguarded? They were piled away and those were the ones that were later used to construct roadside bombs and blow up our people. So, I knew all that shit. I was getting totally...it's beyond belief. That story doesn't really get out very much but everybody seemed like they were all so gung-ho about supporting Bush and supporting the war. Like, open your eyes and see what the hell's happening, but they're all so fucking "gotta support the troops! Gotta support Bush!" So, they'll support you doing the right thing, but I didn't think it was the right thing. I was just getting more fucking angry.

Witnessing multiple mistakes that were made during the invasion reinforced William's questioning of the war, and of how decisions made by politicians and military leaders affected the well-being of soldiers. Moreover, while in Iraq, he cared less about abstract ideals of spreading freedom and democracy, and instead, his primary focus was to take care of the soldiers who served under him. William never imagined that the war in Iraq

would be ongoing five years later when I interviewed him, or that his son would already have done two tours in Iraq. He assigns blame for the United States' continued presence in Iraq on political leaders such as President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, whom William argues completely disregarded the concerns of soldiers, such as then Chief-of-Staff General Shinseki who contested that occupying Iraq would require several hundred thousand troops.<sup>7</sup>

William joined the army in 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War, and during a period when morale in the army reached a historical low point (Bailey 2009). During this period, the army was plagued with drugs and racial tension, and acronyms such as FTA (Fuck The Army) were readily scribbled across military equipment. William remained in the army because he witnessed significant improvements throughout the military. Although he was critical of the war before deploying to Iraq, he believed that the war was winnable because he thought that the military had learned from its mistakes in Vietnam. Thus, similar to other veterans who joined the military before September 11, 2001, he believed that the United States would never again enter a war without extensive planning and thought.

William reported a very jubilant honeymoon period when he returned from Iraq, similar to that reported by Paige. When his unit returned to the U.S., they were greeted by hundreds of people from the community welcoming them home. He was sent to Iraq, he accomplished his mission, and now he felt extremely touched by the way in which

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<sup>7</sup> Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld replaced General Eric Shinseki as Army Chief of Staff with General Peter J. Schoomaker after Shinseki questioned the characterization of the conflict as a "cakewalk scenario," and told Congress in February of 2003 that we would need several hundred thousand troops to secure Iraq. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz called General Shinseki's estimate "wildly off the mark," ("New Strategy Vindicates Ex-Army Chief Shinseki," *New York Times*, 1/12/2007).

people in the community embraced him. For William, in his own mind, the war had ended, but it did not end for the politicians who had sent him to war. He explained:

Shortly after we got back, in the early part of 2004, our unit was already ranking up to be deployed again by mid-summer, I think it was, not to Iraq but this one was to Afghanistan. It just kept going. I think we've done five or six rotations now, just one fucking army reserve battalion, and this is not active duty. So you are asking a lot from a part-time soldier to continue rotations like that.... It was clear Bush did not have a clue. He had no clue what to do as Commander-in-Chief. He just sat there, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld just kind of like.... Things were just so fucked and it just kept getting worse and worse. He [Bush] didn't have a clue what to do.

In William's view, the leadership across the entire political and military apparatus was not thinking about and taking care of soldiers in the same way in which he, William, was expected to do as a military leader on the ground. In practice, William placed the welfare of his soldiers first, and expected the same of his own superiors, particularly in the face of politicians who did not think practically about how to deploy troops into combat. His prior experiences in the military had convinced him that today's military was much better than the military of the Vietnam War era. In addition, he initially believed that political and military leaders were much more concerned about the welfare of American troops because they had learned from mistakes made during Vietnam. As a leader within his unit, William drew upon multiple positive experiences to support the war before going to Iraq. However, the lack of regard for troop welfare from political and military leaders led to failed expectations and ruptured the pro-war framework he used to justify his deployment.

After reflecting upon his experiences in Iraq, William became involved in the anti-war movement and shifted his identity as a leader of soldiers to being a leader in Iraq

Veterans Against the War. He described to me how his role in the anti-war veterans movement is an extension of his leadership as a First Sergeant in the army:

After I got back, I just got more and more pissed about what was happening. As a First Sergeant, you really are the father of your company, sort of speak. If you're gonna do a good job, you have to really care about the soldiers and take care of them. Bureaucratically, I was horseshit for a Sergeant. I hated military bureaucracy. As far as taking care of my soldiers, I did that. My soldiers paid me back. We worked hard, like in our company; they always got their shit done first. I mean, it wasn't my leadership but they did it because they appreciated that I looked out for them and took care of them. I was very fortunate, you know. My speaking up for peace is just an extension of my role as a First Sergeant. So that, many times I'm just doing what a First Sergeant should: take care of his soldiers. I mean, these young guys, you have to take care of them. These guys, they don't mind letting me be here, they don't mind that I'm an old fart.

William frames his political activism as an "extension of my role as a First Sergeant." In addition, younger veterans in the anti-war movement recognize and respect William as a First Sergeant with over thirty years of experience in the army. This is fundamental to William's activist behavior because it involves a continuation of taking care of his troops. For example, I witnessed numerous occasions when younger veterans sought William out for advice and guidance. One year after I interviewed William, at a GI peace convention in Maryland, William was asked to speak on behalf of anti-war Iraq veterans to thank the Vietnam era anti-war veterans for their support.

When I asked William if he remains in contact with the soldiers from his unit, he simply paused. Many of them are fellow police officers with whom he worked, and he knows their families, as well as their struggles through many deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. As William thought about the sacrifices made by these soldiers and their families, his emotions took over, and he could no longer continue with the interview. Discussing the war and his frustration toward political and military leaders became too

much for him. He is also frustrated with apathy toward the war from the American public, and what he sees as a complete disregard for the lives of his soldiers, as well as the sacrifices made by their families.

### **Experiences that Met or Exceeded Expectations of Military Service**

*Scott (pro-war veteran)*

Scott continues to support the Iraq War and is the state of Ohio's chapter president for Vets for Freedom. He joined the Marine Corps Reserve in 1996 during his junior year of college. From February 2005 to September 2005, Scott deployed with his reserve unit to Iraq, where he served as a Sergeant in an infantry company. He now works for the Department of Veterans affairs at a Veterans Center assisting veterans diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Although Scott witnessed incidents during the war that did not completely make logical sense to him, in addition to witnessing horrific combat events, he remains committed to supporting the war in Iraq.

Scott held minimal expectations of the military before he joined, and similar to many other Marines whom I interviewed, he signed up for the Marine Corps because it would be physically challenging. He attended a small college in Pennsylvania and was focused on becoming an attorney. However, after Scott's junior year of college, he found that college life was boring, and after working as a clerk in a law office during the summer, he decided he was no longer interested in becoming an attorney. He believed that being a Marine would satisfy his inclination toward doing something exciting in his life that was physically challenging. I interviewed Scott at a coffee shop in Columbus,

Ohio during one of his breaks from work and graduate school at the Ohio State University. He described to me why he decided to join the Marine Corps:

I was always one of those people who wanted to do the hardest thing, meet the toughest challenges, and being in the Marines seemed to meet that. You know the most honorable, most prized, best reputation, all that kind of stuff. So I said that if I was going to go into the military, I would go into the Marine Corps.

Scott fits the image of a Marine. He is tall, muscular, and wears a military-style haircut.

He is also a former college football player. Scott had been approached by a Marine Corps recruiter in high school, but had rejected going into the military because he already had plans of attending college and playing football. In addition, Scott's mother is a school teacher and had worked hard to prepare him for college. Nonetheless, his conversation with the Marine recruiter resonated with him because the Marine Corps presented similar physical challenges as playing football. When I asked Scott if his initial training in the Marine Corps was what he expected, he stated:

It was actually better. Because I thought, you know being this hard, and this intensive, would make it better for me, it's the kind of thing where the harder it is, once you accomplish it, of course, you feel better about yourself because, you say, "Man, I did that." And it is tough, but I did it.

Unlike Paige who quickly became disillusioned with her ideals of military service, Scott's less than idealistic views, and emphasis on the physical challenge of being a Marine, laid a very different foundation for him. For Scott, joining the Marines, and fighting in Iraq, provided a space for him to mature and "do something exciting" in his life.

On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Scott's infantry unit was activated to deploy to Iraq. Scott looked forward to his deployment because he had joined the Marine Corps in 1996, and unlike many of his peers, he had yet to go to Iraq or Afghanistan. He was in strong

support of the war and reports that regardless of what people say about George W. Bush, going to war with Iraq was the right thing to do. By the time of Scott's deployment in 2005, the patriotic rhetoric of Marines overthrowing a brutal dictator and spreading freedom and democracy to the Middle East were resonating with him. He disregarded criticism toward the war and believed that it was paramount for the military to remain in Iraq and stabilize the country. Scott explained:

In two years, after being in the country and ousting the entire government, to me it was, no shit, we're not going to be done right now, and be out of there. If we would have left, we would have left a government that had no idea what it was doing and no military to speak of. And the police force would have fallen apart very quickly. I knew we needed to be there. Maybe sometimes the operations weren't exactly what I thought would have helped better along the stability of the country, but we still needed to be there. And I felt that eventually we would have gone in the right direction. You know, like training the Iraqi army, trying to create a police force there etc. etc. I'm still very much in support of it. I didn't have any kind of anger about being sent over there, I think we did what we had to do there.

Scott continued to justify and highlight the positive aspects of the war throughout our interview. Despite witnessing and experiencing combat events that challenged his support for the war, Scott remains focused on the overall positive outcome of the missions that he participated in. At moments, he agreed that "maybe sometimes the operations weren't exactly what I thought would have helped better along the stability of the country," but he brackets these negative events with overall positive events during the war that confirm his support. In the case of Scott, the bracketing of negative and positive events during the war allowed him to organize his experiences logically so that there was no conflict to his identity as a Marine. He defined negative events as natural or expected mistakes that will inevitably occur in the course of war, but which are few and exceptional. Hence, a rethinking of the war did not need to take place.

Scott's motivating argument throughout our interview fits the military's rhetoric and overall mission in Iraq, which is to establish political and economic stability in order to create a democratic society for the Iraqi people. He argues that the military's mission has not yet been accomplished, and that the military is gradually moving in a positive direction. Scott dismisses failed military operations that anti-war veterans such as Paige and William cite as events that turned them against the war. Instead, Scott's met expectations of military service allow him to remain focused on the military's mission. This was evident during our interview as he explained to me the tactical reasons for why Americans should continue to support the war effort. Below is one of several examples that Scott used to argue his continued support for the war:

In Iraq, when we went in and swept a city, and then left back to our well-guarded base, you know, we just left it [the city] there. Eventually insurgents would see us come in, they run away, and after we leave, they come back. So, when we started to establish our operating bases in the city, and say, "Hey, we are here to stay," I knew that, "Hey, this is gonna work."

I then asked Scott if he ever experienced any problems with civilians when his unit would go in and "sweep a city"—when military units move from house to house searching for insurgents, weapons, or gathering intelligence. Searching a home can range from knocking on doors and walking into homes, to kicking down doors and conducting house raids. When I probed Scott with regard to whether Iraqis were resistant to his presence, he nodded his head and stated:

Not much at all. There was no yelling or cursing from the military age males that we saw for the most part. Occasionally, you would see them maybe in a group staying off to the side kind of glaring a little bit, but you could understand, anyhow, the old "machismo" thing, and that was the impression I got; that it was more of a "I'm supposed to be the protector of this area, you got guys with guns coming in just doing what they want," but not so much of the "I hate you—you need to get out of here or I'll fight you," or whatever. Not a lot of that.

Scott's interpretation of the way in which military-age males stood "off to the side kind of glaring a little bit" did not deter his support for the war. In addition, he stated that there was "no yelling or cursing" from Iraqi military-age males, nor from elderly men, women, or children. As a result, Scott was able to anchor activities in Iraq such as "sweeping cities" within an overall belief system that supports the war. William, the anti-war veteran, cited similar examples of the way in which young Iraqi males viewed their presence when they entered a city. However, William cited these events as negative events that planted the seeds for the insurgency and influenced his opposition toward the war. Furthermore, William's support for the war was vulnerable because he already doubted the justification for war before being deployed. But in Scott's case, the mental framework through which he justified the war was powerful enough to generate a strong level of certainty and to interpret these events as insignificant.

When Scott returned from Iraq in September of 2005 he felt that the news media's coverage of the war was negative. They did not highlight the positive accomplishments he had seen being made by the U.S. military, such as defeating insurgents, providing security, electricity, water, and developing infrastructure for the Iraqi people. Instead, Scott felt the media was overly focused on roadside bombs, a growing insurgency, civilian deaths, and fighting between Sunni's and Shiites. Scott described his frustration with the media and why he decided to become politically active:

What I saw and read in the media was completely different. And at least it was starting to make me scratch my head. Was what I saw that much different from other areas of the country, or is it that the media was really trying press an agenda? So, I thought maybe being politically involved would help to counteract the media.

Despite the fact that Scott did experience being attacked by insurgents in Iraq, and witness first-hand the brutal impact of warfare on civilians, he continues to support the military's mission of bringing democracy to Iraq. As a veteran, he feels that fighting in Iraq provide him with the "boots on the ground" credibility American voters and politicians need to hear in order to continue to support the war. Moreover, he uses his military experiences to highlight successful accomplishments by the U.S. military in Iraq. His minimal ideals of military service were met by a series of events that he interpreted as "accomplishing the mission," and have compelled him to become a political activist.

*Carl (pro-war veteran)*

Carl joined the army in 1987 at the age of nineteen after growing up in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana. Carl does not come from a military family and describes himself as "the last person who you would think would have joined the military." However, he was a young man with a wife who was pregnant and the military offered free health benefits, as well as greater opportunities for individuals, such as himself, who came from a working class background and held only a high school diploma. According to Carl, he had an impression of the army as being more adventurous than an office job, and held very low expectations toward military service. For Carl, joining the army was similar to "getting a steady job with good benefits, just like you would start working at UPS."

Carl initially enlisted for five years in order to become a journalist in the army. He later embraced the mindset of being a soldier, and as he was promoted, he became more and more enthusiastic about being a leader. When Carl reenlisted in 1992, he

decided to become a Cavalry Scout,<sup>8</sup> a very physically demanding combat military occupation. After twelve years of active duty service, Carl left the army because his deployments were interfering with his marriage and the raising of his children. But when he returned home to Billings, Montana, he felt alienated from the community. He explained:

When I came up with my first reenlistment I changed my job to become a Cavalry scout. You know, shooting the big guns, running around, jumping off helicopters... all kinds of fun stuff. And I had a great time. I loved that job. It was absolutely the best job I've ever had. I've never done anything more fun in my life than be a Cav Scout. I mean... I got addicted to being a leader, you know, leading soldiers...that's totally an addiction. It's really, really hard to walk away from. But I did walk away from it because I never saw my kids... and I felt like I had to choose between being a good father, or being a good soldier, especially in that MOS.<sup>9</sup> We got to Montana with the kids. And I didn't like being out. I didn't like being a civilian. I didn't have anything in common with civilians.

The military mindset that Carl had come to embrace in the army did not integrate well with civilians. He missed being part of the army and being a leader of soldiers. Thus, he quickly returned to the army and reenlisted as a mechanic.

Carl's experiences throughout his career far exceeded his low expectations of the army before he joined. He had expected serving in the army to be like any other menial job. However, a series of positive experiences led him to embrace both the structure of the army and his responsibility as a leader within it, resulting in a very durable pro-military mindset. Moreover, when Carl returned to Montana, he reported not having "anything in common with civilians." Over Carl's twelve years in the army, he developed

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<sup>8</sup> The job of a Cavalry Scout in the Army is both mentally and physically demanding. Cavalry Scouts operate as the first soldiers in a combat zone, and provide forward reconnaissance relaying key information about the enemy to commanders and leaders in the field.

<sup>9</sup> MOS stands for Military Occupational Specialty. The acronym is used in the U.S. Army and Marines to identify a specific job.

a unique set of norms, values, beliefs, and practices distinct from the everyday civilians in his hometown of Billings, Montana. Once outside the military, however, the cultural properties that he used to form his identity as a soldier and leader no longer had meaning. Hence, he returned to the army with an even greater conviction toward military service.

Similar to William, Carl embraced his role as a senior member of his unit and took pride in taking care of his troops. In addition, he was sceptical about the justification for going to war with Iraq because the army was already involved in fighting a war in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, his overall positive experiences in the army served as a powerful basis upon which he framed his support for the war. He deployed for one year to Iraq from March 2003 to March 2004 and was there during the same period as Paige and William. In addition, although he expressed slight criticism toward the war before his deployment, he had participated in the first Gulf War during the early 1990s and, therefore, was optimistic of winning the war.

I interviewed Carl at a coffee shop in Denver, Colorado, where he described to me his position toward the war before his deployment and why he was persuaded that the Iraq war was justifiable:

Now, at that time, I remember having conversations with people who wanted to go into Iraq, but I didn't want to go into Iraq. I just remember expressing some scepticism, about should we go, or shouldn't we go. But what's fed my frustration for so long, for the last six years, is that the whole thing is not weapons of mass destruction that a lot of people thought of at that time. And I feel like, a lot of the country wasn't paying much attention, they were kinda half-ass listening because it didn't affect them. It wasn't uppermost in their mind. I mean, they weren't paying attention to the debate, the way I think, I was paying attention to the debate because I could go [to Iraq]. And I'm sure a lot of the other veterans were paying just as close attention. So, on top of the weapons of mass destruction, was this argument that I clearly remember being made that, "You know what? If we can get rid of Saddam, if we can help create a democracy right there in the middle of all this right next to Iran, right next to Saudi Arabia, right next to Syria, and all

the rest of this stuff. And Saddam needs to be taken out anyway....Let's make this happen.”

Carl describes himself as a “political junkie” who followed debates in support and opposition to the war very closely. Based on his extensive research of the political situation between Iraq and the United States between the first Gulf War in 1991 and the second war in 2003, Carl came to believe that the war was inevitable and that it should be supported. Despite the fact that he initially expressed scepticism toward the war because of the army’s existing engagement in Afghanistan, ultimately, Carl believed that the Iraq War and its stated goals conformed to the patriotic ideals that he learned to embrace as an American soldier. For Carl, the war was about American troops like himself fighting for democracy and freedom in the Middle East. It was precisely what he felt he had been trained to do over the past sixteen years in the army.

Carl deployed to Iraq in March of 2003 with a mechanized unit, with which he participated in convoy missions throughout the country. Travelling throughout Iraq, Carl learned a great deal about the Iraqi people and their relationships with American soldiers. In addition, Carl was in Iraq during the entire first year of the war and was thus able to witness the transition from American soldiers being “greeted as liberators” to the initial phase of an insurgency. He described to me how his initial experience driving through Iraq contradicts many of the claims made against the war by people in opposition to it:

People say that, “Oh, Dick Cheney said we'd be greeted as liberators and that didn't happen.” Well that's become conventional wisdom, "that it didn't happen," which is bullshit because it did happen. I was there. I drove through Iraq in the first months after we liberated it. And the people were cheering for us every time we'd stop; we had crowds jumping around us, patting us on the back. We had to push people away.... Yes, they greeted us as “liberators.” And that is one of the things that is frustrating the hell out of me is that the facts of what actually did happen are being rewritten for political reasons. I don't care if people oppose the

war. But don't mischaracterize what actually happened in the war. I know what happened. I was there. I saw it with my own eyes. So you can't tell me that we weren't greeted as liberators when we were. The honeymoon might not have lasted and that's a whole different argument.

Carl's initial experience driving into Iraq and being greeted as a "liberator" diminished any scepticism of the war that may have remained with him when he deployed to Iraq. His unit received a very welcoming reception when they drove into Iraq, which shaped his subsequent outlook on the war. In sum, his overwhelmingly positive experiences in the army, and being greeted as a "liberator" in the war by the Iraqi people, helped to solidify Carl's support for the invasion of Iraq.

Carl reports that many of the convoys that he was on stretched over a mile long and would often drive through cities where they would block traffic. He understood that Iraqis became frustrated when convoys would block traffic many times over thirty minutes. However, Carl bracketed these events as reactions that could be expected from anyone, but not anything that would lead to planting the seeds of an insurgency or that would produce an antagonistic relationship between U.S. soldiers and the Iraqi people. Carl remained adamant toward his support for the war despite witnessing the beginning of an insurgency toward the end of his one-year tour in Iraq. For example, he described when U.S. troops first began to experience the threat of IED's (Improvised Explosive Devices) during their convoys:

We were on our way to Mosul and pulled over on the wrong side of the road, we were the last vehicle. So we stopped traffic. There was an IED up the road that engineers were clearing, so they pulled us over. And we didn't have interpreters with us. We stopped traffic, but we couldn't explain to them that it was for their own good. Because there was an IED up ahead and we didn't want them to go out there and get blown up, so they were pissed off. By this point I think the Iraqis were sick and tired of Americans being there. You know I think they were being told a lot of things, but I don't really know. So they were pretty pissed off.

Traffic was blocked for a long time. And then they gave us the all clear. When all the traffic cleared out from behind us, there was a cardboard box sitting in the middle of the road, like 10 - 20 feet from us. And this cardboard box wasn't there before. We were looking at it and said "This isn't right." We start firing up the trucks to get the vehicles moved out of the way. And while we're doing this, we haven't moved an inch, the box started to smoke. Smoke started coming out of the cardboard box and then it caught on fire. And it burned, you know, very brightly, but obviously this was a bomb that didn't go off. It was wired improperly. While I was sitting looking at it like an idiot, it probably would've blown up and who knows how much damage it would have caused.

The quote above contradicts Carl's argument of the overwhelming level of support American soldiers received from Iraqis. However, throughout the initial invasion of Iraq, Carl drove through cities where he and fellow soldiers were jubilantly greeted by Iraqi civilians. These initial events and experiences cemented Carl's support for the war. Thus, later during the war when he experienced IED attacks, they did not deter his overall support. Carl was able to give minimal attention or at least minimal importance to an increasingly antagonistic relationship between U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians toward the end of his tour. In the above quote, Carl points out that "By this point I think the Iraqis were sick and tired of Americans being there. You know I think they were being told a lot of things, but I don't really know." Similar to Scott's experiences discussed earlier, Carl was able to cognitively subordinate events that did not support his primary pro-war framework and carry on with his official role as a soldier.

When Carl deployed to Iraq in March 2003, there was strong support for the war from politicians and the American public. He returned from Iraq in 2004 and, to his surprise, witnessed the political discussion moving toward greater anti-war sentiment. He felt that the overwhelming support that he received before his deployment had abated, and that his service in Iraq was being questioned by politicians, the media, and the

American public. Carl had followed the media closely during his deployment and noted that while major news networks in the U.S. focused on many negative aspects of the war, troops in Iraq were also exposed to military news such as the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, which reported on more positive events during the war. Carl explained:

So the Stars and Stripes were giving us the human interest side of it, of course, you know. The Stars and Stripes guys were the ones reporting on all of the MEDCAP missions where we'd fly into a village and immunize all the kids and give people eyeglasses. And the vets would go in and take care of their animals, and we were building schools, and dams and repairing bridges and doing all this stuff, right? So while we're over there, we have this balance. You know, we were getting the Fox News, the CNN and the MSNBC. So we're seeing everything the people back at home were seeing. But we're also seeing the Stars and Stripes and we're also seeing with our own eyes what's happening on the ground.

Carl also returned from Iraq when the presidential election season began in 2004 and presidential candidate John Kerry was heavily criticizing President George W. Bush for his handling of the Iraq War. In addition, the media was reporting a growing insurgency in Iraq against American troops, and the public was becoming sceptical of the war due to the increase in violence being reported. Carl felt that media reports were biased against the war and he no longer had the balance of military news that he relied on in Iraq to support his overall positive view of the war. He described the harsh rupture of this shift:

You want to talk about the shock to come back to the states in March 2004, right, with the election kicking off? And now we don't have that balance. Now, nowhere are reported the MEDCAP missions and the school houses. I mean you'd catch it once in a while, but it's like, Oh my god! What happened? What happened since we came back? Everything is different. Everything is changed. We're losing. It's worse. It's terrible. I mean, "Oh my god!" And so, on the one hand the insurgency was really picking up steam. It was getting worse to a certain extent because casualty numbers were going up. I mean I'm a realist, I don't ignore that. It seemed as though everything blew up. But it didn't actually blow up. It's just that we were watching the war now from the civilian perspective, without that Stars and Stripes giving us the human interest side of what the soldiers were doing and stuff. And it seemed like a different war. It seemed like everything was bad. Everything was wrong and terrible. And then you've got the

politicians who voted for the war and who supported the war in the beginning, saying it was a mistake. You know, wrong war. Kerry and all of his...really, really negative rhetoric. And I understand the guy was trying to win an election. But I don't think he understands the effect that had on the soldiers. To be told that I sent you into a mistake. I mean it's just been a year. And now, it's this grave error. It's this huge mistake. It's wrong, it's terrible. You know, "the wrong war," "dying for nothing," and all that stuff. I mean, this is what we're hearing.

Carl continues to serve as a Gunnery Sergeant in the Army Reserve and is preparing for a second deployment to Iraq. In addition, he maintains contact with several soldiers who have rotated back and forth to Iraq on many occasions. The stories that he learns from fellow soldiers and from what he reads on military blogs reinforce his ongoing support for the war.

Carl became involved in political activism through attending anti-war counter demonstrations, lobbying Congress, blogging, and joining Vets for Freedom in order to counteract what he defines as "negative reporting" of the war. His unwavering support for the military was shaped by positive experiences early in his career that exceeded his low expectations of military service. Later, when he deployed to Iraq in 2003, he was greeted as a "liberator" by Iraqi civilians, and his support for the war solidified. Thus, when Carl encountered an anti-war sentiment upon returning to home, he spoke-out in support of the war and anchored his pro-war attitudes in his experiences on the ground in Iraq. His conviction in supporting the war eventually evolved into political activism. Carl uses his political activism as an avenue through which to express not only his views, but the views of his fellow soldiers who wish to shed light on the more positive aspects of the war.

## **Conclusion**

The unique life trajectories of Paige, William, Scott, and Carl converged in Iraq, but they came away with divergent attitudes toward the military and warfare. All four entered the military with differing expectations toward military service. For example, anti-war veterans trusted the expertise of political and military leaders, and expected the military to perform professionally when challenged with the complexities of warfare. But for Paige and William, the military failed to meet their high expectations of military service, which set in motion their trajectory toward anti-war political activism. In contrast, Scott and Carl's experiences far exceeded their expectations toward the military before their deployment to Iraq, and negative events were bracketed as exceptional, allowing them to continue to support the war effort. Hence, how soldiers' expectations of the military are alternately disappointed, met, or surpassed is fundamental to their respective political outcomes.

The military as a total institution in American society is a hybrid organization—part coercive, part voluntaristic (Goffman 1961). The incompatibility of these two forms of social organization tells us important things about what people retain from their institutional experiences. First, their very entrance means that they have taken a proactive stance to transform the self. Second, prior expectations toward the institution shape and constrain how they interpret institutional practices. Third, failed expectations lead to greater antagonism toward the institution; while expectations that are met or exceeded solidify its support.

The armed forces are highly revered and constitute a central presence in American society both materially and socially. Young women and men volunteer for military

service with expectations of belonging to a well-organized and highly professional institution. They seek to transform their civilian selves into an ideal-type soldier who is physically and mentally fit, disciplined, courageous, and self-sacrificing. In the case of today's Iraq War veterans, this framework leads to a high threshold of ideals of military professionalism. However, during wartime, military ideals are greatly challenged, and team concepts and patriotic motivations are subdued by political and military leaders who assert authoritative practices to press a swift and decisive victory. And, as evidenced in the experiences of veterans above, this can result in a breakdown in institutional values.

The sociological analysis of warfare through the biographies of Iraq War veterans serves as a way in which to explain the social world at the subjective level of experience. When veterans volunteer for military service, they are already partially withdrawing from civilian life. Their vast range of pre-, during-, and post-war experiences illustrate the multiple ways in which they make meaning of values, beliefs, ideologies, and their identities as soldiers. Through capturing and interpreting their trajectories from civilians to soldiers to political activists, this chapter sheds light upon prior ideals of military service, and how expectations toward service influence the meaning veterans draw from their experiences of war.

In the following chapter, I discuss the intricacies of combat events, and how the conditions of fighting in guerilla warfare can lead to events that trigger a major rethinking of support toward the military and war. I describe how Iraq War veterans are thrown into complex and violent conflicts with less-than-clear objectives for which they are often ill-prepared. As a result, more is demanded of them if they are to continue their support for the war and for the military in general. Traumatic events in the fog of war cause them to

reflect upon the moral obligations of service and self-sacrifice that compelled them to become soldiers. While in Iraq, veterans work to file away the bundle of emotions they feel toward the war. However, when they return to civilian life, they are unable to ignore their moral and patriotic ideals toward dignity (personal achievement, respect for self, and respect for others) and fidelity (duty to country, leadership, and teamwork) that initially contributed to their decision to join the armed services. As a result, following their deployment to Iraq, they find a way in which to voice their beliefs toward the military and war through political activism.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Experiences of Combat**

When Jerry enlisted in the Marine Corps on August 10, 2003 he was completely in support of the war in Iraq. He states that he had always admired the Marine Corps because he believed it was a highly professional organization with a strong sense of camaraderie. Jerry grew up in foster care until the age of fourteen. Three years later his foster parents filed for divorce. The Marine Corps offered him a sense of belonging, the freedom to leave home, and job stability. He was optimistic of the military and war until his deployment in 2007 to Iraq, where his boots-on-the ground experiences precipitated questions about the war. In Iraq, he felt excluded from the camaraderie of those senior to him, and was repeatedly hazed by his senior non-commissioned officers. Moreover, he began to question the moral justification of the war after experiencing combat.

I interviewed Jerry in 2009 at a GI peace convention in Maryland, one year after he was discharged from the Marine Corps. Jerry described to me his initial and subsequent questioning of the Iraq War. He stated:

The higher-ups were saying “this is a good war,” “we’re going to defeat the terrorists” and I thought, okay, “we are doing that.” Until I actually started going on patrols, and going into people’s homes, and seeing that what we were doing wasn’t good. I didn’t have the word “occupation” in my mind back then, but looking back now, it definitely was an occupation.

Jerry went on to explain that, at the time, he did not have the words to describe his experiences in Iraq, but he knew that “waking up families in the middle of the night, pulling them out of their homes, and searching them” was wrong. He was also forced to produce false intelligence reports about Iraqi insurgents in order to demonstrate productivity to his commanders in Camp Falluja. Jerry’s experiences are similar to other anti-war veterans in this study who worked to hold onto idealistic beliefs of the war as a just cause, but whose participation in combat triggered a major rethinking of their support for the war. During Jerry’s eight-month tour in Iraq from February to October 2007, he gradually began to question the war in Iraq as “a good war” against “terrorists” after personally witnessing and participating in the abusive violence against Iraqis. While in Iraq, however, when Jerry questioned the practice of raiding homes and falsifying reports, he was told by his fellow Marines to “shut the fuck up,” and “I don’t want to hear that anymore, you’re here, you’re a Corporal, just do your job.” Jerry’s discouragement from questioning the war while in Iraq is indicative of the experiences of anti-war veterans in this study. Voicing their personal views toward the war came later, when veterans separated from the military and began to reflect upon traumatic events in Iraq.

In this chapter, I build upon the importance of expectations, as discussed in Chapter 2, and argue that an additional conjuncture in the path toward becoming an anti-war activist is rooted in the conditions of modern guerilla warfare triggering a break in veterans’ support for the war. Turning against the war is the result of a series of events punctuated by combat experiences that are jarring enough to leave one unable to maintain framing the war as a just cause. For other veterans, however, the conditions of guerilla warfare and participating in combat actually push them in the opposite direction toward

pro-war political activism. Thus, combat events in modern guerilla warfare are equally salient for pro-war veterans, but the key difference is that, in their case, such events do not lead to a major rethinking of military service and, instead, work to solidify their support for the war.

### **Sociological Studies of War**

Warfare plays a significant role in defining changes and conjunctures that are fundamental to sociological inquiries of state-building, revolution, nationalism, and social movements. Yet, sociology has largely marginalized the study of warfare itself (Kestnbaum 2005). Nonetheless, sociologists along with an interdisciplinary group of anthropologists, political scientists, and psychologists have addressed the internal logics of recent wars in significant ways (Bueno de Mesquita 2006; González 2009; Robben 2010; Smith 2005; Wimmer et al. 2009), and contributed to special issues in the journal *American Psychologist* on war and psychological health.<sup>10</sup> Sociological work on the study of war builds upon Max Weber's (1978) thesis that the modern state acquires its distinctive quality only when it additionally claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. This thesis has traditionally led sociological research on warfare to focus on the control of power over both the state and society (Ahram 2008; Geyer 2002; Paret 1992; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 2003), and on how collective understandings are reorganized by groups of people affected by war (Adams et al. 2005; Steinmetz 1999). Furthermore,

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<sup>10</sup> A special issue of the American Psychological Association's January 2011 publication of the *American Psychologist* was based on the US Army's "Comprehensive Soldier Fitness" program, which is "a preventive program that seeks to enhance psychological resilience among all members of the Army community, which includes soldiers, family members, and Department of the Army civilians." (Casey, 2011, 1).

sociological scholarship on warfare examines social and structural interactions between the state, the armed forces, and society to explain how this powerful trinity organizes coercion and violence (Paret 1992; Simons 1999). In sum, sociological scholarship of warfare can be categorized into three broad thematic domains: 1) the interactions between the state, armed forces, and society when preparing for war; 2) the way in which enemy combatants are treated; 3) how people who are affected by war make sense of their experiences (Kestnbaum 2009).

The first category is also the broadest: how the state, armed forces, and society prepare for war can be traced back to how the state in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe consolidated a monopoly over violence by creating coherent military organizations (Bates 2001; Elias 1939/1994; Kiser and Baer 2005; Mann 1986, 1993; Redlich 1964/1965; Tilly 1985, 1992). After consolidating the means to deploy violence, through the institutional framework of an armed service, the state adopted conscription to build mass armies of ordinary citizens who could be mobilized under the banner of nationalism (Bartov 1994; Brubaker 1992; Scarry 1996). At the same time, states consolidated control over militia forces and popular movements to draw ordinary people into armed conflict (Centeno 2002; Kestnbaum 2002, 2005; Skocpol 1994).

But sociological scholarship on the state, armed forces, and society is too broad to examine how people are drawn into military service. The emphasis on state monopoly over organized violence does not include the multiple ways in which ordinary people experience their recruitment into military organizations. This body of literature employs a top-down approach to the study of warfare with an emphasis on broad developments such as nationalism and state-formations.

The second area of research focuses on modern warfare and moves closer to the effect of war on social actors by examining the shift in the treatment and definition of enemy combatants since World War II. As wars have changed from more conventional interstate warfare to wars against guerrillas and insurgencies, defining the enemy has become increasingly complex for states that seek to legitimate the use of organized violence (Schmitt 2007), and as Kestnbaum (2009) describes, “making anyone the target of attack” (243). In modern warfare, armies redefine “the enemy” and noncombatants in homogenous terms as both alien and terrifying, which becomes a mechanism for dehumanizing civilian populations regardless of their role in the war, and making brutality against civilians both necessary and justifiable (Collins 2008; Kassimeris 2006). As Tilly (2003) claims in regard to the state’s use of collective violence more generally, “collective violence almost always involves governments as monitors, claimants, objects of claim, or third parties to claims” (pp. 9). However, some sociologists are beginning to doubt the state’s monopoly over violence due to the rise of transnational institutions, insurgencies, guerrillas, and private militaries that undermine traditional states and standing armies (Hironaka 2005; Roxborough 2006, 2007). This literature continues to grapple with the pressures changing the role of the state, armed forces, and society, particularly in modern guerilla wars, such as the war in Iraq, but this work continues to overlook the people directly impacted by warfare.

Hence, sociological studies of war trace shifts in processes of war making, but remain focused on the role of the state. Moreover, studies on how states wage war emphasize changes in how wars are fought without examining how these changes influence soldiers responsible for fighting. Therefore, sociological research on modern

warfare continues to emphasize a top-down approach to the study of war that excludes how participants are shaped by the pressures of warfare.

The third category of sociological research on war makes use of a more eventful approach, in Sewell's (2005) terms, to study how war affects various groups of people—sometimes in diametrically opposite ways. The experiences of warfare from the perspectives of ordinary people, families and friends of soldiers, and veterans highlight how different groups work to make sense of war (Olick 2005, 2007; Schwartz 2000; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), and how war has affected their lives (Förster and Nagler 1997; Winter and Robert 1997). Research has also examined how compulsory service homogenizes people from various class, racial, and ethnic groups by calling them to serve under the banner of civic responsibility, and an elevated masculine ideal of duty, sacrifice, honor, courage, and camaraderie (Kestnbaum 2005). This third body of literature comes closer to examining how ordinary people are affected by war making institutions such as the state, armed forces, and society. However, what is missing is how those directly affected by the decision to go to war—soldiers—have their thinking shaped and constrained by the experience of combat.

I argue that it is equally valid for sociologists to elevate the experiences of ordinary soldiers to a central place in the study of warfare. But rather than focusing on a broad theory of how the state, armed forces, and society shape and constrain wars, this chapter departs from previous studies and employs a bottom-up approach to explain how participating in combat has become a catalyst for engaging the state in contentious politics.

In this chapter, I argue that a critical juncture in the development of political attitudes takes place in the most traumatic experience of warfare – combat. I am sensitive to how veterans draw meaning from combat, and argue that it is precisely these traumatic experiences under the social conditions of modern guerilla warfare, which are the mechanisms that solidify their views. Hence, this chapter maps out how experiencing combat events can trigger a major rethinking of military service (or not), and cement the path to pro- or anti-war political attitudes.

Since it is the case that multiple events influence the development of political attitudes, I trace veterans' political trajectory beginning with how and why they joined the military, their expectations of military service, their deployment to Iraq, and their post-war experiences, in order to map the various turning points that resulted in their pro- or anti-war views. Nonetheless, it turned out that for both pro- and anti-war activists, their story was, indeed, punctuated by a combat event that occurred in Iraq that they themselves identified as a source of their political beliefs. For some veterans, combat events triggered a major rethinking of military service that led them to oppose the war, while for others, combat events cemented their belief in the war as a just cause.

In the case of Jerry, he joined the military because the Marine Corps offered him a sense of belonging and camaraderie that he was unable to acquire in foster care, and that became even more difficult to find when his foster parents divorced. He looked to his superiors for support and guidance, and he viewed the military as a professional and well-disciplined organization where he could learn to be a person of integrity and honesty. However, during war time, the Marine Corps did not meet his expectations of military professionalism. He also later questioned the justification for raiding the homes of Iraqi

civilians. In Iraq, he was silenced by his peers, and overwhelmed by the institutional pressures that advocated the war in Iraq as a “good war.” After he was discharged from the military, he began speaking-out about his experiences in Iraq, and turned toward political activism to finally voice his opposition toward the war.

### *Case Selection*

In this chapter, I examine the cases of four Iraq War combat veterans – Mike, Henry, Daniel and Wyatt. Each veteran experienced combat events in Iraq that are fundamental to shaping their political attitudes. The first two veterans – Mike and Henry – experienced combat events in Iraq that provoked a major rethinking of their service in the military and turned them against the war. Mike’s experience in war led to failed expectations of the military and to a shift toward anti-war attitudes after killing two unarmed Iraqi civilians. In the case of Henry, however, his experiences of military life are positive, but he encountered a major rethinking of his service when he could no longer ignore his experiences participating in abusive violence, which challenged his own religious beliefs. On the other hand, in the cases of Daniel and Wyatt, they also underwent combat events under the very complex conditions of guerilla warfare, but their experiences were not jarring enough to turn them against war. In the case of Daniel, he experienced some of the most brutal combat events in this study. Nonetheless, the army exceeded his low expectations of military service, and fighting against an equally deadly insurgency in Iraq reinforced his belief in fighting a just war. For Wyatt, although he became disheartened with political and military leaders, and their failure in planning for post-war reconstruction, ultimately, his criticism was based on military strategy rather

than moral issues. Moreover, his overwhelmingly positive experiences driving into villages and being greeted as a “liberator” by the Iraqi people, affirmed his pro-war beliefs and abated any questioning of the war.

The following table outlines two separate processes leading veterans to opposite political attitudes and activist behavior.

**Table 2: Political Outcomes for Iraq War Combat Veterans**

	<b>Prior ideals of military service</b>	<b>Experience in Iraq</b>	<b>Combat events produce a rethinking of service</b>	<b>Political stance after service</b>
<b>Mike</b>	High	Failed expectations	Yes	Anti-war
<b>Henry</b>	High	Failed expectations	Yes	Anti-war
<b>Daniel</b>	Low	Exceed expectations	No	Pro-war
<b>Wyatt</b>	Minimal	Met expectations	No	Pro-war

Each case adds a more complex piece to the puzzle of how veterans who experience warfare emerge with two radically different conclusions about war. Thus, this chapter is guided by the following question: how do combat events under the social conditions of modern guerilla warfare become a catalyst for pro- or anti-war political attitudes and activist behavior? In this chapter, I trace the life trajectories of four Iraq War veterans, in order to examine the process through which political attitudes are constructed, and how experiencing combat events are formative in this process.

## **Combat Events and Turning Against the War**

### *Mike (Anti-war Veteran)*

Mike joined the Marine Corps Reserve on May 30, 2000. As a young man with a long family history of military service, he held a very idealistic notion of being a Marine. Mike's great-grandfather is a World War I veteran, his grandfather is retired from the Air Force, and his father served in Vietnam as a member of the U.S. Navy. Moreover, Mike's older brother will soon retire from the Air Force. Mike shares a very close relationship with his father, who became an anti-war veteran after serving in Vietnam. When Mike was in eighth grade, his parents separated and he went to live with his father, during which time the bond between them strengthened. Before Mike joined the Marine Corps, he consulted with his father about whether or not to enlist. Despite holding anti-war views, Mike's father supported him in his decision to join the military. Mike joined in 2000, before the invasion of Iraq, and when the military was more involved in peacekeeping missions than engaged in full-scale war. Reading Thomas Rick's (1997) *Making the Corps* about Marine Corps boot camp reinforced Mike's idealistic views of being a Marine, and soon after he decided to join the Marine Corps Reserve.

One year after Mike joined the Marine Corps, the September 11, 2001 attacks took place. Mike's reserve unit was one of the first to be called up for active duty, and was sent to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for three months to provide security for the reconstruction of the prison that would soon house detainees. In August 2004, Mike's unit was deployed a second time, this time to Iraq. By the time of his second deployment, Mike had already begun to question the justification being made for war by the Bush administration. Throughout his military training, he had remained in

communication with his father, who greatly influenced how he thought about the military, war, and politics.

I interviewed Mike at a GI peace convention in 2009, three years after he was discharged from the Marine Corps. He is physically fit and has long blond curly hair with blue eyes. We sat at a table in the student union at the University of Maryland as he described to me, in his Southern Louisiana accent, his feelings toward the war before his deployment to Iraq:

I could tell that something was wrong. At this time I was still under the assumption that the war in Afghanistan was good, but I thought the war in Iraq was absolutely nonsense and then when I talked to my dad on the telephone, I asked "what do you think about this, you know?" He said "I think it's a really bad idea. So I said, "yeah, me too." And we talked a lot about it. And we both came to the same conclusion that everything they were saying was just bullshit you know. It just doesn't make any sense at all.

Mike was critical of the war in Iraq before his deployment, but was not completely opposed to war itself. He believed that "the war in Afghanistan was good," and a necessary response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. However, Mike's continuous communication with his father, an anti-war Vietnam veteran, helped to develop a way of thinking that later enabled him to develop an anti-war stance. Nonetheless, Mike was very loyal to the Marine Corps, and his identity as a Marine was important to him. For him, being a Marine represented manhood, courage, and toughness. When I asked Mike why he decided to go to war despite his developing anti-war views, he stated:

Yeah. It's a strange thing. So, at the beginning I was against it, but there was still something inside me you know this invisible responsibility, maybe to myself or to somebody else. That even though I thought it was nonsense that I still had to go through with it. I'm not so sure if I had to prove something. And you know, it's not a mentality that I would ever have again in my life. Maybe I felt that if I backed out that I would be left out, or that I would lose a part of my manhood for not being "courageous."

The fact that Mike was worried about losing a part of his manhood if he did not go to Iraq is not an uncommon sentiment among veterans in this study.<sup>11</sup> Mike's sense of "invisible responsibility" resonates with many young men who have been inspired by the military's marketing campaign and joined the military with a desire to transition from teenagers into men.<sup>12</sup> In addition to Mike's loyalty to the Marine Corps, he also developed a strong sense of camaraderie with his fellow Marines. Thus, maintaining his idealistic image of being a Marine and his bond with the members of his unit, overcame his questioning of the war. Furthermore, he held a great level of trust in the competence of his military leaders.

In 2004 when Mike deployed to Iraq, some of the most intense battles against insurgents were taking place, and the military was desperately trying to distinguish between Iraqi civilians and enemy combatants. Mike describes his overall experience in Iraq as several occasions of boredom punctuated by intense urban warfare. For example, Mike spent many hours standing guard in front of ammunition sites, or at posts in front of buildings. In addition, he participated in numerous house raids during his year-long deployment. Mike described to me how the nightly raids on Iraqi homes were beginning to reactivate and reinforce his earlier questioning of the war. He explained:

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<sup>11</sup> One reason is that the marketing of military service became "hypermasculinized" in the U.S. after the Great Depression in order for men to acquire a new sense of national purpose when the U.S. entered WWII (Jarvis 2004; Kestnbaum 2005). Since the implementation of an all-volunteer military after the Vietnam War, the military invested in high-budget advertising of military service not as obligation, but as an opportunity that was sold to young men as a "warrior ethos" of courage, honor, loyalty, and duty (Bailey 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes (2008) in *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* argue that the Military's total recruiting and advertising budget rose from \$4 billion in 2003 to \$20 billion in the 2009. The rise went toward more recruiters, more recruitment bonuses, more advertising money to Madison Avenue firms, and more "outreach" activities, particularly to the people – like parents and coaches – known as "influencers" in military marketing lingo.

A lot of what we did on a daily basis in Al Asaad, was when we get these intelligence reports, they would say this house has a bad guy in it, that kind of thing, at 2:00 in the morning, you know always in the middle of the night, and we would kick the door in and take the whole family out. We grab the eldest male and we put some flexi cuffs on him, and usually the family is screaming and crying and all. They are all stunned because this happens in the middle of the night. He's drug out of his house, we bring him back to the Hummer, and take him all the way to the base, and [Intelligence] would take them for a couple of days for interrogation. And then usually, nine times out of ten, two or three days later they would give him back to us and say alright take him back to his house. And we did this all the time. We were just constantly doing this. I can only think of one time when the person we went after actually turned out to be credible... and I would always think of my father in these situations who was against the Iraq invasion from day one. I always used to say, every time we would go into a house and take the eldest male, I would imagine the worse thing, you know. Strange nation had invaded the United States and my dad's house was targeted? And he was taken out of his house? How would you feel about that? And that's the way I always dealt with it. So when I was doing it to somebody else, it was like doing it to my father. That was really hard to deal with.

Mike participated in several missions that affected him emotionally and amplified his questioning of the war. In addition, the strong ties he shared with his father also influenced how he thought about his participation in the war and sharpened his critique of how the war was being handled. Throughout Mike's tour in Iraq, he participated in countless house raids, brutalized Iraqi civilians, fought in an urban environment, and underwent long periods of boredom. His infantry unit was constantly moving throughout the country, and toward the end of his tour, it experienced a shortage of personnel, requiring everyone to work long hours with very little sleep. Mike describes himself as finally becoming "desensitized" and "numb" to all of the violence around him.

One day Mike's unit had taken over a tall building in the city of Hit. The building consisted of offices where a team of doctors both lived and worked. Mike's squad was sent to the bottom floor to rest after taking over the building. By this phase in the war,

his unit was extremely exhausted and completely insensitive to the chaos of warfare. He described what happened:

I was already tired of all the different shit that's going on in Iraq. There was actually a car bomb outside the house, literally right in the intersection in front of the house. Well, it wasn't really a car bomb; the car exploded because the Marines were shooting at it so much the car blew up, but the guys in it were driving up obviously at a fast speed toward the building and they were going to get out and fight us, and we shot them, killed them and blew up their vehicle, and I was in the bottom of the building when all that stuff was going on. But I was so numb to everything by that point that I said, "I'm not even going to get up to see what it is." So, I'll never forget how numb I felt at that point.

Later that evening, Mike was on the roof of the same building with members of his squad along with two snipers from another unit. They were standing watch when a vehicle came around the corner of the street and suddenly stopped. He described to me how quickly an event turned from complete boredom to a rapid moment of chaos:

I'm standing on the side of the building just kind of jaw jacked [talking], and we're just looking around and a vehicle comes down this street; not fast, not aggressive, so he was just driving towards us. And the sniper says "I see a car." and I said "yea, I see it," and so I get up my rifle and I'm aiming at the car in case he tries, you know, people have been trying to blow up the building all morning. So I had a very heightened sense of alert. And I was looking through the scope and all that. And I got the windshield in my scope. And the car stops, and the sniper asks his buddy who is out on the ledge, "hey do you see the car?" And there was no response and he says, "Hey man, do you see the car?" And so the sniper looks over the ledge to see what's wrong. And his buddy is just totally laid out. And so he actually jumps over the ledge to help his buddy, he's like slapping him saying "What the fuck? Wake up!" and then he looks at me and says "light up that fucking car!" And I'll never forget it. So I put about a magazine and a half into the windshield of that car. It just all happened so fast. And then another fire team was called by the squad leader to go and check the car out. And at this point, I'm trying to take it all in. The other fire team goes and checks it out and I hear over the radio, there was two men in the car and they're dead obviously, and that there were no weapons in the car. So, I'm standing there. You know, it's really the hardest thing to swallow. I mean it was... it was... cause I just shot and killed some guy who didn't deserve it.

When the second sniper (referred to as the “buddy” above) heard that there was a car approaching, he had accidentally bumped an electrical wire hanging in front of the building when he stood to aim at the car. Sniper 50-caliber rifles are made mostly of metal, so when he bumped the wire, an electric current went through the rifle and shocked him, leaving him unconscious—hence, his being “laid-out” on the floor. Because Mike was the senior man on the rooftop and he had fired the shots, the company Gunnery Sergeant ordered him to come down from the building. Relating to me what happened next, Mike sat up in his chair, looked down at the table, and began to speak with more intensity. He went on:

All of my comrades were looking at me like "oh fuck!" I was thinking brig time and when the company Gunny calls, I'm totally thinking brig time, I'm in trouble. By this time we got docs up there and they carried this guy out. He was getting medevac'ed out and the sniper and I just looked at each other like, “what the fuck are we gonna do?” And so I go down, and I will never forget for some odd reason the company Gunny, I do not know why he did this, but he had to see me right next to the vehicle. You know, knowing that just doing this shit made it so hard just to actually have to walk up and talk to him within a foot of the vehicle. Two dead guys sitting there and the fact that he put me through that, it's just terrible. And I will never forget what he said. He says to me "I'm not worried about this, I'm not worried about this." And I think he made a comment about planting some weapons we had. And he said "I'm not worried about this at all, I actually think it's a good thing because all your shots are in a well shot group." Just like this, and he points at the bullet holes in the glass like I was on the fucking rifle range, you know. I'll never forget the harshness and the cruelty, and the lack of humanity. We were still in a combat zone, and I took my helmet off, and set my rifle down, and sat on the steps to this building. And I just started crying, and uh, I mean I just couldn't hold it in anymore. That became the definitive thing that's actually the tipping point for me being very much against the war. That was the tipping point, and just as in the earlier example of my father, when I was dragging people out of their house, I would always think what if this was my dad? What if this was them doing this to our country; I had the same thought about the driver of that vehicle. What if my dad was on his way to work and you know, some foreign nation is occupying this country. And they just shot his ass on the way to work, you know, how does that make me feel?

Mike's "tipping point" became the critical moment when his questioning of the war developed into opposition to the war. Leading up to this juncture, Mike had experienced numerous events that influenced his questioning of the war. A series of events before going to war such as lengthy conversations with his father, and during the war such as raiding homes, and finally the "tipping point" – killing an innocent civilian – influenced Mike's anti-war political attitudes and activist behavior.

Mike also held a strong sense of trust in the competence of his military commanders who were supposed to set a positive example for younger Marines. When Mike's company Gunnery Sergeant displayed a complete "lack of humanity," it contradicted his own idealistic beliefs about military professionalism and shattered his faith in the Marine Corps. Finally, when Mike searched for a way in which to make sense of this traumatic experience, he could do nothing but break down and begin crying.

After Mike's deployment to Iraq, he returned to the Marine Corps base in Twentynine Palms, California with shattered assumptions about what it meant to be a Marine. He had not lived up to the idealistic image. Instead, he was ashamed of what he had done in Iraq, and along with using alcohol to self-medicate, he began starting fights with his girlfriend. Mike explained that he dealt with his experiences in Iraq by finishing an entire bottle of Jim Beam whiskey each night with members of his unit at Twentynine Palms. Through a combination of drinking alcohol and fighting with his girlfriend, Mike worked to ignore his experiences of combat events, and the disruption to his identity as a Marine.

Mike was honorably discharged from the military on May 20, 2006. He went to live with his father for the summer, before his planned return to college at Louisiana State

University in the fall. He continued his heavy drinking and would sit on the porch at night listening to music on the same headphones he had used in Iraq. He was used to sleeping in a room with eighty other Marines and now he was alone. He described how he would call his girlfriend at night and constantly argue with her. Finally, when his girlfriend left him, he decided to seek professional help. With the assistance of a counselor who provides therapy for low-income people, he was able to stop drinking and began to think more clearly about combat events in Iraq.

Mike now believes that his anti-war activism works as a form of therapy for dealing with his experiences. He continues to feel guilt and shame for his participation in the war. However, he now channels negative emotions by working toward peace and being politically active along with other anti-war veterans. The rhetoric of becoming a man via being a Marine no longer resonates with him, and he has completely turned against militarism and war. Words such as honor, pride, courage, and commitment are terms that the Marine Corps uses to market itself as the most professional organization in the armed forces. But for Mike, there is no honor, pride, or courage in his experience as a Marine, nor his participation in the war. The trajectory of his anti-war political attitudes and activist behavior are shaped by several events and experiences. But combat events in particular, such as killing Iraqi civilians, resonate as the trigger that finally turned Mike against the war.

*Henry (Anti-war veteran)*

Henry turned against the war after returning from Iraq where he served with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Infantry Division. He is a fundamentalist Christian and grounds much of

his views in biblical scripture. I interviewed Henry in 2009 at a GI anti-war convention in Maryland, and during our interview he invoked verses from the bible to highlight his view toward issues of war and peace. Henry now lives in Texas, and was wearing traditional Texan clothes (blue jeans, plaid shirt, and boots) when I interviewed him. He began the interview by telling me how his childhood fascination with martial arts and comic books motivated him to want to become a soldier. When the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11, 2001, Henry joined the army because he felt a calling to defend his country. He signed up to be in the army's airborne infantry and soon thereafter attended basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Before Henry joined the army, his impression of it was that it was an honorable institution that protected our freedom and "a place where you could prove yourself to be a man." After Henry completed his training and was assigned to his unit, he completely immersed himself into the ideal of being an airborne soldier, and planned on making the army his career. In February 2003, Henry deployed to Iraq with his infantry unit. When I asked him about learning that he would be deployed to Iraq, he described his response:

It was exciting and scary all at the same time. I knew I was going to war, I signed up to go to war, it took us a little bit because we didn't go to Afghanistan, you know everybody was going to Afghanistan, and I felt that maybe I came in too late and missed the war, and then Iraq came up. I really wasn't listening to politics, or the debate about the Iraq War at all. I mean every weekend I was in Raleigh [North Carolina] with my girlfriend getting drunk and partying. Then when I finally got orders I had to really get into a mode of "I'm gonna kill somebody." And we would watch in our barrack rooms videos of Chechnyan soldiers decapitating Russian soldiers with their Bowie knives. We watched these videos over and over again.

Henry describes his pro-war attitude as very common throughout his entire unit. They were a highly motivated infantry unit that looked forward to being tested in war.

When his unit deployed to Iraq, they drove to Samarra during the initial invasion, following an unprecedented aerial attack from mortars, missiles, rockets, and airplane bombings that completely destroyed the city. But to their surprise, they were euphorically greeted by Iraqi civilians when they entered the city, which reinforced Henry's support for the war and his pride in being an American soldier. He describes:

When we were in Samarra they had cheered us when we came in. It surprised the heck out of me because we just tore hell on that town. But they were really happy for us being there and they were saying "Yes Bush! No Saddam!" A man walked up to our position with only one ear, and said that they cut off his ear for not fighting against us. So that really made me feel good about what we were doing.

Henry truly believed that he belonged to the best military in the world. As a soldier, he was experiencing the joy of removing an oppressive dictator from power, so that people could live in a free society. Despite Henry's dismay at the unprecedented destruction of Samarra, the celebratory reaction of Iraqi civilians reinforced his positive emotions, and his belief that this was a just war.

As the war continued, Henry reports that Iraqis were still cheering for them in the streets, but their excitement waned once they realized that the military was not going to leave. At the same time, American troops were also becoming increasingly bitter the longer they remained in Iraq. While American politicians were touting the liberation of Iraqis and bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq, on the ground, Henry began witnessing and participating in abuse toward Iraqi civilians. Unlike Mike, who began to empathize with the Iraqis during the war, Henry reports that he and his fellow soldiers gradually developed less empathy, and began to hate the Iraqis. When the line between insurgents and civilians became blurred, Henry developed a much more aggressive stance

against the Iraqi people. He described to me the moment when he realized how the fear of not knowing who the enemy was made him insensitive to violence:

We have this thing called the Muslim Maul. It's this iron bar we wrote Muslim Maul on. We would use it on cars. We picked up this Lieutenant at the airport one day in country. We're doing this roundabout and this car is trying to close in on us, and Mendez started kicking the car, and hitting it with the Muslim Maul. "You know, what the fuck? Get back! Get back!" And the LT turned around and was like "is he allowed to do that?" And I turn around on my 50 cal, and just look at him and said "turn around and watch your sector, sir." He was scared and he did exactly that. I never thought I could tell an officer what to do, but seeing his expression I recognized that I've fucking changed. There was something in me that had really been desensitized to violence.

Henry reports that these acts of violence contradicted his own Christian values and beliefs, but this was his way of managing the constant fear of being attacked by Iraqis. For Henry and his fellow soldiers, the difficulty of distinguishing between civilians and enemy combatants led to a desensitized willingness to commit violent acts against the Iraqi people.

At the same time, Henry became increasingly frustrated with, and critical of their inability to identify the enemy. One day as his unit was driving out of a small town on the outskirts of Bagdad, two men with rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers on their backs ran across the road. Before the men ran away, Henry was able to clearly see the face of one of the men through his rifle scope. When they went in search of the two men, locals in the area provided false information, which resulted in Henry's unit detaining innocent Iraqi civilians. Henry explained:

When we started asking questions, this farmer said "oh this person said something bad about the U.S. The bad guys are over there." So we went and messed the house up inside. We jumped out of the truck and went into this farming house where there was this small family. We tossed 'em good, and all we found was this, you know, this little box with money in it and I found a .22 caliber pistol. It was small. No AK-47s, no RPGs, no explosive rounds, nothing that indicated

they were part of the resistance against us. But we took the two young men of the family anyway and I told my Sergeant "Sergeant, these aren't the men. I know for sure that the one that I saw was neither of them." He replied that they were still bad men. It's not like I could engage in an argument with my platoon Sergeant who was someone I had respect for. He's a good man. As we were tying up these men, their mothers are just crying at me, trying to kiss my cheek, getting on their knees trying to kiss my feet, and I'm trying to tell her that they're going to be fine, they're going to be out. Well, I was very naive and I didn't know that we kept them for months and years, you know, in places like Abu Ghraib. I thought we weren't getting the enemy at all with all of these raids, we went into the wrong houses, everything just seemed...we were just fucking with the people.

In Iraq, these events began to sow seeds of doubt in Henry's mind about the war and the military. He began to grow frustrated with the military's inability to identify the enemy and its frequent detention of the wrong people through house raids. But he still believed in the mission and the importance of removing Saddam Hussein from power, so he set aside his emotions and remained focused on fighting the war. During our interview, Henry began nodding his head as he told me how they often raided the wrong homes and were simply detaining random Iraqi men. But despite frustrations, he remained in complete support of the overall mission to win the war. He went on to describe:

When I was there, it was all about not getting hit by a mortar, roadside bomb, or a sniper. Stay alive and hope to do our job better, you know. I was so...I wanted to stay there, actually. When we were about to leave finally, I wanted to stay, you know, move me to another unit. I'm not leaving 'til this job is done. I wanted to do it better, I wanted to proceed to Special Forces, really get better intel and actually get the enemy. It wasn't 'til I got back home and went on leave that the change started. I thought that we did a good job, we got rid of Saddam. That was the one string that held the whole justification for it. We got rid of that asshole who cut off people's ears, tortured people, and gassed the Kurds.

Henry continued to support the war by holding on to "the one string that held the whole justification for it"—getting rid of Saddam. But the seeds of doubt about the war that were planted in his mind during house raids in Iraq began to settle, and triggered a break in his primary pro-war framework that would later turn him against the war.

In February of 2004, Henry began to seriously question the war. He went on a two-week leave to visit some friends in Seattle. During his visit, he met a young woman who was completely against the war and began talking to him about her opposition. Although Henry remained loyal to his ideals of being a soldier, he reports that these conversations began to provide a sense of clarity to his earlier doubts about the war. Before he returned to his unit at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Henry went to a screening of the film "The Passion of Christ," which caused him to seriously question his identity as a soldier and a Christian:

We went to go see "The Passion of Christ." I've always considered myself Christian. I walked out of that theater completely lost. How could I be a Christian and follow the teachings of Jesus: loving your enemy, doing good things to those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, if struck upon one cheek turn and offer the other. How could I follow his teachings and be in the army? My job was to kill people. I just couldn't find a common ground. When I went back to my unit, I had all these feelings of love and of faith. I ended up in the hospital having these, I guess anxiety attacks; sharp pains in my chest, my left arm was going numb, it was hard to breathe, I felt like I was having heart attacks and became emotional. When I was hanging out with my guys they'd say "I can't wait to fuck up another Haji" boom, these pains would come and they did a chest X-ray, blood test, EKG, you know basically they narrowed it down to the protective sac around my heart as being inflamed, which was causing these pains. And they asked, "are you stressed?" I was like, "No, I'm not stressed!" Airborne! Infantry! You know, they build us with this ego thing. We're invulnerable.

As an airborne infantry soldier, Henry's unit expected him to suppress negative emotions from events in Iraq and remain loyal in his support for the war. But reexamining his Christian beliefs produced a break in his idealistic views toward the military and war, and resulted in both psychological and physical damage. Unlike Mike, the breaking point for Henry occurred after returning from Iraq. But similar to Mike, his turning against the war is rooted in combat events that triggered a major rethinking of his idealistic views toward military service.

When Henry reported his medical problems to his unit they assigned him to work as a Chaplin's assistant. Henry grinned as he stated that they assigned him this duty "thinking that would cool me down and give me perspective. As a Chaplain, you're supposed to use religion to justify war." But this simply gave him more time to think about how his own Christian beliefs contradicted combat events in which he had participated. He finally came to the conclusion that being a soldier opposed the teachings of God. Thus, rather than using the time as a Chaplin's assistant to regain his ideals of being a soldier, he filled out the paperwork to become a conscientious objector. He described to me the level of peace that he gained once he began turning against the war:

Once I started working on my CO packet, my chest pains went away and I haven't had it back since maybe a couple of years afterwards when I was in Austin; 4th of Julys are pretty harsh. Fireworks don't really agree with me. Once I started working on the path towards peace, I felt, I don't know how to explain it, I felt that I was doing the right thing and I have no regrets about it.

When I asked him about the transition from being a gung-ho soldier who wanted to kill Iraqis to becoming a peace activist, he stated that it was extremely challenging, but liberating at the same time:

It encompasses everything. It was the hardest thing I did, it was the easiest thing I did, it was the greatest joy; it was the greatest pain. It encompasses all. I felt the pain for what I did and how it affected people, and such a joy in finally freeing myself of that and moving in a different direction.

In 2004 when Henry was working on becoming a conscientious objector, he found support through veteran peace activist organizations. Before he was discharged from the army, he attended a peace rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina and began speaking-out against the war with other anti-war veterans. Since then, Henry has been highly active in the peace movement, and travels across the country speaking at anti-war events about his

experiences in Iraq. He has also become a leader in the GI movement, constantly invoking his faith in God as an avenue toward peace.

A series of complex events and experiences set Henry on a path toward anti-war political activism. While in Iraq, he grew frustrated with arresting innocent civilians, but as a soldier, he forced himself to conform to usual military practices. Nonetheless, when Henry returned home he reflected upon his participation in combat, which created experiences powerful enough to trigger a break in his ideals of being a soldier and his support for the war. Through the assistance of his family, friends, and other anti-war veterans, Henry applied for conscientious objector status, which finally solidified his path toward anti-war political activism.

### **Combat Events and Unwavering Support for the War**

*Daniel (Pro-war veteran)*

Daniel grew up in Buffalo, New York and joined the army in July 1999 because he felt that it was time for him to “grow up and become a man.” He comes from a very religious, conservative, and well-educated, upper middle-class family. His father is a prominent dentist in Buffalo and his two older brothers attended seminary school. However, Daniel became very liberal in college, majored in theater, and rebelled against his politically right-wing parents. He wanted to be more creative and began reading philosophy; he also became anti-death penalty and believed in complete non-violence. He eventually decided to drop out of college and moved to Hollywood, California to become a writer and artist.

On a weekend when Daniel returned from Hollywood to visit his parents, two burglars broke into their home. Daniel and his parents were home when the burglars entered. He inhaled a long breath of air and described to me how the two men completely humiliated him:

I came home from California one weekend, my parents had a home invasion. These two guys walked into the house, armed, robbed us, and beat the hell out of my parents. I was just a complete coward. It made me realize I got to do something. I'm not a man.... I had a shotgun, I was trying to load a shotgun and couldn't load it. These guys were you know, they took everything in the house. My mom just had surgery. You know, my dad was taking care of my mom. He kind of locked himself in a room with a .45. And I was like out there, you know, to do the thing that young men are supposed to do. Protect their loved ones and these guys just laughed at me. They totally emasculated me and I just remembered our house is trashed and my dad got roughed up. And they just ignored me. And I was like, "you know what man, that's never going to happen again, I swear to God I don't know what I got to do, but I'm not gonna be that person anymore."

At that moment, Daniel felt that he needed to do something in his life to "become a man." He decided to join the army. But when he joined the army in 1999, he did not actually believe that he would end up going to war. He thought of the army as a good place to "toughen up," but he figured that he would serve for a few years and later leave the military to write about his experience.

Daniel did not tell his family that he joined the army until he arrived for basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, because he knew his parents would disapprove. His father is a prominent dentist in Buffalo and paid for the education of all of Daniel's older siblings—all of whom have graduate degrees. When his family learned that he had joined the army, they were completely ashamed. His father told him to return home, finish college, and that he would help him get to anywhere he wanted to go in life.

However, Daniel had his mind set on becoming a soldier. When Daniel refused his father's offer, he felt that he had made his first major step toward becoming a man.

In the army, Daniel thrived and fully embraced a military-mindset. One could say that he not only learned to play the role of a soldier, but he also fell in love with the script. He had joined the army at the age of twenty-three and was older than most of his peers who were eighteen years old. Because of this age difference, he was immediately put into leadership positions, and he himself describes quickly falling in love with the experience of leading soldiers. For Daniel, the army was simply a stage where he was able to put into practice his training as a theater major. He describes:

Well I mean it was tough. I had never slept outside in my life. I never had to worry about anyone screaming at me. But it was a game. As a theater major the military was just a game; an act, you play the role: yes sir; no sir, you know? You did your part, and that was it. And it was the easiest job in the world. I ran in the morning, came back, did my job, and got a check for nothing. I loved it, and it wasn't serious; there was no threat. It was just kind of like, "hey, you might be a POW someday." Oh, absolutely; right (exaggeration). "You might have to kill a man with your hands." Of course, yeah (exaggeration). You know, none of it was real, so it was like perfect.

The army thus exceeded Daniel's low expectations of military service and he embraced his role as a soldier with even greater resiliency. He explained that when he arrived to his first duty station he began to "completely drink the water," and he wanted to know everything about being an infantryman.

In 2003 when Daniel's unit was preparing to deploy to Iraq, he states that he learned to mask all fear and became a complete maniac training his soldiers for combat. As a result, he received positive attention from his commanders in Iraq who recognized his tenacity. Daniel had learned to manage negative emotions and gained what he

believes is a strong sense of manhood. He described to me the positive attention that he received from the army when he demonstrated his tenacity as soldier:

My first patrol, we took contact. And it was just like the adrenalin...I've never experienced anything like it. It was like, I felt like I was destined to do this in my life, you know. I went from thinking I'll do six years and get out, to I want to do this for the rest of my life. I want to get an apartment in Baghdad. I don't care if I ever see my family again. I just hated the enemy. I was just possessed with hatred, and I lost it, you know. And I was like look. I don't care where they're at; I'm going to come down and kill their souls. I was the guy that just was the maniac in the battalion, and the division was like, "this guy, we need him." I started getting attention, positive attention by doing this. And so, it just fueled a monster and I loved it. I loved it!

The line between role-playing and reality became blurred, and Daniel completely embraced a pro-war mindset conducive to war fighting. Within a few years, Daniel had transformed from being a complete pacifist to a person who thrived on the adrenalin of combat. When I asked him how this had happened, he replied that he used his acting skills to mask his fear. In fact, he was terrified of combat, but he could not let the soldiers for whom he was responsible see his fear. He finally concluded that the army was going to keep him in Iraq for the next twelve months, and, therefore, embracing a warrior mentality became the best way in which to stay focused in war.

Before going to Iraq, Daniel had believed that fighting in a war was black and white. There was a clear enemy army and their mission was to defeat them. However, he learned that in modern warfare, it is not clear who the enemy is. In combat, insurgents hide within the civilian population, and he witnessed many unfortunate deaths of Iraqi women and children. But rather than these events turning him against the war, they made him feel even more anger toward the enemy. He believed that if he held on to his past liberal moral principles of peace and non-violence, it would only make him another

victim in the inhumane and brutal environment of combat. The war, for Daniel and many other veterans whom I interviewed, was not political when they were in Iraq. Instead, the war was about keeping himself and his fellow soldiers alive.

Daniel claims that his experiences in Iraq also moved him further away from the Christian principles with which he was raised. Unlike Henry, who worked to hold onto his Christian beliefs, Daniel reports that in Iraq he stopped praying because what he was doing was simply unforgiveable. He gave me an example of an event during the battle of Falluja in 2004 that completely turned him away from his faith in God. He vividly described:

I walked in the house and these guys had hot weapons and cordite in their hands, and the kids were around them and there's a battle going on and they looked at me and in English say, "you're a good American, you can't do the things that you want to do because of your Geneva convention." I wanted to put a round in their heads. It just infuriated me. I got 3 of my guys outside who are dead; one of my best friends was shot like five times. I was livid, this mother fucker was telling me you know, that I'm a good American, and I can't do my job, and so I didn't know what to do, if I leave him in the house he's going to shoot me. So I tied him to his front gate, and I was going to get back to him when the fight was over. And some guy cut him free. We took both of them down and he was wounded. And his kids came out and were just emotional and he's bleeding, and they were screaming to him. And so I popped smoke and I threw it to the kids, and you know, I did that to get the kids away from the fight, but really, I did it so that piece of shit couldn't say goodbye to his kids. Because you know, I didn't want him to be able to say goodbye. And he looked at me as he was dying, and he was like, "why would you do that? Why would you rob me of my last earthly you know." And I was just like, "eat it, suck it! I want to watch you choke on your own blood, you sack of shit." And he died, and I felt so amazing about myself. And then the fight ended, and I just kind of remembered like, "what the hell have I become?" That's not me. What's wrong here? I was you know, turn the other cheek kid, you know. And my parents would be horrified if they knew what I've become. And so I just stopped talking to God, I stopped praying. I stopped going to church; ignored the chaplain. And it was like, "Hey, if God wants control of that stuff he could send me home, but until that day I'm here; I'm going to do my job, and I'm going to be as ruthless as they are, and I am going to bring my soldiers home."

A series of events that began when Daniel was “completely emasculated” in his home, through the army exceeding his expectations of military service, and into his experiences of combat in Iraq, shifted Daniel away from pacifist political attitudes and toward embracing a completely pro-war mental framework. As the line between simply playing the role of being a soldier and real life hand-to-hand combat disappeared, so too did Daniel’s willingness to question anything about the war, its justification, or his role within it.

Daniel experienced combat events similar to those of anti-war veterans, but participating in combat drove him in a completely opposite direction. Daniel described the event that finally solidified his support for the war:

In Fallujah there was a house fight. And it was on my birthday, ironically. And I’m in this house fight, and there was like six guys in the house. And so we walk into this ambush. I got kids [soldiers] wounded, screaming for help, and these insurgents were like mocking them, like screaming for help in English. And I lost it, I went crazy, they all pulled out of the house, and I ran out of the house, too. I was there to suppress them while the kids [soldiers] got out. And I ran out, and I was getting shot at. And I was like, “Holy cow, man! I just come full circle.” I am a coward, you know. In the fight of my life, I prayed for this moment; face-to-face with the bad guys. I mean, I had shot guys at point blank, but never like six-to-one. So, I was like, Man, I’m just that kid in my parent’s house. I’m going through all this, and you know, I went crazy. And I put a couple of guys up for security; I went in with another guy, he got shot as soon as we walked in, and I stayed in the house and I killed them. And the last guy of the six was upstairs, and the house was ready to blow, because it was like a building bomb and there was gas everywhere. And I hit him in the head with a frag, but it rolled away, and he was wounded; I shot him before. We eventually got into a hand-to-hand scrap, and I hit him with my helmet and he bit the hell out of me, man. He bit me in the hand; through the bone, and he – you know. I pulled my blade out and I stuck him and he eventually died, but right before he bit my penis, and he bit it to the point where it was like the most, I mean, come on, who gets bit in the dick in combat, you know?

This very traumatic combat event cemented Daniel’s support for the war because despite his severe physical injuries, he “felt amazing” because the people they killed were not

Iraqis, but foreign insurgents. Daniel had “come full circle” from being “a coward” in his parents living room to fighting insurgents in hand to hand combat. Moreover, the positive attention and recognition that he received from superiors, peers, and younger soldiers exceeded his expectations of military service and reinforced his pro-war mental framework.

Daniel believes that embracing a complete pro-war mindset was critical to his survival. After reflecting on the traumatic event above that ended his tour in Iraq, he described to me how he maintained such an intense mentality toward combat:

You know what man? There’s no... there’s no... it’s all barbaric, it’s all animalistic. So, I could either use my mind out here, and be a victim, or I could just say, “look, I believe in what I’m doing; I believe these guys are horrible human beings, and the majority of them are foreigners [not Iraqis]. Maybe if I kill them with such tenacity, that their kids will grow up and realize you know, don’t mess with Americans.” And I believed that. And so I thought that on every mission, if I could just hover over these guys and just you know, put the fear of Christ in them that they would change. That their behavior would change, the more violent we were. There’s no counterinsurgency man. This is a full-fledged war, and yeah, that’s what I did; that’s what I was good at, and that’s what I got the pats on the back for.

The story of Daniel’s battle in Falluja was reported in *Time* magazine and he was later nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor, which ensured that he would not return to combat. He was told by his command that he would become an instructor, would never again deploy, and that it would be fantastic for his career. However, Daniel simply wanted to return to his unit and continue in the fight. He didn’t want his story told in *Time* magazine, he didn’t want the Medal of Honor, and he felt that others were beginning to control his future. As a result, six months after Daniel returned from Iraq, in August 2005, he left the army.

In 2005 politicians were also preparing for the Presidential election and many of them began questioning the war. Daniel became extremely angry with anti-war rhetoric and took it upon himself to go to Washington D.C. and speak with Congressman John Murtha, who had changed his stance and now opposed the war. Daniel did not agree with critiques of the war from politicians whom he felt did not understand the challenges American soldiers faced fighting a guerilla war in Iraq. He believed that his Army experience and publicity as a war hero provided him with credibility and more clarity about the issues being debated. After Daniel went to Congressman Murtha's office and was turned away from the staff, he used his war hero status to draw attention to supporting the war. He soon joined Vets for Freedom to help create an even greater movement of people who had fought in Iraq and wanted to win the war. Daniel began lobbying Congressmen to support the war, motivated by a sense of betrayal he felt from both politicians and the American public. He explained:

I was really angry at the population. I felt that the American people will support anything that our military is doing. But, so many people were using the war as just a way to get back in an election. And I would talk to these Democratic leaders, and they truly supported us. They weren't against the military; they had to do what they had to do, because they wanted the House and the Senate back and they wanted to take a president down. And then I go to the Republicans, and they'd all be like, "dude, we got your back. We love you guys, you guys are great." And then when push comes to shove, what were they saying? "Well, you know, it's a really unpopular war, and we're not really happy with the way it's going." Well, that's not what you told me behind closed doors. They're all cowards. It just fueled my anger all the more.

Daniel continues to be active in politically supporting the war, despite his frustration with both Democratic and Republican politicians. He works through pro-war veteran organizations to lobby Congress, conduct radio and television interviews, attend rallies, and support pro-war political candidates.

Daniel completely embraced a pro-war mental framework as a result of his combat experiences in Iraq. His fighting in Falluja taught him that the enemy they were fighting was equally equipped and just as deadly as American forces. Therefore, as he stated above, the war was not a counterinsurgency against a weaker enemy, the fight was evenly matched, and as Daniel describes, “a full-fledged war.” Fighting against insurgents who killed the soldiers under his command generated a belief system that abated any questioning of the war, and instead, solidified his support.

*Wyatt (Pro-war veteran)*

I interviewed Wyatt on December 1, 2009, four and a half years after he was discharged from the Marine Corps as a 1st Lieutenant. Wyatt served two combat tours in Iraq as an infantry officer, but during his second tour was severely injured by a suicide bomber, which ended his military career. Wyatt’s father is a former Army officer and was highly supportive of Wyatt joining the military. He was raised in a rural area of Virginia and joined the Marine Corps in January 2001, soon after graduating from the University of South Carolina. A combination of reading about the military, his family history, and a sense of duty compelled Wyatt to join the Marines. Thus, Wyatt held high expectations of the military, but unlike anti-war veterans in this study, Wyatt’s expectations are based on military strategy rather than idealistic notions of military service.

Before the invasion of Iraq, Wyatt reports that his experience as a young Marine officer was challenging, but met his expectations of military training. When I asked Wyatt about his initial years in the Marine Corps, he explained:

It was a positive experience. I felt like I fit in and assimilated well, and that I was able to carry out my job effectively. You know, there were obviously a lot of frustrations and challenges that come with being a second lieutenant; you know, a guy on deck with no experience, but I think it went pretty well. So it was difficult, but all things considered, I was content with how things went up until the invasion.

Wyatt was satisfied with the level of training that he received and he believes that he was able to perform his duties well as an infantry officer. Two years later, in 2003, Wyatt prepared for his deployment to Iraq. He looked forward to putting into practice his training as an infantryman, and leading Marines into combat. He states that at the time, he supported the war because, like any other infantryman, he wanted to “test his mettle” in combat. Therefore, at the time of the invasion, he did not concern himself with politics. Instead, he focused on war tactics and effectively carrying out his mission as an infantry officer.

Wyatt deployed for the initial invasion of Iraq from February to May 2003. But upon his arrival, he began to develop serious doubts about the war. He states that his unit was sent to Kuwait with an uncertain mission with uncertain outcomes. They didn’t know if Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, or if the Iraqi army was going to put up a fight against them. They waited idly in the Kuwaiti desert for eight weeks before crossing into Iraq, which created what Wyatt describes as a very tense, nervous, and anxious environment. But Wyatt’s critiques about the war during his first deployment to Iraq were based on tactical issues, rather than moral questions about the war itself. His unit was set up in a haphazardly constructed tent city without access to news media information. He states that everyone in his unit wanted to know more about what was happening with the war. They didn’t know when they were going to be sent into combat,

nor how long they would be in Iraq. As an officer, he felt that he should have more information, and that rumors throughout the ranks created a situation in which nobody knew what was true or not true. In addition, Wyatt was a platoon leader and he experienced numerous difficulties with the company Gunnery Sergeant and company commander. He described to me his bitterness in Iraq as they were waiting for the invasion to begin:

It was just that there were a lot of unknowns out there. You know, personal issues weighed on me. I had a heavy-handed company gunny who marginalized the lieutenants. He was always in my platoon's business, and I had a company commander who, I felt like, kept the lieutenants in the dark all the time. You know the typical life of a second lieutenant; nothing any other second lieutenant hadn't gone through, but in that environment of sitting around all day and not really having an outlet for all the anxiety; and just being around everyone all the time. It created a... I don't want to say it was demoralizing; but I guess it was demoralizing, just waiting there in the desert. I was actually pretty unhappy.

Wyatt explains that his negative experiences before the initial invasion of Iraq are not uncommon from any other young officer. He was responsible for keeping his men informed and preparing them for combat, but he lacked the appropriate information to ensure he could effectively carry out his responsibilities. In addition, he felt isolated from the senior members of his command, who he felt did not adequately support him.

After waiting in the desert for eight weeks, his unit was finally given the order to cross into Iraq for the initial invasion. Wyatt describes tremendous feelings of anxiety throughout his unit as they entered Iraq. But once the ground war began, he also felt a tremendous boost in his morale. Similar to many other veterans who participated in the initial invasion, he felt that the war would end quickly, as in the case of the Gulf War in

1991.<sup>13</sup> As a young officer lacking experience, he was also uncertain of his ability to lead Marines into combat. Wyatt described the challenges and confidence that he gained after moving out from his camp in the desert to his first firefight against the Iraqi army. He explained:

There was a lot of angst, and then finally, when we had our first firefight, it was like, “great!” I finally got to fire my weapon, number one. And number two, I did okay, and I didn’t freak out. I was able to lead Marines in a firefight, so that was why I felt good. I felt like all the stress and anxiety from the previous eight weeks of waiting was relieved and off my shoulders, and I also had a real confidence booster. I knew what it felt like to be under fire.

Wyatt went on to describe the various physical challenges of leading Marines into combat during the first few days of the war, and the mixed emotions he felt when they drove into Iraqi cities following aerial bombings. He continued:

And from that point on, for the rest of the invasion, I felt like things went well; obviously, I was very frustrated a lot of the time, you know, just like any combat environment, you have personnel issues, and everybody around you is tired. You're dead tired. And you just don't think as clearly; and you know, it was no different than what everybody else went through: just a lot of friction, a lot of sleep-deprivation, a lot of stress, a lot of gory, you know, seeing a lot of uncomfortable things. And also seeing some really spectacular things of towns that were liberated and people thanking you and giving you flowers, but also, you know, seeing children and people that are dead and blown apart. That was really, really, an intense emotional experience on so many different levels.

Throughout his tour in Iraq, Wyatt approached the war from a tactical standpoint rather than from a moral or political perspective. Moreover, his support for the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with political parties or supporting President George W. Bush. Instead, Wyatt viewed the war as an opportunity to put into practice his training. Throughout the military, and particularly among infantry soldiers, there was a strong desire on the part of

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<sup>13</sup> During the Gulf War, U.S. and allied ground forces invaded Iraq and Kuwait on February 24, 1991, and the war ended on March 1, 1991.

soldiers for an opportunity to prove themselves on the battlefield. Thus, Wyatt concentrated on his mission, rather than on moral questions as to whether or not the United States should invade Iraq. He truly believed that despite the destruction that he had witnessed from war, that removing Saddam Hussein from power was a just cause. These feelings were reinforced when his unit entered Iraqi cities and people surrounded their vehicles cheering, thanking them, and bringing them flowers. Later in the war when Iraqi civilians began to turn against American troops, Wyatt argues that the military failed to capitalize on a very small window of opportunity to build upon the support of the Iraqi people. Thus, Wyatt attributes the turn against American troops to failed military strategy, rather than to moral issues of war in general.

Wyatt also experienced many traumatic combat events during the initial invasion of Iraq. When I pressed Wyatt on some his negative experiences, he briefly hesitated, and then talked about a night when they fought off an attack from Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen army. He explained:

Some of the bad things I experienced: oh boy, you know, we got into a firefight one night and we were in a stationary position in a 360 degree perimeter, and the Saddam Fedayeen were kind of attacking us from all sides; and we were calling in mortars, we were calling in artillery, we were calling in air support, and basically held a block in position on Route 7. And they kept coming at us, and we kept coming at them, and it turns out the next morning, that a lot of these vehicles that were coming at us you know, had women and children in them, and we found out later that the Saddam Fedayeen were coming down from Baghdad and embedding themselves in vehicles with women and children so they could pass the check points and not look like military-aged males, they would look like family men. But so, the next morning we pulled out after sunrise, and drove all around Route 7 and we saw the carnage; it was pretty horrific. And a lot of people weren't even dead yet. They were still groaning and you know, mortally wounded, and it was just awful.

I went on to ask Wyatt if any of his negative or positive experiences caused him to think more critically about the war. He immediately replied “no,” then stated that the positive events did influence how he thought about the war, and that despite horrific events, removing Saddam Hussein from power was “the right thing to do.” He argues that regardless of whether people support or oppose the war, he believes that everyone would agree that Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, and he felt that the United States had “done something principled,” and positive for the world by removing Saddam from power. Wyatt admits that mistakes were made during the war, but that they were a result of improper planning. He continued to explain how negative events in the war did not influence his views. Despite witnessing and participating in traumatic combat events, he believes that experiencing combat should not be a factor in whether a person supports or opposes war. He explained:

I knew going into the war that bad things happen in war. You can't control a lot of them, and it's just inherent with warfare. You hear a lot of these anti-war vets say, “Well, I saw so much blood and carnage, so that's why I'm against war.” Well, in my opinion, that's not a reasonable reason to be for or against the war. There was a hell of a lot of blood and carnage in World War II, but you didn't hear anybody saying you know, “There's a lot of blood and carnage, that's why we should quit.” But you know, obviously, you have to weigh the blood and carnage and sacrifice with the stakes, and ask if that's worth it. But just seeing blood and carnage in a war zone, I knew not to let that affect me and how I thought about things.

Wyatt's focus on military strategy and positive experiences such as being greeted with flowers by Iraqi civilians was powerful enough to subside any moral questioning of the war. His unwavering support for the war continued despite having witnessed horrific events and being frustrated with the lack of tactical planning from the Bush Administration and particularly Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. He blames

Donald Rumsfeld for the military's failure to capitalize on a crucial moment after the removal of Saddam Hussein when Iraqi civilians were welcoming American troops. When American troops began withdrawing from Iraq, Wyatt knew that it was because Donald Rumsfeld wanted to prove that he could win the war using a minimal number of troops. He didn't want to leave Iraq because the situation on the ground remained highly unstable. As they drove south toward Kuwait, they observed a tremendous amount of looting and civil unrest. Wyatt explained that as they crossed the border back into Kuwait, a nineteen-year old Marine looked over to him and said "we'll be back here next year."

Indeed, one year later, in March 2004, Wyatt returned to Iraq and was assigned to command an infantry platoon in Fallujah, which at the time, was one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq for American troops. Wyatt explains that his second deployment to Iraq involved much more planning and understanding of the mission, but that it still fell far short of what they needed to do to win the war. Moreover, he did not experience the same welcoming from Iraqis that he had received during his first deployment. He describes Iraqi attitudes toward Americans as hostile, and that his interactions with civilians were very negative. The people of Fallujah made it very clear that they did not want American troops there. In addition, Wyatt continued to raise questions about the overall strategy being used to win the war. He felt that they were being put in danger because they didn't have enough troops, and did not have a plan. The feeling of putting his Marine's lives in danger without enough support and an unclear mission caused Wyatt to become highly critical of the Bush administration's management of the war. Nonetheless, these setbacks did not turn him against the war. Wyatt still believed that the

military could be successful if they implemented a winning strategy with an overwhelming number of U.S. troops.

Wyatt's confidence in military strategy reached its lowest point six months into his second deployment to Iraq. Military planners were trying to figure out a strategy to gain the support of the Iraqi people and ordered U.S. troops to integrate with civilian traffic. This decision placed Wyatt and his Marines in significant danger and ended his tour in Iraq. Wyatt explained:

We were on an interstate highway north of Fallujah, on route mobile, and we were doing a relief and place for another platoon that was out there securing the roadway. And that was something we have done dozens of times before, and a vehicle pulled out next to my vehicle. This was at the time when the General's order was to integrate with civilian traffic. So, you know, we were under orders not to keep the civilian vehicles at bay; but in any case, a vehicle pulled up alongside of us, while we were driving about 60 miles an hour and detonated. And we were on a 7-ton truck, there were 7 Marines killed, 3 Iraqi Special Forces that were with us on that truck; they were killed, and 5 people survived, including myself, and it was pretty horrific.

Wyatt's body was completely burned and he was medically evacuated from Iraq. He describes this event as a very dark moment in his confidence in the war, but it did not deter him from his continued support because he believed that the war could be won if military and political leaders implemented the right strategy.

In September 2004, Wyatt was laying in a hospital bed at Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, recovering from his injuries. As he watched news coverage of the presidential contest between George W. Bush and John Kerry, he was disgusted with their rhetoric toward the war. He was angry at President Bush for sending him to Iraq without a post-war plan, and frustrated with John Kerry, whom Wyatt argues did not offer any viable alternatives. Wyatt claims that the candidates had absolutely no

understanding of the challenges American troops faced on the ground in Iraq. He grew increasingly frustrated with politicians far removed from the war, and after attending a friend's funeral one year later, he decided to become active in voicing his pro-war views.

Wyatt was discharged from the Marine Corps on June 1, 2005, and later that year, he attended the funeral of the lieutenant who had taken over his platoon in Iraq after he had been evacuated. Attending this funeral became an important step in Wyatt's turn toward political activism. He explained:

I went to his funeral down here in Virginia where I live, and they read his letters from Iraq, and they were very pro-mission, and he really believed in it. He was valedictorian at his high school and they played his valedictorian speech at the funeral. And the title of his speech was, "Never Give Up." Yeah, that really just hit me on an emotional level.... This was in Fall of '05. I was recovered, and the election had come and gone, but at this point, Congress was talking about cutting off funds for the war, and some significant figures turned against the war, John Murtha being one of them. And again, I was so disgusted with the level of discourse over the war, and the way it had been politicized. And then I went down to Ryan's funeral, and you know, I was just kind of jolted into action. And I was upset that this very small vocal group of anti-war activist veterans, were the only ones out there, and I wanted to empower the people who had been there using intellectual arguments, and intellectual solutions, not just bitching.

Wyatt continued believing that nobody was offering any viable alternatives to the war strategy in Iraq. In addition, the only group of veterans that he observed receiving media attention were anti-war veterans. Throughout his experience during the invasion, and up to this point, Wyatt believed that the war itself was a just cause, but the strategy was flawed. Thus, for Wyatt, the United States could still make up for its mistakes in Iraq, and win the war by changing its strategy.

Wyatt went on to become the founder of Vets for Freedom. His goal is to provide a pro-war veterans' perspective to the war debate. He laid the foundation for organizing hundreds of veterans into pro-war political activism. As a group, Wyatt and his fellow

pro-war Iraq veteran activists write op-ed articles, lobby Congress, and were a prominent voice in support of President George W. Bush's 2007 surge strategy. They first organized to support political candidates who voted to increase the number of troops in Iraq. Today, their goal is to increase the number of Iraq War veterans in Congress who support both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

Sociological scholarship on war examines the intersection between the state, armed forces, and society to address broad based explanations of why and how states and societies wage war. Consequently, the effect of war on participants, as well as how war compels them to politically engage the "trinity" of state, armed forces, and society are left unexamined. This chapter works from the ground up to emphasize how individuals affected by war actively engage broad political institutions responsible for war-making decisions.

In the cases of anti-war veterans such as Mike and Henry, their political activism is rooted in combat events under the social conditions of guerilla warfare that were jarring enough to trigger a major rethinking of their support for the war. For Mike, killing an Iraqi civilian, and the inhumanity of his command, broke his framing of the war as morally just. But this event is also part of an ongoing process that includes joining the military with very high expectations of being a Marine, conversations with his father about the war, and participating in abusive violence such as raiding the homes of Iraqi civilians. In other words, a series of events that failed to meet his idealistic expectations of military service set the stage for his anti-war political attitudes. Subsequently, fighting

a guerilla war in an urban environment where it is difficult to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, led to his killing of civilians, which provoked a major rethinking of his support for the war. When he returned from Iraq, he drank heavy amounts of alcohol as a way to ignore the challenge to his ideals of being a Marine and his developing anti-war attitudes. But soon after leaving the Marine Corps, he began speaking-out about his combat experiences, which he reports help him work through the guilt that he feels for what he did in Iraq. He now considers himself a pacifist and enjoys the camaraderie of working with anti-war veterans who understand his experiences and support his decision to turn against the war.

In the case of Henry, although he worked hard to hold on to his ideals of being a soldier, the helplessness that he experienced when they detained the wrong individuals and brutalized Iraqis contradicted his beliefs in being a soldier and a Christian. But he states that while in Iraq, “it was all about not getting hit by a mortar, roadside bomb, or a sniper,” and keeping him and his fellow soldiers alive. Therefore, he developed his anti-war attitudes after returning from war and reflecting upon combat events that failed to meet his idealistic expectations of military service. The development of Henry’s anti-war political attitudes and activist behaviors are based on combat events, but are also part of an ongoing and multicausal contingent series of events before, during, and after his deployment to Iraq.

In the cases of Daniel and Wyatt, they also experienced traumatic combat events, but the conditions that characterized their participation in guerilla warfare left lasting impressions that the enemy is viciously brutal and equally deadly. Thus, in contrast to Mike and Henry, combat events and participation in abusive violence reinforced their

support and justification for the war. For Daniel, he argues that the army exceeded his expectations and that he “loved” leading soldiers into combat. Each event in the military before and during his tour in Iraq reinforced his tenacity as an infantry soldier and he was praised by his superiors for his display of aggressiveness. In addition, Daniel argues that maintaining a “warrior mentality” was instrumental to his survival in combat and now informs his pro-war political attitudes and activist behaviors. Hence, in the case of Daniel, combat events solidified a pro-war mental framework that actually began when he joined the army with low idealistic expectations of military service. Daniel is now involved in pro-war political activism because it works as another avenue through which he is able to reinforce his pro-war mental framework. He believes that politicians in Washington do not understand the challenges that soldiers face on the ground in Iraq, and his goal is to bring a soldier’s perspective into the political debate.

In the case of Wyatt, his tour in Iraq was replete with disappointment because he experienced being isolated from his chain-of-command due to the fact that he was a young and inexperienced Second Lieutenant. In addition, he grew frustrated with the lack of post-war planning. Nonetheless, Wyatt cites that the overwhelmingly positive emotions that he experienced when they “liberated” Iraqis from a brutal dictator obliterated any doubt that the war was a just cause. Moreover, as an officer, he bases his arguments in support of the war in tactical and strategic terms. Thus, despite feeling “demoralized” immediately before the invasion of Iraq, his support for the war remained steady throughout his deployment because as an infantry officer he focused on tactical issues rather than fulfilling idealistic expectations of being a Marine. As a result, Wyatt remains committed to the belief in adopting the *right* military strategy to win the war.

By employing a path-dependent approach, this chapter captures how combat events, under the social conditions of guerilla warfare, work as mechanisms that both break and reinforce attitudes toward military service and war. Moreover, the stories of Iraq War veteran political activists are an example of the way in which social actors reverse top-down institutional pressures and become agents of social change who work from the bottom-up to influence institutions, such as the state, armed forces, and society. Finally, each veteran in this study entered the military influenced by a host of variables such as class, family, religion, gender, and education. These variables continue influencing their experiences before, during, and after serving in the military. But it is the meaning that they draw from their actual experiences of war that sharpens their purpose for participating in contentious politics.

## Chapter 4

### Becoming a Political Activist

*These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.*

—Thomas Paine, “The Crisis,” December 23, 1776

In the above quote, Thomas Paine praised soldiers who joined the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War and fought through the winter months as well as during the revolution’s most dire and desperate times. Iraq War veteran political activists have appropriated this quote from “The Crisis” and identify as “winter soldiers” who continue fighting in service of their country. They define their political activism as a continuation of military service during a period in which they argue Americans have grown tired and complacent toward war. Becoming a political activist is seen as part of a longer process, fuelled by the values of duty and service that compelled them to join the military in the first place, and that gave them a sense of purpose for fighting in Iraq. By identifying as winter soldiers, veterans explain that their activism is very much in line with the reasons they joined the military and the values instilled in them during their training.

In this chapter I depart from how expectations and experiences of warfare influence political attitudes to draw out veterans' motivations for participating in political activism. The previous chapters describe the trajectories of Iraq War veterans before, during, and after the war with particular emphasis on their experiences before and during the war. This chapter pays closer attention to their post-war experiences and moves beyond the development of political attitudes to the process of becoming a political activist. I briefly cover the pathways that led to their activism, but I am more concerned here with how veterans develop their identity as activists and how activism functions as a process of organizing experiences of warfare.

The cases in this chapter examine how Iraq War veterans frame their political activism and deploy their identities as veterans in contentious politics. I provide an in-depth analysis of eight Iraq War veterans and their motivation in becoming political activists. Goffman's (1974) frame analysis and Bernstein's (1997) model of identity deployment serve as analytical tools for drawing out the core reasons for veterans' participation in contentious politics. Through the analysis of these eight cases, I identify extension of military service, response to the media, experience of trauma, and definition of patriotism as four key themes that Iraq War veterans draw upon to explain why they participate in political activism.

### **Framing and Identity**

How activists frame their identities plays a significant role in all contentious politics (Friedman and McAdam 1992; Hunt et al. 1994; Robnett 1997; Rupp and Taylor 1987; Whittier 1995). I briefly describe framing and identity as theoretical tools for the

analysis of Iraq War veteran political activism. I first make use of frame analysis to explain how veterans define their political activism. Though frame analysis is already used by many scholars looking at social movements, I use framing in a more orthodox tradition (Goffman 1974). Rather than describing how a movement frames issues to resonate with the broader public and build a more robust movement (Snow and Benford 1988), I use framing to describe how individuals organize their experiences and make meaning of events. Second, I explain how veterans engage in “identity deployment” (Bernstein 1997) to establish legitimacy and credibility in both pro- and anti-war movements. Frame analysis and identity deployment provide a theoretical platform to explain the link between military experience and political activism.

In this chapter, I employ frame analysis to understand how veterans make meaning of their experiences through political activism. Frames offer veterans a “schemata of interpretation” so they have a means “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” their experiences and transform them into expressions of political activism (Goffman 1974; Gamson 1988; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Snow et al. 1986). For Iraq War veteran political activists, how they frame their activism is grounded in both the ideals that motivated them to become soldiers in the first place, and the meaning that they draw from their service in the military. In addition, their collective identity with like-minded veterans from either pro- or anti-war political organizations provides a space for them to express feelings about the war that were difficult to identify or discuss while they were serving within the institutional constraints of military life.

Frames in social movements resonate with the general public and increase the movement’s potency to establish legitimacy for activists (Snow and Benford 1992).

Frames that resonate develop a historical momentum and establish a future trajectory that can harness or challenge dominant discourses (Woehrle et al. 2008). News media is often the target of political action and is a significant mechanism through which information is developed and filtered (Gamson 1995). Similarly, in the case of pro-war veterans, their pro-war frames are accorded significant influence in mainstream media outlets and resonate with dominant pro-war discourse. In contrast, anti-war veterans' frames challenge power holders and dominant discourses. But there are moments in which anti-war activists can produce new frames and influence the cultural context in which ideas are carried forward (Woehrle et al. 2008; Tarrow 1992).

Indeed, frame analysis is useful for explaining social movement outcomes, but in this study, I find it more appropriate to make use of framing in an orthodox fashion, as a way of identifying how individuals make meaning and organize their experiences within the social world. For Iraq War veterans, recounting their experiences within pro- or anti-war frames allows them to express their views toward the war, but perhaps more importantly, to regain a sense of self, develop closure, and move on with their lives. Furthermore, framing shapes how we make sense of our experiences and are heavily influenced by social context and institutions (Loseke 1999; Nolan 2001; Rice 2002). By examining how veterans frame their political activism, I trace the patterned ways in which veterans reconcile with the multiple meanings that they have drawn from their experiences of warfare.

In the case of veteran political activists, they deploy their identities as veterans to gain public support for their political attitudes and behaviors. Mary Bernstein's (1997) model of "identity deployment" as a form of strategic collective action provides a

template for examining the conditions under which veterans celebrate or suppress different aspects of their identity. This model has been used by an array of scholars to describe how movements celebrate or suppress identities such as gay and lesbian identity (Creed and Scully 2000; Dugan 2008; Engel 2007; Hennen 2004; Rupp and Taylor 2003), gender identity (Gilmore and Kaminski 2007), racial identity (Einwohner 2006), community identity (Gotham 1999), or professional identities (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000; Pozner and Rao 2006; Roa et al. 2003), in order to influence dominant culture, achieve policy reforms, or build community. I use the identity deployment model to explain the ways in which veterans draw on their military service to legitimize their respective arguments about war.

Bernstein's (1997) model of identity deployment argues that there are three distinct analytic levels of the role of identity in social movements. The first level is "identity for empowerment," referring to the way in which political action is feasible when there is a shared "collective identity" with a broad community (Morris 1992). A sense of group identity is necessary in order to translate individual interests into collective action. The second level is when identity is the goal of collective action, either in terms of challenging stigmatization, deconstructing categories, or gaining acceptance (Calhoun 1994). The third and final level is when identity is expressed as a political strategy. Bernstein (1997) defines this third analytic level as "identity deployment," in which "the terrain of conflict becomes the individual person so that the values, categories, and practices of individuals become subject to debate" (537). In a similar fashion, in my fieldwork I have observed both pro- and anti-war veterans deploy their veteran identities through activism to justify their pro- or anti-war frames, and to

legitimize their political position in debates about the war. But in addition, deploying their veteran identity works as a form of healing from their traumatic combat experiences and opens a space for regaining a sense of self.

### *Case Selection*

The cases below are divided into four analytical themes that are representative of veterans' motivations for becoming political activists. The first is political activism as an extension of military service. The second theme highlights the relationship between political activism and the media. I examine how media reports of Iraq contradict veterans' experiences on the ground, drawing them into political activism as a means to tell the "truth" about what is happening in Iraq. Political activism as a mechanism for working through issues of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the third theme. I explain how political activism helps veterans heal from their psychological wounds and how collective solidarity with like-minded veterans is important for their reintegration into civilian society. Fourth, I compare the ways in which veterans' locate and define their political activism in terms of patriotism. While some pro-war veterans describe dissention during wartime as destroying the fabric of American society, others explain that dissent is the highest form of patriotism. Each theme explains the motivations behind the escalation from political attitudes to participation in contentious politics.

### **Extension of Service to Country**

Paul and Javier are leaders within respective pro- and anti-war veteran organizations. Paul joined Vets for Freedom in 2007 after his already extensive

involvement in political activism. Working on his own, he was writing op-ed pieces, contacting Congressmen, and participating in various other media outlets arguing for continued support for the war. He continues to serve as a Captain in the National Guard and was preparing for a second deployment when I interviewed him in November 2009. In contrast, Javier joined Iraq Veterans Against the war after submitting his application for conscientious objection.<sup>14</sup> He served fourteen years in the Army and describes his political activism as “patriotic” and an extension of service as a soldier. By invoking patriotic duty and service, both Paul and Javier connect the ideals and principles that led them to become soldiers to their political activism as veterans.

*Paul (Pro-war Veteran)*

Paul is the president of Vets for Freedom and currently serves as an infantry Captain in the Army National Guard. He is originally from Minnesota and grew up in a middle class family. Neither of his parents served in the military, but he insists that they instilled in him a strong sense of patriotism and love for the country. He remembers attending veteran parades as a child and developing an admiration for military service. Paul has now served in the Army National Guard for six years and was preparing for his second deployment, this time to Afghanistan, when I interviewed him.

Paul joined the National Guard in 2003 after graduating from Princeton University. He claims that after graduation he felt a desire to “give back” to his country

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, a conscientious objector is a person who refuses to perform military service on the basis of thought, conscience, or religion. In the U.S. Armed Forces, Department of Defense directive 1300.6 (4.1), administrative actions are at the discretion of the military department concerned.

because of the many opportunities available to him as an American. When I asked him why he joined the military after graduating from Princeton, he stated:

I knew that if I didn't put the uniform on I would look back someday and regret it. That I will look back and say, "what have I done for the freedom that I have?" I grew up in such a wonderful family, with such loving parents, in such a great community, with great friends, every opportunity that anyone could ever have. Looking around at all that and saying, "man am I lucky!" Man, am I fortunate to have grown up and have all these opportunities and access to incredible people! Am I just going to benefit from that? Or, am I going to give back? I just didn't want to look back at my life and say, "yeah, what a great life I got. But what did I ever do for my country?" And because like I said, my parents weren't necessarily from a military family; they weren't super-political. But they instilled in me a deep self-appreciation for this country.

Paul maintains that he was fortunate to have terrific military leaders who taught him to look beyond negative military experiences and concentrate on developing the skills that he would one day need on the battlefield.

In 2005 Paul volunteered to deploy to Iraq and serve as a platoon leader with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. During this period, politicians and the American public were questioning the purpose of the war and discussing the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. But Paul advocated for the war and believed that it was a just cause.

Therefore, he took advantage of the opportunity to deploy to Iraq because he supported the war and felt a responsibility to fight in it. Paul was assigned to lead a platoon in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade and for several weeks, he trained for a situation of total warfare, rather than one of fighting a counter-insurgency. Paul explained:

I went with the 3rd brigade in the 101<sup>st</sup>, which was commanded by Colonel Michael Steel, he was featured in Black Hawk Down, he is a ranger, company commander in that movie; very hard-charging guy. And all of our preparation was kinetic; it was all offensive operations kicking down doors, throwing grenades, putting in ambushes, and that's what we trained on. And that's what our guys talked about, we didn't do any counter-insurgency training, we didn't do

any language training, we didn't do any cultural training; in his mind we were going into total war.

Paul quickly found that as an officer, he was more involved in developing rapport with Iraqi leaders to begin reconstruction projects. Nonetheless, his unit was attacked several times by rocket propelled grenades, roadside bombs, and small arms fire. He describes the work that he was doing in Iraq as extremely difficult, but highly rewarding at the same time.

Paul's work with Iraqi leaders gave him tremendous faith that the war was winnable if Americans committed the resources to help Iraqi leaders fight Al-Qaeda and move forward with rebuilding the country. He observed several Iraqi leaders risk their own lives and the lives of their families to work with Americans to establish political, economic, and civil institutions. For example, Paul described working with an Iraqi leader in the city of Samarra who gave him "a lot of hope" for the war. He explained:

There is a city council president in Samarra. His name is Shiekh Assad Ali, who was a very good friend of mine and our team. And he put his life in the line; his family's life on the line. Two of his sons were hit with IEDs, and a number of his bodyguards were killed, his house was bombed, hit by RPGs, and sniper fire. His house was attacked almost every night. Al-Qaeda was trying to impose some level of civil authority, and he was at many times a man standing alone. And we partnered with him, and worked with him as best as we could, to keep him alive, and to give him an opportunity to instill leadership.

Paul maintains that these incidents gave him "great faith" that there were leaders throughout Iraq also standing against the insurgency. He felt that if Americans provided these leaders with support, and the military implemented the right strategy, that Iraqis would eventually turn against insurgents. He continued to work with Iraqi leaders throughout his tour and described several other incidents where he watched Iraqis put their lives in great risk to work with Americans. Paul believes that if he had not seen

these examples of “courage” and had only experienced being constantly attacked instead, then he may have returned with different views toward the war.

Paul returned from Iraq in 2006 and worked at an investment bank in New York before becoming involved in political activism. Within three days after returning from Iraq, he was out of active duty and back into the reserves serving one weekend per month. Although he had returned to his very comfortable life in Manhattan, his only desire was to return to Iraq. During the war, he strongly believed in the purpose of his mission and, thus, he had difficulty readjusting to New York where he felt that “everybody’s pretending like there isn’t even a war going on.” Paul closely followed news coverage of the war in order to remain connected to events taking place on the ground in Iraq. However, in his view, military strategy was being determined by politicians responding to media coverage, rather than by soldiers on the ground. Moreover, Paul felt the general public gradually turning against the war. He argues that the war is much more complex than reported in the media and is crucially missing a soldiers’ perspective. Having studied politics while at Princeton, he understands the importance of public opinion.

In 2007, President George W. Bush was working to gather political support for “the surge,” increasing the number of troops in Iraq by 20,000. Paul began to see how he could continue to fight off of the battlefield for his beliefs in the war. He felt that soldiers were doing an outstanding job in Iraq and that it was now his responsibility to influence public opinion in support of the war. Paul worked with Vets for Freedom to organize an event in Washington called “Vets on the Hill,” where hundreds of veterans across the country came to lobby Congressmen in support President Bush’s 2007 surge plan.

I interviewed Paul in November 2009, shortly after Vets for Freedom sponsored a second “Vets on the Hill” event in Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress in support of the war in Afghanistan. While Paul is active in politics, he also continues to serve as an officer in the National Guard and is in Afghanistan at the time of this writing. When I asked Paul why he became involved in political activism, he replied:

I’m not doing this for political reasons; I’m not doing this for political points; I’m not doing it for a political party. I’m doing it for the United States of America; I’m doing it for the United States military; I’m doing it for all the men that we lost, and for all those who are still serving. So you may call it political activism, issue advocacy, or whatever you want to call it, but I think it is a logical extension of service on the battlefield... there’s no better training for future public servants than the military.

For Paul, his activism is “a logical extension of service” and when he returned from Iraq, he discovered a new battlefield. His political activism is rooted in the same love for his country that initially compelled him to join the military. Paul, along with many veterans interviewed for this study, identify their political activism as an extension of service. Regardless of support or opposition, they frame their activism in terms of the same passion for service to country that compelled them to initially join the military. They argue that they have a moral obligation and duty to voice their views about the war publically, and to speak out about events on the ground that are rarely covered in the media. But their expectations and experiences of the war differ, as well as their interpretations of events. Therefore, how they express their activism as continued service is also framed differently. For some veterans, continuing to serve their country means fighting against what they believe is an illegal and immoral war.

*Javier (Anti-war Veteran)*

Javier left the army as a conscientious objector after fourteen years of service. He was raised in New York's south Bronx, and describes his neighborhood during the 1980s as plagued with drugs and violence. In addition, Javier describes many instances of domestic violence in his household. His father is a Vietnam veteran who suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and self-medicates with alcohol and marijuana. When Javier was recruited into the Army, his mother was absolutely opposed to him joining. However, Javier was a very impressionable young man who was inspired by an array of films during the Cold War that glorified militarism. When he became a soldier, he returned to his neighborhood as a "hero." He described how his aunts would tell their children that they needed to be more like their cousin Javier, who made something of his life. Javier thrived in the Army and planned to serve twenty years and retire. But when the United States invaded Iraq, he was skeptical of the Bush administration's justification for war.

Javier was in New York during 9/11 and felt uncomfortable with the pro-war rhetoric throughout the country in its aftermath. He describes New York as "not the kind of place you would associate with rampant patriotism"; most people wanted to know why 9/11 took place, rather than focusing on revenge. During this time, Javier was a reservist attending graduate school at the City University of New York, which also influenced his questioning of 9/11. Nonetheless, he still considered himself a "gung-ho" soldier during this period, and believed that going to war with Afghanistan was a just cause. But Javier grew increasingly skeptical of war as the Bush administration continued to argue for the invasion of Iraq.

Two years into the Iraq war, a series of events finally drove Javier to turn against the war and apply for conscientious objection. As we sat on a sofa at the 2009 annual Iraq Veterans Against the War convention in Maryland, he described why he became a conscientious objector. He explained:

It wasn't an immediate thing for me; it was a pretty long process, and I can list off a number of different kind of points that stand out in my mind during the Iraq War that was mounting my frustration, my anger, my disgust for what was happening over there. Everything from Abu Ghraib to Fallujah the first time; Fallujah the second time, and things that just happened between 9/11 and December 2004 that really turned my thinking around about my relationship with the military and what was happening in Iraq.

Javier went on to explain that these events and in particular the photos from Abu Ghraib made him begin to identify more with Iraqis than with the military. He explained, "I'm looking at these Iraqi men's bodies, and they look just like mine." Javier began to question his own role in the war and became critical of his military service. Because Javier had spent fourteen years in the Army, and was now a Staff Sergeant, turning against the war was a difficult process for him to reconcile with his identity.

He finally came to the conclusion that his duty as a soldier was to oppose the war in Iraq. Javier had been sent to senior non-commissioned officer training because of his promotion to Staff Sergeant in the Army. One day the class read a website about the Mei Lai massacre in Vietnam. The exercise was to test how non-commissioned officers could prevent soldiers from committing war crimes on the battlefield. Javier's colleagues argued that non-commissioned officers should look for changes in their soldier's behavior and counsel them. But Javier raised his hand and replied:

"Well, you know, the real problem here is war itself, because it requires us to dehumanize the enemy, and that's why the soldiers were able to do what they did in Mei Lai. Right now overseas were calling people ragheads and haji's and all

that other stuff. And so we really need to look at that problem.” And I didn’t get a very good reaction from the other sergeants.

When Javier returned from his training, he realized that his thinking had changed and he began research on becoming a conscientious objector. Javier contacted veteran anti-war organizations, and learned to reframe his definitions of patriotism and service. In January 2007 Javier submitted his application for conscientious objection and in May of the same year was honorably discharged from the Army.

While Javier was going through the process of becoming a conscientious objector, he was also becoming active in Iraq Veterans Against the War. He participated in his first anti-war demonstration and claims that becoming a political activist was “a big step” for him, as previously he had not even been registered to vote. He soon embraced the camaraderie associated with anti-war veterans who shared similar experiences.

Anti-war veterans such as Javier often describe themselves as victims of a government and presidential administration who sent them to fight an “unjust war” under false pretenses. In addition, they argue that their job as soldiers is to disobey unlawful orders. Because the Iraq war was waged in contravention of the United Nations Security Council, and preemptive attack was largely based on the premise that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that did not, ultimately, exist, these veterans argue that the Iraq war itself is unlawful and, therefore, it is their duty to be in opposition. For example, toward the end of our interview, Javier elaborated on how his anti-war activism is in line with his duty as a soldier. He explained:

I didn’t see what I was doing in protesting as being outside of who I was, as somebody identified as a soldier. It was almost like this is the honorable thing to do, and going to Iraq is the dishonorable thing to do. Because I took my service seriously, I was pretty aware of the fact that soldiers can and should disobey

illegal orders. And I took that pretty seriously, and I saw Iraq as just that: they're sending us in there for false reasons. And once they didn't find weapons of mass destruction, I was just like, "this is fucked up beyond recognition...." So I just can't participate in this thing.... A real patriot is gonna ask questions; they're gonna challenge authority. And so I didn't see them as being mutually exclusive, in fact, I was doing what I was supposed to be doing.

Extension of service provides a more fluid transition from soldier to political activist for many of the anti-war veterans in this study. Moreover, by continuing to view themselves as patriots they reestablish their sense of identity as soldiers. In other words, anti-war veterans frame their activism as continuing to fight for the rights and freedoms they were trained to protect. This reframing also builds camaraderie and solidarity among anti-war veterans. Moreover, extension of service provides a cognitive and social space for both anti- *and* pro-war veterans to argue that their position toward the war is morally just.

### **Political Activism and the Media**

Derrick and Jason began their respective processes toward participating in political activism through social networking sites because they believed that their experiences on the ground contradicted reports from mainstream media.<sup>15</sup> Derrick regularly blogged about the progress that American soldiers were making in their training of new Iraqi security forces and how Iraq was becoming increasingly stable. On the other hand, Jason blogged about the military's destructive behavior in Iraq, and how America's presence was fueling violence. Derrick and Jason began blogging in Iraq because they

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<sup>15</sup> As Ender (2009) points out, service members' access to the internet makes this war much different from previous wars by eroding the distance and distinctiveness of home versus the war front.

felt compelled to report the “truth” of events on the ground. When they returned from Iraq, Derrick joined Vets for Freedom while Jason joined Iraq Veterans Against the War.

*Derrick (Pro-war Veteran)*

Derrick is a combat veteran who deployed to Iraq in March 2006 with the Minnesota National Guard. He joined the National Guard in 1992 at the age of twenty. He describes himself as a “spoiled teenager” raised in an upper-middle class family along the suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota. When I interviewed Derrick in October 2009, he amusingly recalls having absolutely no interest in the military and being the kind of teenager that would hang up on military recruiters. But two years after graduating high school, he joined the National Guard for the college money and because he felt that he needed “stability and discipline” in his life.

When the September 11, 2001 attacks happened, Derrick had been serving in the National Guard for nine years and was a non-commissioned officer. He describes his initial years of military service as highly satisfying, and as meeting his expectations in terms of training and discipline. He is now a Staff Sergeant in an infantry unit and explained to me his initial positive reaction to the Army when he joined in 1992. Derrick states:

I very much enjoyed it. I mean, I used to tell people that one weekend per month I would go out in the woods and play soldier, and we’d run around, train, and have battles, and they paid me for it. It was very much something that I enjoyed.

Derrick’s positive experiences in the military, along with financial incentives, influenced his decision to remain in the National Guard beyond his initial six-year contract. Then, after September 11, 2001, Derrick felt greater purpose in serving his country during a

time of crisis. In 2003, his unit deployed to Kosovo on a peacekeeping mission, and soon after returning, they began preparing for redeployment to Iraq.

During their pre-deployment training, Derrick's unit closely followed news coverage from Iraq, which caused them to anticipate intense fighting against insurgents. Derrick explained that there was a tremendous level of anxiety throughout his unit as they trained for their mission. This was due in part to their active attention to news media coverage, which depicted Iraq erupting in violence. But when they arrived, Derrick states that the violence was not as widespread as characterized in the news. He explained:

We spent six months in deployment training for Iraq, and we were glued to the TV watching what was going on. And the news media made Iraq turn out to be complete chaos and bombs and bullets everywhere. And once we go into the country, we saw that it was not nearly what was being reported on TV.

Derrick admits that during the initial phase of his deployment, his unit did experience multiple IED attacks, and providing convoy security proved to be "very intense."

However, he also explains that during his one-year tour in Iraq, IED attacks dropped from three to five daily to several weeks without attacks. In addition, he describes most convoy missions as generally "boring" with brief moments of intensity. After a few months in Iraq, his unit entered a rhythm of three-day missions, followed by periods of rest. Throughout our interview, Derrick repeatedly stressed the disjuncture between media reports and his experiences on the ground:

It was very surrealistic, there were moments when we would be sitting in the chow hall in Iraq, and hear on the nightly news about our portion of Iraq, and of all this stuff that had been going on throughout the day, and we were looking at it thinking that it wasn't generally as bad as what they said on the news. The public information that was being reported from Iraq wasn't what I was seeing when I was there on the ground. That more than anything was what got me speaking out, and trying to set the record straight.

Derrick's frustration with the media compelled him to begin blogging about his experiences on the ground in Iraq. Derrick argues that reporters wrote about the war from Baghdad's Green Zone and relied on secondhand information for their stories, which led to exaggerated and inaccurate reporting.

The morale in Derrick's unit was volatile throughout his sixteen-month deployment to Iraq. Tremendous anxiety developed during their pre-deployment training, and they expected Iraq to be horrific. But when they returned from their initial missions without any injuries, they were euphoric for having survived. Nonetheless, convoy security also became monotonous over the next few months, boredom set in, and soldiers grew weary of being in Iraq. Finally, when his unit was extended one-hundred twenty additional days, Derrick describes their morale as "heading into the toilet." They went through a two-week period where yelling and fighting between soldiers was rampant. But near the end of his deployment troop morale improved once more. Despite participating in several hundred security convoys, his unit did not lose a single soldier throughout their sixteen-month deployment. And although morale ebbed and flowed, Derrick argues that most soldiers supported the mission and were proud of their work.

For example, five months into Derrick's deployment to Iraq, his unit began training and working with Iraqi Army police units. He describes this experience as having a very positive impact on him and his soldiers because of the courage displayed by American-trained Iraqi forces. The willingness of Iraqis to put themselves in extreme danger to secure their country convinced Derrick that the war was winnable. He explained:

We worked with the Iraqi police at Al Anbar province. I found it amazing that the U.S. Army didn't allow me to go outside the wire without full body armor, inside an armored vehicle, and I had to have three other vehicles with me. Now that was the bare minimum to go outside the wire. But when the Iraqis went out, they might have an old cast-off police vest, and if they had a helmet they were lucky; and they went out with a twenty year old AK 47. So, in my mind, they were being much more courageous than we were because they were going out risking the same IEDs with much less in the way of protection. We would have been considered crazy to go outside the wire with the equipment that they had. But that was really an interesting point because it showed me that: a) the war was winnable if we could just hang on long enough to get these guys trained up. And b) it just dispelled the myth of Iraqis being lazy, or not caring about their country. They were putting their lives on the line to keep their country together.

Derrick's impression of Iraqis was that they welcomed a U.S. presence and were eager to stabilize the country. The process of building a more secure Iraq was evidenced daily as Iraqi forces became proficient. For Derrick, his experiences on the ground were much more positive than what he had imagined. He could see that winning the war was possible, and even very likely if the U.S. maintained a significant presence long enough to train the new Iraqi police force fully.

The disjuncture between negative mainstream media reports and positive experiences on the ground led Derrick to begin using social media networks to voice his opinions of the war. During his deployment, in January 2007, Congress debated President George W. Bush's surge strategy. Derrick believed that negative media reports aroused anti-war sentiments in Congress and among the American public. As a result, Derrick began blogging about his positive experiences in Iraq and why Congress should support the 2007 surge. He explained:

The media did not want to talk about winning in Iraq. That's why I kind of found my voice online. Of course, that's the only way you could really get your voice heard while you're in Iraq. It felt good to be speaking and saying, "hey, I am here in Iraq and not only are we winning, but what you're seeing on the nightly news when they report from Iraq isn't what I'm seeing here on the ground."

Derrick states that his blog was being read extensively by people back in the U.S. who wanted to learn more about what was happening on the ground in Iraq. Throughout our interview, he maintained that the news did not want to report on the positive aspects of the war because negative events such as roadside bombings, attacks, and fighting between Sunni's and Shiites were much more attractive to report on. Derrick insists that during the first two weeks of the 2007 surge, the media was very active in reporting events taking place on the ground. However, as violence receded, so did reporting from Iraq because reporters were insistent on covering negative events.

When Derrick returned to the U.S. in July 2007, he described how people were amazed that he had survived. He returned believing that they were very close to winning the war, but at home, he heard repeated discussions about how the military was losing.

Derrick explained:

It seemed to me like everybody should understand that we were finally winning the war, and when I got home, a lot of people thought that we were still losing. I'd mention that I just got back from Iraq and most people would say, "Thank you for serving." And then people would launch into, "it's miracle that you're still alive because everybody gets killed over there, and we're not going to win that war," and it was very strange; it felt like you were at a football game where your team just won and then walking out of the stadium and everybody asking you how badly your team lost.

Derrick argues that negative media reporting falsely led the American public to believe that the U.S. was losing the war. Derrick already believed media coverage was inaccurate, but when he returned from the war, he learned the extent to which it affected public opinion. When he returned home, he was contacted by the pro-war organization Vets for Freedom, which asked him to become a state captain in Minnesota. Derrick

soon began speaking at events about his experiences in Iraq and why the American public should continue to support the war.

Derrick explained that when he became politically active, it was “defensive in nature.” He argues that anti-war veterans were very vocal in speaking-out against the war and that the media gave them “moral credibility.” He felt that the media’s overall message was that we could not win the war and that it was morally wrong. Derrick completely disagreed with these arguments, and argued that, in fact, based on his experience, the war was close to being won. In order to voice his views, he went on speaking engagements with Vets for Freedom, lobbied Congress, and became active in organizing veterans throughout the state of Minnesota. Derrick is now highly involved in politics and argues that his participation is a “direct result of having been to Iraq.” Upon returning to the U.S., he became politically active in pro-war events to shed light on the more positive aspects of the war not reported in the media.

Derrick was not alone in his frustration with media reporting on Iraq. Many veterans I interviewed brought up this issue, but for some, the effect was the complete opposite, motivating them to become anti-war political activists.

*Jason (Anti-war Veteran)*

I interviewed Jason at an Irish pub in downtown Denver, Colorado. He now considers himself an anarchist and was completely dressed in black when we met. He also displays pride in his Irish heritage through the tattoos on his body and long red hair and beard. As we sat at a table in his favorite pub, he rolled tobacco in a cigarette paper and described to me how he turned from an army infantry soldier to an anarchist. Jason

is originally from Cortez, Colorado and moved often throughout his childhood due to his father's work in construction. When Jason was in high school, his father told him that he did not have the money to pay Jason's college tuition. After graduation, Jason worked in construction with his father and later at Home Depot. He also enrolled in a few college courses at the local community college, but soon dropped all of his classes and quit his job. Jason then made the decision to join the army because he was not prepared for college and had limited work opportunities.

Jason entered the army on October 1, 2001 soon after the September 11 attacks. His intentions were to be assigned to a U.S. military base in Germany, and to use the GI Bill to pay for his education. His army recruiter told him that the army was just like having a regular job, but with higher quality benefits. When I asked Jason what his expectations of the army were, he explained:

My impressions of the military before I went in were that it was a good opportunity to pay for school, to see the world. I always thought that the Marine Corps was the branch of the military that was really gung-ho and macho, and I figured that I wasn't going to be a part of that. I will be in the Army and be in like this respectful service, you know, but I did kind of fall for the heroism, what soldiers did in WWII and what the army was known for, the 101<sup>st</sup> was known for, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division was known for. There was a movie made about it. So I felt like, I always grew up around guns, and kind of liked that, so I thought it might be a fun way to spend three years, you know. Going to the rifle range, shooting your rifle, and hanging out with the guys, and that was my impression of it.

Jason adapted well to being a soldier and came to embrace a sense of pride in the army and, more specifically, in his unit. When he completed basic training, he was assigned to an infantry unit in Germany. Up to this point, being in the army had worked well for Jason. He was stationed in Germany and was saving money for college.

Similar to Derrick's experience above, Jason's unit was sent on a peacekeeping mission to Kosovo in 2003, where they served as a police force in support of NATO. Since his service in the army was scheduled to end in 2004, he thought that he would be discharged from the military before his unit would be called up for another deployment. However, in February 2004 he was stop-lossed<sup>16</sup> and his unit was sent to Iraq. Arriving to Iraq and operating in a Muslim society was not a culture shock for Jason's unit because they had already worked with Albanian Muslims in Kosovo. However, after their third week in Iraq, they experienced extremely high levels of combat. He reports that once they began being attacked by the insurgency, the morale of his unit became very poor. They had been told by their military commanders and the Bush administration that they were there to help free the Iraqi people and to bring them democracy. Furthermore, Jason's unit thought that they would be greeted as liberators by the Iraqis. However, after constantly being attacked, Jason described that the morale of his unit shifted toward bitterness, anger, and frustration, which was then unleashed upon Iraqi civilians. Jason stated:

The morale of our entire company was pretty poor. My peers were very angry for having to be there. They didn't want to be there, they wanted to be at home, they didn't want anything to do with Iraq, they didn't like the heat; they didn't like the dust. They didn't like the living quarters, they did not like getting attacked all the time. But their frustration was a little different than mine. Their anger, they took their anger out on the Iraqis. They hated the Iraqis. They kind of bought into the propaganda of it, that the Bush administration was saying that we came to give

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<sup>16</sup> Stop-loss is the involuntary extension of a service member's active duty service. Under the enlistment contract, service members agree to serve two or four active duty years, and a total of eight active and inactive duty years during which they can be recalled. The policy was created by Congress after the Vietnam War, Title 10, United States Code, Section 12305(a), which states: "...the president may suspend any provision of law relating to promotion, retirement, or separation applicable to any member of the armed forces who the President determines is essential to the National Security of the United States."

them democracy.<sup>17</sup> We came to free them. And they were really angry that we left our homes to come out to this God awful hell. And then, you attack us? We are here to help you, and you try to kill us? And so, there was a lot of anger, and they despised the Iraqis.

Many of the soldiers in Jason's unit had expected to be discharged from the army after their deployment to Kosovo, but experienced being stop-lossed. At the same time, the constant attacks from insurgents in complex urban environments, along with the brutal heat of the Iraqi desert added to their affliction. As a result, Jason's unit responded with intense negative emotions like anger and frustration, which led to abusive violence toward Iraqi civilians. Jason also states that his senior commanders permitted a certain level of hatred to build against the Iraqi people.

Soon after Jason arrived in Iraq, he began sending e-mails to friends back in the United States and to his brother, a student at Colorado State University, about his negative experiences on the ground. Consequently, his brother and friends back home sent him anti-war literature, which led him to question the blaming of the Iraqi people, and to become critical instead of the Bush administration and the U.S. military. At the same time, Jason recalls that other soldiers in his unit were also becoming critical of the Bush administration and the war, albeit in a more rudimentary way. He explained:

Once we got there and saw what we were doing, they were like fuck this shit, this is all about the oil. You know, fuck the oil, I'd rather go home and ride a bicycle than have to deal with this shit. That was like a very common sentiment. And you could see that the soldiers themselves would write that with their sharpies. You know, where basically freedom of dissent is only limited to a bathroom stall, you'd see like "Fuck Bush" and you would see "Fuck Rumsfeld." You would see

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<sup>17</sup> In an interview on NBC's *Meet the Press*, Vice President Dick Cheney announced: "I think things have gotten so bad inside Iraq, from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators," transcript for March 16, 2003, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/cheneymeetthepress.htm> (accessed July 10, 2011).

"Fuck this war" and you would see "Operation Iraqi Liberation," and emphasize O.I.L. – oil.

Throughout his tour in Iraq, Jason's brother continued to send him anti-war literature, which influenced Jason's growing empathy for the Iraqi people.

As Jason sipped on a pint of Guinness beer, he described to me one of many events where he witnessed complete disregard for Iraqis. He observed the following incident when his unit was on the side of the road waiting for another military convoy to pass:

There was a military convoy passing us. And there was an Iraqi that got in the other lane to pass the convoy which is very common. But as he started to pass, there was a rear gunner on this convoy who shot at him. The bullet went through the windshield and missed his head by a few inches, and the bullet hole in the back seat was close to where his head was at. And so, he pulled over and this convoy just kept going. I remember the gunner in the back just like flipped him off, you know. And they just kept on going and this guy was scared to death. And we went to talk to him and he spoke perfectly good English; he was an Iraqi doctor, and he was going to provide assistance in a delivery.

Jason maintains that the military did this all of the time and that it was openly accepted by his chain of command. It was accepted because soldiers were terrified of an Iraqi driving next to them detonating a car bomb.

Jason argues that the soldiers in his unit were also frustrated with the corruption they observed taking place. He explains that his unit was constantly sent out to escort Halliburton convoys carrying empty containers across Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad. Soldiers were angered that they were putting their lives on the line to protect empty containers. Halliburton was paid by the government based on the number of convoys and not actual goods delivered, and soldiers reacted to this with increasing frustration, anger, and cynicism toward the war.

The little hope Jason had that there might be some sense of dignity to his participation in the military was finally shattered when his unit responded to a car bombing in downtown Baghdad. Jason described:

We responded to a car bomb that had detonated outside of a Donut Shop, it was a coffee shop where these Iraqi police officers frequented and it was across the street from the Iraqi police station downtown. The car bomb rolled in and detonated and killed like eighty civilians. It was all over CNN, and the Iraqi fire department came and hosed blood and body parts down the gutters, and seeing old ladies like, bleeding out of their head trying to get help. And I was looking down on the ground from my gunners turret and seeing like a little baby's foot, and like a toddler's foot and a little pink toddler's sandal, you know. I'm thinking to myself, so, this is the terrorist that we came to kill. These are the terrorist that we came to root out. And these are the people that are harboring these weapons of mass destruction, like this little 2-year-old. I mean there's no right to this. The gains are not going to be worth what it costs. Especially when everything... like I said, all the political reasons for being there, and all that propaganda, and the reasons as to why we were there were so crazy, you know.

Jason cites this event as pivotal in finally turning him against the war. He soon began blogging about his experiences in Iraq on anti-war websites because he felt that mainstream news covered only the positive aspects of the war. Jason felt that the American public was completely uninformed about how the U.S. military treated the Iraqi people. He went on to describe how blogging about the "truth" of what was taking place on the ground in Iraq helped to sharpen his criticism of the war. Jason explained:

Nothing was what it seemed. Nothing is what the American public thought we were doing. And I really learned that in the act of war, our military, our army was at times so grossly negligent, so grossly incompetent, so not professional. The American public has this view, based on the commercials they see, and based on all the hype around Veterans Day, and Memorial Day, and the interviews with brave soldiers doing good things in Iraq. The American public thinks that we are this professional fighting force that never does anything wrong, and doesn't harbor ill feelings to the people we are trying to help. And in reality, we're calling them Haji and we're shooting at them and we're working with known insurgents. And we are paying them off and it's... the corruption is disgusting. It was like, on an everyday level too. Even a ground foot soldier like me would see it. And then you go back to the dining facility and watch it on CNN, and it's like two

different worlds, especially FOX news. It's like there is this perfect military and you know that you are part of a war machine that its whole purpose is destruction.

The disjuncture between reports from major news networks of America bringing freedom and democracy to Iraqis, and witnessing America's destructive presence thrust Jason into anti-war political activism while in Iraq. From Iraq, he began contacting Iraq Veterans Against the War, blogging on anti-war websites, and reading anti-war literature mailed to him by his brother.

When Jason returned from Iraq in 2005, he grew angry with the lack of critical discourse in the media about the war. He became belligerent toward all forms of authority and even toward his family. Jason described to me his frustration with the American public because of their apathy toward the war. He thought that when he returned to the U.S. that there would at least be a debate taking place about the war. But when he returned, it seemed that no one cared about the war, or about his experiences. He gave me an example of how he released his anger when he returned from Iraq:

I really felt the society was so apathetic and so stupid to allow this to happen; to allow this war to go on, when it was so wrong. It was so... right in the headlines it was so wrong. And yet nobody cared. And I think coming back home, dealing with the apathy was very hard. That's what made me most mad. Seeing these goddamn SUV's with these yellow ribbons saying "support the troops!" I would go out in parking lots and steal them and throw them away because I was that mad you know. It took about a couple of years after getting out of the military before I finally, you know, I was married and having my wife there to help tone me down a little bit and keep me a little bit more under control. So, that helped a lot. Like – yeah, I was just very angry. A lot of people didn't understand what I had gone through.

Jason reports that after he “toned down,” he channeled his anger and frustration toward anti-war political activism. He became increasingly involved in Iraq Veterans Against the War and traveled throughout the country speaking-out against the war.

After Jason was finally able to reflect clearly on the corruption and violence that he witnessed in Iraq, he completely turned against the government and became an anarchist. He laughed as he explained to me how fellow anarchists are astonished when they learn that he was in the army. But Jason tells them that it is precisely his military experiences during war that shaped his anti-government views.

For Jason, and also for Derrick, the contradiction between media reports and experiences on the ground compelled them to blog about their experiences and views of the war while in Iraq. Upon returning to the U.S., they joined veteran political organizations that supported the pro- or anti-war political attitudes and behaviors they developed as a result of their military experiences. Furthermore, they both argue that their political activism is in direct opposition to mainstream media reports that fail to cover the “ground truth” of the war.

### **Political Activism and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Craig and Eric suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Political activism works as a mechanism through which they process their symptoms and manage their reintegration into civilian society. Craig is a pro-war veteran who participated in the initial invasion of Iraq. He developed PTSD as a result of experiencing numerous combat events and searching dead bodies to gather intelligence. His frustration toward politicians who oppose the war led him to blog about his pro-war opinions and become an activist. By the same token, Eric is an anti-war veteran who deployed to Iraq in 2006. He also experienced combat, and the constant stress of working in a combat environment for several months resulted in PTSD. Eric participates in anti-war protests and speak-

outs throughout the Los Angeles area. He believes that his activism and camaraderie with anti-war veterans help him recover from the trauma he experienced in Iraq. Both Craig and Eric turned toward political activism because of their respective pro- or anti-war political attitudes, but also to help work through issues of PTSD and draw meaning from their experiences of warfare.

*Craig (Pro-war Veteran)*

Craig currently serves in Army Intelligence and resides in Huntsville, Alabama, where he is the state captain for Vets for Freedom. His father is a thirty-two year Navy veteran and Craig spent much of his childhood living on military bases in Jacksonville, Florida, and in Japan. As a young man, Craig rebelled against his father and all forms of authority. He describes himself as a “headbanger,” who was more interested in coloring his hair differently each week than in thinking about his future. During high school, he worked at Taco Bell and became engaged to his high school sweetheart. Upon graduation, he was approached by army recruiters, but at the time, he did not want anything to do with the military. But when they offered him a linguist position due to his proficiency in Japanese, he felt that it was a great opportunity to settle down and have a family.

I interviewed Craig in 2009, six years after he returned from fighting in Iraq. Due to the fact that he had “authority issues” as a young man, he anticipated his military experience to be “terrible.” However, military life turned out to be better than expected, and according to Craig, “everything was clicking” during his initial years in the army. Within four years, he was promoted to Staff Sergeant, and throughout the 1990s,

military life functioned well for Craig. In September 2002 his unit deployed to Kuwait for Operation Enduring Freedom.

In March 2003 Craig was part of the initial invasion of Iraq. The war in Afghanistan already made him dubious about fighting two wars, until his experiences during the invasion of Iraq solidified his support. He described the first two days of the invasion as “boring,” as they drove across the Iraqi desert to the city of Samawah. But upon arriving to Samawah, they immediately engaged in combat operations against the Iraqi regular army, Fedayeen, and Saddam’s Republican Guards. Daily combat actions continued for three weeks, and fighting against Saddam Hussein’s forces convinced Craig that removing Saddam from power, and bringing freedom to Iraq was a just cause. Craig explained:

The battle of Samawah is when I immediately changed my thoughts about going into Iraq and recognized that we’re doing the right thing. And I say that from talking to these guys who are farmers, store-owners, people who’ve never fought in combat at all, and we’re slaughtering them. And because Saddam’s Fedayeen had taken their families, their daughters, their sons, their wives, and at gun-point said you will fight the Americans, or we will kill your family. And I recognized at that point, what kind of person, what kind of menace, what kind of monster we are fighting against. And any doubt I had of tactics, or politics, or anything like that was erased from my mind.

Craig went on to describe other interactions and events that influenced his support for the war. He met farmers who suffered from malnutrition and had not harvested their crops because they were waiting for Saddam Hussein to give them permission. He also met young Iraqis who wanted to learn about America because they were fans of American popular culture. In sum, several critical moments convinced Craig that he was fighting a just war. But Craig also experienced numerous combat events that were difficult to

define as just. When I asked about any negative experiences that may have caused him to question the war, he paused and finally revealed events that led to his PTSD.

As an army interrogator, Craig was responsible for searching dead Iraqis after engaging in combat in order to collect identification, maps, or any other forms of intelligence. There were instances when they searched dead bodies with various forms of decay. He went on to state that “no matter how righteous your cause is, war is just an inhuman and ugly thing,” and that “having to shoot at another man is just not natural.” Despite Craig’s illustration of the difficulties of taking another life, he remained insistent that the killing was justified because it was either in self defense, or because it was necessary to complete the mission. For example, Craig described the following incident in the city of Samarra, which he justifies as a necessary evil of warfare. After briefly pausing, and telling his wife it was okay for him to continue, he stated:

I hope I can get through this.... We were fighting the Fedayeen, and there was a Fedayeen guy who was in a shop, the windows have been blown out of the shop, and he was shooting at us. And he had his AK resting on this woman’s shoulder that he was using as a human shield. And he was sitting there firing at us, and there was blood coming out of her ear, and she’s screaming and it’s just... There was no way to kill him. There was no way to (long pause), there was no way to safely take him out. And I had to go through her to get to him. And you know, having to kill anyone first of all, sucks, but when you’re forced to kill a completely innocent woman, or a completely innocent anyone, ahm, it caused me to question my own soul. It was just something I didn’t want to have to do and I had to do it; I’d do it again if I had to, but it was a very bad experience for me.

This combat event caused Craig to question his own soul, but did not cause him to question the war. Although the experience was horrific, difficult to discuss, and part of the reason that he has PTSD, he remains adamant that his actions were justifiable and that he would “do it again if I had to.” Several incidents similar to the one above followed, and Craig explained that, eventually, he no longer considered them negative; they were

just part of combat. Craig went on to describe incidents such as a seventy-year-old man begging him for help because his arm was torn apart, nearly killing a five-year-old child whose uncles shot at American troops, and when he titled one of his journal entries “The Day I Lost My Soul.”

When I asked Craig if these negative events ever caused him to question the war, he directly replied that they did not. Because his job was to gather intelligence, he explained that Iraqis showed him where Saddam’s military buried squadrons of fighter jets, dug mass graves, and Iraqi men showed him where their genitals had been cut off because they made public statements against Saddam Hussein. In addition, Craig stated:

People would come up and tell me how Uday and Qusay (Saddam’s sons), had raped their daughters, or their wives for sheer enjoyment, and that they weren’t allowed to say anything about it; so, I never, ever, regardless of how frustrated I was with the way the war was being fought, never questioned it once I was in theater.

As the war continued, Craig grew frustrated with politicians who were dictating policy on how to fight the war. He argues that politicians such as Congressman John Murtha began turning against the war and changing military strategy. Because his support for the war never wavered, he could not understand how politicians in Washington, far removed from events on the ground, could turn against a war that they had sent him to fight.

Craig returned from Iraq in August 2003 and began blogging about his experiences and opinions of Iraq to provide a “soldier’s perspective” and because he “was having issues reintegrating into society.” Craig felt that the media was not covering the progress soldiers were making on the ground and negative coverage was turning the American public and politicians against the war. In addition, Craig describes that he had been in combat for several months and returning from the war was like moving one-

hundred miles per hour to coming to a complete halt. Unlike Iraq, people appeared to be moving at their own pace without a sense of urgency. Moreover, it was difficult for Craig to speak openly about Iraq because others found his statements difficult to listen to. In 2004, Craig began publishing journal entries online to work through his experiences, and as a form of therapy. He stated:

I started publishing my journal as a way to talk to somebody without really talking to anybody, because I didn't feel comfortable talking to people about my experiences, because they wouldn't understand. And I didn't want to talk to my fellow soldiers about it, because I didn't want them to think I'm weak. We didn't have PTSD training and resiliency training, and this was still a macho time in 2003 where you suck it up and you drove on, or your career goes down the tube. And I have a top secret clearance; so I'm not allowed to have mental health problems.

Craig continued blogging about his experiences and feelings toward Iraq emphasizing his support for the mission. He was later contacted by Vets for Freedom and invited to Washington to lobby congress while General David Petraeus advocated for the 2007 surge. Craig insists that keeping himself busy in politics helped him to deal with his experiences, but at the same time he did not clinically take care of his PTSD. Craig decided to seek professional counseling after he found that his wife was sleeping on the couch because she was "getting beat up in the middle of the night." Nonetheless, he remains politically active and maintains that counseling through the VA, blogging about why we should continue to support the war, and political activism through Vets for Freedom have helped him work through his PTSD and integrate into civilian society.

*Eric (Anti-war Veteran)*

Eric joined the military in 2003, and in 2006 deployed to Iraq with an Army National Guard infantry unit from Orange County, California. Eric grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles, was raised in an upper-middle-class family, and excelled in school. He also has a family history of military service. Both of his grandfathers fought in World War II, and his biological father and uncle served in Vietnam. This family history of military service inspired Eric to become a soldier, and he reports that throughout his childhood he felt a very strong desire to serve his country. At eighteen he went to speak with an army recruiter. He said that he wanted to be in the infantry in order to “blow shit up, do the cool stuff, and jump out of airplanes.” Eric was soon off to basic training and assigned to a special air assault infantry unit where he received extensive combat training. He was excited to be assigned to a combat unit and took advantage of every opportunity to attend courses and improve his skills as an infantryman. He describes himself as a very “gung-ho” soldier and was in total support of the military’s mission in Iraq.

In 2006 Eric deployed to Iraq, and upon arriving, his idealistic views toward the army and the war quickly dissipated. His unit was assigned to southern Baghdad where they were tasked with conducting two patrols per day in the city. One patrol was in a humvee, and the other patrol was on foot. In addition, because Eric was one of the lowest ranking members of his unit, he was placed on the Quick Reaction Force team at night. He was also the only private in his platoon who could remember how to properly load radio channels to send encrypted messages. Eric described to me the stress of being assigned all of these duties, and how the lack of sleep affected him. He explained:

There's always some kind of gunshot, so we got called out every night... So, by the first two months I was there, I'd probably gotten one hour of sleep per night and... I was so stressed out that I started losing patches of hair on my head. I had, you know, the kind of buzz cut so my hair was kinda short, so you could tell where my patches of baldness are coming in 'cause of stress. And on top of that, I was handling radios...every time a radio broke, they'd wake me up to fix it or something because no one could figure out how to fix a radio.

*Interviewer:* So were you also trained as a radio tech?

No, I just trained in the infantry. I was just smart enough to remember how to load the radio channels, so I became the platoon RTO (Radio Transmission Officer) 'cause I wasn't the dumbest private (laughs).

Eric explains that each time something was wrong with the radios they would wake him up to fix the problem. He states that after a while he became a completely different person. In his unit, he had been known as always making jokes and held a positive attitude. But Eric soon became belligerent to everyone in his unit, regardless of their rank. He began swearing at anyone who woke him up at night and lost complete respect for his chain of command.

After two months, he was assigned to a different platoon where he focused solely on doing patrols. As the war continued, Eric and his fellow soldiers cared only about their own safety, and not for the Iraqi people. They became increasingly aggressive on patrols as the difference between Iraqi civilians and insurgents became blurred. When I asked Eric to describe to me his interactions with Iraqis during patrols, he stated:

you'd stop to talk to people, and you'd go into their houses, search their houses, and try to be civil. And if they gave you an attitude, you'd become more aggressive, and you know start throwing all their shit around in their house. It was not always the best interaction with the Iraqi people. We'd, uh... you know, treat them like shit, and every time we'd ask "okay, why did the IED explode outside your house?" And we'd ask them "is this a nice neighborhood?" And they'll say, "oh yeah, it's a perfect neighborhood, mister, nothing bad happens here." And we'd show 'em the IED hole outside, "then what is that?" And, "have

you seen anybody?” And they just kinda jerk you around, and that just made a lot of the guys in the platoon angrier at the Iraqi people.

Eric went on to explain how soldiers did not care about the security of Iraqis, or of helping them rebuild any part of their country. Their only concern on a patrol was to return to the base alive. Their interactions with Iraqis were minimal and their basic assumptions were that the tougher they acted toward Iraqis the less likely they were to be attacked.

Eric claims that he was very naïve when he went to Iraq and truly believed that he was going there to help the Iraqi people. But he quickly learned that the military didn't care about Iraqis. He participated in several house raids in the middle of the night, threw people on the floor, and destroyed their homes. He claims that they treated the Iraqis as less than animals and “dehumanized everybody there.” His idealistic beliefs in the military were shattered, and he turned against the army and the war.

When Eric's unit was preparing to return to the United States, they were screened for symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, exposure to depleted uranium, and a host of other illnesses. He states that they were provided questionnaires and were told that if they answered “yes” to any of the questions that they would possibly remain in Iraq for further screening. Thus, the common agreement among them was to answer “no” to every question in order to quickly move through the screening process and come home.

Eric returned home in January 2007 immediately before the beginning of the college semester. He enrolled in classes at the local community college and describes the transition from being in a combat zone to a classroom as “surreal.” The transition from

soldier to civilian was much more difficult than he had anticipated, and he was unknowingly working through symptoms of PTSD. Eric explains that he tried to ignore negative emotions about the war because his family and friends were so proud of him having served in Iraq. He describes feeling very “high-strung,” and that hiding negative emotions from people who treated him like a hero was challenging. During our interview, Eric simply nodded his head, looked down at the floor and stated “you were just in a war zone, and you’re supposed to kinda change back to civilian life, and it doesn’t always work like that. It doesn’t work that easily.” Eric has not sought counseling from the VA because his goal is to become a police officer, and he fears that he will not be hired if he is diagnosed with PTSD. He plans to complete his degree at the California State University, Northridge and then apply for law enforcement positions.

When Eric returned home, he worked through his PTSD by interacting with veterans who had experienced similar events and turned against the war. He reconnected with his best friend Jamar who had also served in Iraq but returned three months prior. Jamar invited him to a viewing of the anti-war film *The Ground Truth* where Eric met other anti-war veterans. He gradually became active in the veteran anti-war movement in Los Angeles and participated in anti-war rallies and speaking engagements. Eric is careful with his level of participation in political activism because speaking-out against the war and doing interviews “brings the whole Iraq feeling back.” Nonetheless, he states that his camaraderie with anti-war veteran political activists who do not judge him and sympathize with his experiences is critical to his adjustment to civilian life, as well as working through symptoms of PTSD.

## **Defining Patriotism**

Alfredo and Carlos represent completely opposite ideological perspectives. Alfredo believes that it is the responsibility of citizens to censor all criticism when political leaders decide to go to war. In contrast, Carlos argues that dissent is the highest form of patriotism and that it is the duty of soldiers and citizens to oppose unlawful and unjust wars. Both veterans joined the army in 1995 and had nearly a decade of military service when they deployed to Iraq. But when they returned, their experiences in the war set them on completely opposite ideological paths. For Alfredo, his experiences inspired him to run for Congress and campaign for continued support for the war. For Carlos, his experiences turned him toward conscientious objection, and eventually military prison. The following describes each veteran's unique path to becoming a political activist and how their activism helps to shape their opposing definitions of patriotism.

### *Alfredo (Pro-war Veteran)*

Alfredo believes that when the country goes to war, it is the duty of elected officials and citizens to support the President and the military. Alfredo is the son of Italian immigrants and claims that his father instilled in him a deep sense of patriotism and love for America. On September 11, 1995 he joined the army reserve because he felt a "patriotic duty" to serve his country. Throughout the late 1990s, he states that he received excellent training and was proud of wearing the army uniform. Alfredo deployed to Iraq in March 2003 and when he returned one year later, he began participating in pro-war political activism. He eventually became well-known in political

circles and ran for Congress on the Republican ticket in New Jersey. He continues serving in the Army reserve and is an active member of Vets for Freedom.

Alfredo deployed to Kuwait during the initial invasion and in April 2003 crossed into Iraq. He argues that he was in complete support of the war when he deployed and that he expected the American people and politicians to support the military fully.

Alfredo explained:

I feel like when your country is at war, you need to voluntarily suspend your right to free speech, whether you're in the military or not. When the country is at war, politics ends at the water's edge, and it bothers me when people try to subvert the troops, or the mission, or the commander-in-chief when we're at war.

Throughout our interview, Alfredo insisted that regardless of political affiliation, it is the duty of citizens to support the President during wartime. Alfredo believes that criticism hinders support to troops on the ground, and sets them up for failure.

Alfredo's support for the war continued through his arrival to Iraq. He spent his deployment serving in military intelligence mostly in the city of Balad. He described positive interactions with the Iraqi people. He stated that children, in particular, had a profound impact on him because of their positive attitudes toward Americans, and because he believed that they were the people who would benefit most from removing Saddam Hussein. Alfredo explained:

The children are the lasting impression. They had the most lasting impression that I kept with me because I feel like they treated us like rockstars. Like American troops were celebrities. They always ran up to us whenever we convoyed through their towns, they would run out of their houses to the edge of the street to wave at our convoys when we drove through, and if I had some candy or dollar bills I would give it out.

Alfredo went on to explain that his experiences with Iraqi children remained very positive throughout his tour. In addition, Alfredo worked in military intelligence where

his job was to befriend locals and gather information from them. Therefore, he had countless interactions with informants who told him how thankful they were of Americans and described how Saddam terrorized them. When I asked Alfredo about his interactions with Iraqi adults he stated:

At the end of one of our meetings, I remember expressing thanks to them, you know, "Thank you on behalf of grateful Americans. Thanks for risking your neck for bringing us useful information, because it's helping to save lives, helping to better the situation," and these folks would interrupt me to say, "No, no, no, don't thank us. We need to thank you. Thank you for getting rid of Saddam." And they would go into a brutal story about Saddam; how a member of the family or someone who lived in their village, just for suspicion of political opposition, would get their doors kicked-in during the middle of the night, and be whisked-off to some prison where they would be tortured, raped, or killed. And those encounters left a lasting impression on me, and it felt like the mission was worthwhile; that we're planting the seeds of democracy in the Middle East.

Throughout our interview, Alfredo continued to emphasize positive interactions with Iraqis and the way in which they embraced Americans. Moreover, he described walking into Iraqi homes and seeing children watching American music videos and memorizing songs in English. Alfredo views this as a positive outcome of the invasion. He maintains that children will benefit the most from Americans removing Saddam Hussein because they will be raised in a free and democratic society.

When Alfredo returned from Iraq in March 2004, he became frustrated with negative media coverage and with politicians who turned against the war. He felt that the country was in crisis and that it was the responsibility of the American people to continue supporting the war effort. For Alfredo, politicians and the media are significant actors for building unity. His frustrations finally turned toward political activism soon after returning from Iraq. He described:

The reason why I became so vocal about Iraq is because after September 11, the prevailing mood in this country was unified and supportive of the commander-in-chief, and it offended me that politicians were dividing the country. Particularly the media, how they would just replay bad news. Reports of IEDs, videos of exploding humvees, charred glass, and bloody casualties; and I felt like the media coverage was very lop-sided against the mission. So that offended me a great deal, because I feel like when our country is engaged in military action, that we need to be united, we need to be behind the troops, and behind the commander-in-chief, and behind the mission.

As the war continued, Alfredo became increasingly active in deploying his veteran identity through radio and television interviews. Two years after Alfredo returned from Iraq, Marines in Haditha were charged with massacring twenty-four Iraqi men, women, and children. This incident became highly publicized after a *Time* magazine reporter's questions prompted the military to open an investigation. Alfredo debated politicians and pundits for their quick criticism against the Marines. Despite the atrocity of the incident, Alfredo argues that the Marines were being unfairly tried by politicians and the media before having the opportunity to undergo an investigation. Alfredo explained:

I got very angry when Congressman Jack Murtha criticized the Marines who were charged in the Haditha incident... I feel like when military personnel are deployed into the combat zone that they deserve the benefit of the doubt; that you should give them all the tools they need to succeed and not second-guess them, and then when incidents occur, you need to give them the benefit of the doubt and let investigations take their course, and not be so quick to run to the first podium and the first press conference so you can to criticize them, and throw them under the bus, and use it for political points.

Alfredo went on to explain that he maintains a “nostalgic” view of wars in the past such as World War II, when citizens unified to support the war effort. He believes that it is the “duty” of politicians and the media to promote national unity during wartime and self-censor criticisms. He is completely devoted to the belief that regardless of why we went

to Iraq, it is the duty of citizens, politicians, and the media to support the President and military during times of war.

*Carlos (Anti-war Veteran)*

Carlos is an immigrant from Nicaragua and joined the active duty army in 1995 at the age of nineteen. In April 2003, he deployed to Iraq as a Staff Sergeant in the Army National Guard. He describes his eight years of experience in the military before his deployment to Iraq as “amazing!” He enjoyed the discipline, experience, and benefits from the army. Yet, when he reached the end of his eight-year obligation, he was also graduating from the University of Florida and ready to transition to the next phase of his life. He planned to pursue a PhD in psychology, but was stop-lossed by the army before his graduation and sent to Iraq.

Carlos grew up in Nicaragua and comes from a very privileged background. His parents were important members of the Sandanista movement and became affluent members of society after the revolution. He describes growing up very “sheltered” and “spoiled,” attending the best schools, shopping at the best stores, traveling, and not “really growing up politically conscious.” But after his parents divorced, Carlos and his mother moved to the United States, and for the first time in his life, he experienced living without privilege. He and his family struggled financially, culturally, and socially. As a result, at the age of nineteen, given these radical changes, Carlos states that the army seemed like a “great choice” for a young man like himself.

But his parents opposed his decision to join the army because of both their own political background, and because they believed that Carlos was not suited to be a soldier.

He describes himself as a very creative and reflective young man who enjoyed poetry, creative writing, drama and theater. His mother discouraged him from joining the military and told him that he was “not going to make it as a soldier” because he was “too sensitive for that.” Nonetheless, Carlos joined the Army and rose to the rank of Staff Sergeant. After three and a half years on active duty, Carlos transitioned to the Army National Guard and became a reservist, which provided time for him to use his educational benefits from the military and attend the University of Florida.

In 2003, Carlos was nearing the end of his military contract, but was stop-lossed, and deployed to Iraq in March. By this time in his life, Carlos had become more political, and began to question the Bush administration’s argument for the invasion of Iraq. Nonetheless, he went along with the deployment because he thought that the war would end quickly. He believed he would return in a few months, complete his degree, apply to graduate school, and move on with his life. Carlos described:

I was at the end of my college career. I was a straight “A” student at the beautiful University of Florida, so I was in a pretty comfortable environment at that time, and I was in a very intellectual, very sheltered academic life situation. I spent my days drinking lattes at Starbucks, Barnes and Noble, and I cared much about my future and my plans, and you know, I had a political opinion, but mostly was concerned with my career and my future, and graduating, and I wanted to go into a PhD program.... I thought it was going to be a huge show of force against Saddam Hussein, and not going to be a long invasion, it’s going to be an operation, you know, Desert Storm.

Carlos thought that the war would quickly end and he could resume his academic career. However, as the invasion transitioned into an occupation, it became clear to Carlos that the military did not plan to leave Iraq. He states that they were given tasks with unrealistic deadlines and goals. For example, they were expected to train six-hundred Iraqi cadets to take over the police force in five weeks. On graduation day, a bomb killed

seventy cadets, and four hundred quit on the same day because they were afraid of going to their neighborhood, being recognized, and singled out as traitors.

For Carlos, these events on the ground in Iraq reinforced his earlier doubts about the war, but he continued to follow orders and do his best at being a soldier. Like many other anti-war veterans in this study, he did not voice his opposition to the war while in Iraq. Instead, he focused on performing well as a soldier and remaining alive. But one event that he now cites as “life-changing,” and that solidified his opposition to the war, occurred when he shot and killed a young man during a protest against Americans. Carlos explained:

We were protecting this government building because there was a protest and the protest turned violent. They began throwing grenades at the compound, and we were ordered to take defensive positions on the rooftop. They moved to one side of the street, and we saw a young man emerge, and he had a grenade, and he threw the grenade, and we shot him. I remember him alive and grieving and moving and he was a very young man, you know, maybe 16, and I remember him on the ground, you know, bloody and dead and being dragged by two men who came right after we shot him. And that was a justified kill according to the rules of war because he threatened us by throwing a grenade, and yet to me... you know, nothing prepares you for something like that. It's an experience that I carry with me through today. That's one of the most life-transforming experiences from the war, you know. The pain of taking life is something that nothing prepares you for and there's no full recovery. It's an ongoing process; something that you have to live with.

Carlos had questioned the war throughout his deployment, but he says that this event solidified his opposition. Beyond killing another human being, he argues that he is deeply affected by this trauma because shooting a protester was morally wrong.

Although the young man threatened them with a grenade, Carlos states that he was too far away from them to be a threat. In addition, he and his fellow soldiers had an

overwhelming advantage in terms of arms; therefore, he argues that the fight between soldiers and protesters was completely unfair and that shooting at them was wrong.

Later during his tour in Iraq, the military gave Carlos a two-week furlough to return to the United States and renew his green card because he is not a U.S. citizen. Before returning, he had already thought critically about the war, but now questioned the war on a moral basis. Up to this point, he had been able to participate in the war because he questioned the war for political-intellectual reasons, rather than on a moral level. However, now he was forced to deal with killing Iraqis and his own morality, which compelled him to resist returning to Iraq.

Carlos decided to go AWOL (absent without leave) from the army and five months later, he filed for conscientious objection claiming that the war is both “illegal” and “immoral.” As a result, he served nine months in a military prison because he refused to redeploy to Iraq. When I interviewed Carlos in 2009, military charges were still pending and he was facing having his residency status removed and being deported to Nicaragua. Nonetheless, he continues to speak-out against the war, and is a prominent figure in the anti-war movement. At the conclusion of our interview, I asked Carlos if there were any final thoughts that he wanted to share with me. After first saying no, he paused and replied:

A fellow that I want to remember just went to jail yesterday; his name is Victor Basco. And Victor and I spoke on the day of his court martial which was a day before yesterday. We gave an interview on the radio and they asked him what the message will be for our soldiers who are in the very same situation, and he said something that I said when I was in his position which is that, “You cannot go wrong if you follow your conscience.” You know, there is nothing more empowering than to do what you feel is right in your heart regardless of the consequences. If soldiers who are in the same predicament follow their conscience then they can’t go wrong with that.

Carlos is doing what he feels in his heart is morally correct, despite the consequences of going to jail for refusing to redeploy to Iraq and for possibly being deported for his actions. He expresses his beliefs in resistance as a form of patriotism through Iraq Veterans Against the War. He now works supporting soldiers who are also refusing to return to Iraq or Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

Framing the war in Iraq as morally just or unjust allows the veterans in this study to develop a cognitive framework that provides coherent meaning to their political activism. Although each veteran operates with multiple frames in their cognitive arsenal, so to speak, their diverse beliefs converge in common around a powerful sense of obligation and service. Thus, their post-war political activism is dependent upon the same logic of service to country that motivated them to become soldiers in the first place.

Deploying their identity as veterans legitimizes their articulation of “facts,” which makes their views resonate with the American public. In other words, fighting in Iraq provides them with “boots on the ground” knowledge of the war that is difficult to refute and elevates their status in social movements. Moreover, this “credentialing process,” through which former members of the military speak in support or opposition to war, enhances a social movement’s credibility (Marullo and Meyer 2004). Therefore, deploying veteran identities not only provides legitimacy for the individual veteran, but also legitimizes the movements to which they belong.

Generally, frames contain implicit or explicit appeals to moral principles (Ryan and Gamson 2006). Following Goffman (1974), their political activism is like a picture frame, marking off a part of the world and holding their experiences together. Activism provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing view of the world (Ryan and Gamson 2006). In the case of pro-war veterans, based on their experiences in Iraq, they believe that the U.S. has a moral obligation to remain in Iraq in order to provide security for the Iraqi people and build a vibrant democracy. In the case of anti-war veterans, they consider the very principles of going to war unjust, and they learned through a series of events that war is immoral. The “facts” then become embedded in pro- or anti-war frames, which they rely upon to justify and legitimize their activist behavior.

Veterans who view their political activism as an extension of military service remain committed to many of the values, ideals, and principles that compelled them to join the military in the first place. They frame their engagement in contentious politics as a continuation of their service to country, and argue that they are doing what the military trained them to do—to fight for a just cause and take care of their fellow soldiers. Hence, for these veterans, there is no break between service through the military and service through activism. Political activism reinforces their belief in fighting for a cause greater than themselves.

Veterans also participate in political activism in order to combat mainstream media reports on the war that do not align with their experiences of warfare. While in Iraq, soldiers are exposed to reports from mainstream media outlets such as CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. But they argue that reporters rarely leave the Green Zone and

writing is based on secondary sources. As a result, veterans argue that reports are exaggerated and fail to capture the “facts” of events taking place on the ground.

Although pro- and anti-war veterans have their own interpretations of “facts,” they both argue that mainstream media is too distant from the complexity of events, which leads to inaccurate reporting.

Expressing their views toward the war through political activism also provides veterans an avenue to work through issues of PTSD. These veterans are more cautious about how they deploy their identities because: a) recounting their experiences uncovers suppressed negative emotions; and b) participating in contentious politics exposes them to critique about issues that are very difficult for them to deal with. Nonetheless, expressing their attitudes toward the war through political activism also helps them work through and build a sense of meaning from experiencing combat in Iraq. In addition, belonging to political veteran organizations puts them in contact with like-minded veterans. Expressing their psychological wounds with veterans who share similar experiences develops into a form of healing. For veterans with PTSD, becoming a political activist is fundamental to regaining a sense of self and reintegrating into civilian society.

Finally, both pro- and anti-war veterans define their political activism as the highest form of patriotic duty. On one extreme, pro-war veterans frame the war as just, regardless of contradictory events. There is little to no disruption to their identities as soldiers and their political activism is a seamless continuation of unquestioning service. On the other extreme, anti-war veterans completely reframe their identity as a soldier in such a way that dissent becomes the highest form of patriotism. Regardless of their pro-

or anti-war political attitudes and behavior, they view their activism as unwavering devotion to their country, and to the personal moral values that compelled them to serve.

In this chapter, I have defined various themes that explain why Iraq War veterans participate in political activism. Frame analysis and identity deployment provide the theoretical tools through which to unpack these themes. Becoming a political activist is a process in which moral conviction is shaped and constrained by a series of experiences before, during, and after the war. Veterans turn toward political activism to make sense of their experiences of warfare and regain a sense of self in order to move forward with their lives. Thus, activism is more than an activity for political expression; activism reminds veterans of who they are, where they come from, and fuels their hope for a better future.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

*I can come home, and you can give me veterans' benefits, and you can give me VA benefits, and all these things; all of that is very important. But if you wouldn't let me win my war, then you'd taken the biggest thing you can away from me.*

Paul (pro-war veteran)

*There's that conscious decision to say I can't do this anymore. I think that for some of the guys and ladies is that it's a matter of conscience. They just can't conscientiously continue supporting the war effort. And what they saw in Iraq for many vets, what they experienced and saw in Iraq was the epiphany of their lives.*

Jason (anti-war veteran)

The memories of invading Iraq may recede from the public mind, but for those who fought in the war, their memories of warfare endure. My goal throughout this study is to add detail and depth to our understanding of the impact of the Iraq War on those who have fought, and how it shapes their participation in civic engagement after coming home. I have worked to eschew political rhetoric that has become associated with the conventional view that veterans are more pro-war than the general population, in favor of a careful empirical inquiry into the sources of their political attitudes and behaviors.

Brad and Gary, whose stories are described in Chapter 1, exemplify the development of divergent political attitudes in this study. Both deployed to Iraq with different ideals toward military service. Gary is a pro-war political activist and joined Vets for Freedom when he returned from Iraq in 2007. When he deployed, he did not hold idealistic views toward bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people. Instead, Gary viewed the war as something that would allow him to put his training as a military police officer into practice. His unit deployed to Baghdad's Green Zone to provide security at the American Embassy. While there, Gary reports that he was fortunate to observe American and Iraqi political leaders work to establish a functioning democratic Iraqi government. Thus, events in Iraq during his tour in Baghdad's Green Zone exceeded his minimal expectations of military service and professionalism. In fact, his experiences working as a military police officer and providing security for political leaders reinforced a sense of purpose in his work that ultimately exceeded his expectations of military service. As a result, Gary returned from Iraq with a very durable set of beliefs toward winning the war. However, upon returning, he also found that media reports of chaos and failed military strategies did not coincide with his experiences on the ground in Iraq. Moreover, Gary argues that negative media coverage began to influence public criticism against the war. When I asked Gary about his views toward American public opinion of the war, he stated:

Definitely negatively influenced by a media machine that is for sure against the war. It's not that I'm against critique or criticism; I think that's a fundamental element of our society that makes us great. It just seemed that's all they chose to focus on and inform people of when there were so many good things going on between the military and the Iraqis on a humanitarian level... I think that a lot of people want to know "how did you see it, what did you experience?" because they

are trying to understand it more. But when the news would report about the war it did not necessarily jive with my perspective, or with what I've seen.

When Gary returned from Iraq in 2007 he joined Vets for Freedom to counter what he argues is a "media machine" opposed to the war. Gary's exceeded expectations of military service in Iraq, along with observing significant political progress between Iraqi and American leaders solidified his pro-war political attitudes and motivated his activist behavior.

In contrast to Gary, Brad returned to Columbus, Ohio, from Iraq completely opposed to the war. He deployed to Iraq with high idealistic expectations of military service and professionalism. Similar to Gary, he was a military police officer and underwent many months of intensive training in how to provide security and handle prisoners of war. This training also gave him tremendous pride in his service as a military police officer before his deployment to Iraq. However, when Brad deployed, his unit was assigned to Abu Ghraib prison, and while there, he witnessed and participated in events of abusive violence against prisoners that failed to meet his idealistic expectations of military service. In addition, as a soldier, he felt completely abandoned by his chain of command and felt they had failed to address the poor living conditions of prisoners, leading to numerous revolts against him and his comrades. These events triggered a major rethinking of his idealistic views toward military service and professionalism, which then generated anti-war political attitudes when he returned from Iraq.

During our interview, Brad emphasized that when he returned from Iraq and began speaking-out about witnessing and participating in abusive violence at Abu Ghraib prison, he "was speaking from a pure place," and that he "saw some terrible things that I

wanted to make sure were known.” He argues that events in Iraq gave him a more profound understanding of what it means to go to war. Brad explained:

My experience over there; something that it taught me was the pragmatic reality of what happens when we go to war. The absolute necessity to be clear in our decisions and to be moral in our decisions. And what I learned was that the people who controlled the installation [Abu Ghraib prison] where I worked were in Washington, D.C., and they didn’t experience it the way that I did, and I felt that it gave me a deeper understanding of the costs of war.

The meaning that Brad drew from abusive violence against prisoners at Abu Ghraib was jarring enough to cause a major rethinking of his support for the war, and finally solidify his path toward anti-war political activism.

Conversely, a shift in support for the war failed to emerge among pro-war veterans. In the case of Gary and of pro-war veterans more generally, their political attitudes coincide with the conventional view that veterans are more pro-war than the general population. But the cases of anti-war veterans complicate this conventional view and question our assumptions toward the durability of political attitudes more generally. Examining experiences of warfare offers a much more nuanced understanding of how groups and individuals give meaning to their life experiences in ways that shape political thinking.

In the study of political attitudes and behavior, the durability of political attitudes is an underlying theme. In each of the dominant areas of research on political attitudes – party realignments, demographic characteristics, and political socialization – participants are seen as having unchanging ideological beliefs. Even in studies of political realignments that changed Southern politics, where voters shifted from Democrat to Republican, it is not the political ideology of voters that is argued to have changed, but

rather, decisions made by political elites are seen to realign the electorate. This study questions the durability of political attitudes by delving into how events and experiences – in this case, of warfare – can rupture persistent ideological beliefs.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that the oppositional political attitudes of veterans are simply a result of the military's recruitment of Americans with diverse political perspectives. Aren't veterans merely maintaining conservative or liberal views that they already held, prior to entering military service? Perhaps pro-war rhetoric simply does not resonate with veterans who are liberals, thus there is a clear trajectory for their activism regardless of events and experiences. Perhaps veterans on both "sides" experience no change in their ideological beliefs, and events and experiences only anchored their preexisting attitudes toward war. This may, indeed, be true for some veterans who continue to support the war. But for anti-war veterans in this study such as Brad, Henry, William, Eric, and numerous others, they entered military service with profound ideals toward patriotic duty that are arguably more aligned to a pro-war political stance. Moreover, the findings in this study indicate that those veterans who held the highest level of support for the war became some of the most active members of Iraq Veterans Against the War. Thus, to argue that veterans are simply sustaining preexisting political attitudes fails to capture the complex process through which anti-war veterans broke with ideals toward military service and changed the trajectory of their political outcomes.

By tracing the demographic characteristics of Iraq War veterans, one could also argue that veterans are politically divided as a result of their race, class, or gender backgrounds. For example, white males tend to be more hawkish and likely to support pro-war policies. Or, as in the cases of Daniel and Wyatt, they both came from upper-

middle-class conservative backgrounds and the experience of warfare solidified their pro-war political attitudes and activist behavior. But when we turn to veterans who turned against the war, we find many here also who are white males from upper-middle-class backgrounds; in short, class and race fail to predict their political outcomes. Indeed, the membership of Iraq Veterans Against the War is predominantly white. Anti-war veterans, such as Eric, who comes from an affluent Orange County, California family, and Mike, whose mother is a professor at Louisiana State University, have actually experienced major shifts away from prior pro-war political attitudes.

Perhaps political socialization – the transmission of political attitudes from parents to children – comes closer to predicting Iraq War veteran political outcomes. This theory does fit well with the experience of Daniel, whose pro-war political attitudes resemble those of his politically conservative parents. Or, Alfredo, whose immigrant father instilled in him a deep sense of “patriotic duty.” Therefore, it can be argued that these veterans are simply embracing the political views with which they were raised. However, political socialization fails to explain why other veterans turned against the war and the military-driven status quo held by their parents. For example, in the case of Patricia, her anti-war views clashed with those of her politically conservative, pro-war parents who “voted for Bush the second time.” Or, the case of William, an anti-war veteran whose family history is steeped in military service that he traces back to the revolutionary war and every war since then. Political socialization theory would predict that these veterans would maintain very durable political attitudes throughout the life course without examining how significant events could change or alter their ideological beliefs.

Realignment theory, demographic characteristics, and political socialization may very well explain the unwavering support many of the pro-war veterans in this study upheld. However, traditional studies on political attitudes fall short of predicting the political outcomes of anti-war veterans due to their reliance on the durability of political attitudes. Hence, what is missing from dominant perspectives on political attitudes and behavior are the ways in which ideological beliefs can change as a result of significant events and experiences that alter political outcomes otherwise believed to remain stable.

### **Experiences of Modern Guerilla Warfare**

The sources of political attitudes are caught up in a bundle of experiences and emotional responses to significant events. This does not mean that I use the term “experience” to mean anything. In fact, I am particularly concerned with experiences of fighting under the social conditions of modern guerilla warfare, and the patterned ways in which participants draw meaning from those experiences to inform their political views. Throughout this study, I have privileged the meaning of experiences in warfare because such experiences are particularly intense and deep, leaving an impressionable mark on the worldviews of those directly affected.

I employ experiences of participating in war to explain the political, moral, and social psychological dimensions of the sources of political attitudes. Though veterans in my study have drawn multiple and often contradictory meanings from their experiences, their participation in the Iraq War had a significant influence on their political outcomes. In fact, what I find most interesting in these narratives are their paradoxes, ironies, and disappointments. The multiple experiences of warfare related by veterans in this study

forced me to make difficult choices about whose experiences were most representative of veteran political activists. Indeed, only the subjects of my study really know what she or he experienced, but the preceding chapters capture the patterned meanings that they draw from their experiences as it pertains to their political views toward the war; the narratives of the veterans themselves relate their experiences in an ordered way, not as irregular or erratic.

The narratives in this study also show that many of the strains placed on soldiers in Iraq differ markedly from experiences in previous conventional conflicts. The most prominent features distinct to this conflict are the unequal use of force and the inability to distinguish between noncombatants and the enemy. Modern guerilla warfare, unlike previous conventional warfare, creates pressures that lead to and sanction acts of brutality against civilians and prisoners of war. The veterans in this study underwent a multitude of war stressors, such as combat, participation in abusive violence, and witnessing abusive violence, all while trying to adjust to new surroundings that they knew little or anything about. How they came to Iraq, and endured their experiences of warfare during and after their return have forever marked their views toward future conflicts.

The veterans who participated in this study volunteered for military service with innocent notions of warfare and the armed forces. For some veterans, joining the military was a way to “prove” a sense of manhood either to themselves, their families, or to their communities. For others, joining the military was an attractive expression of patriotic idealism. But none of the veterans in this study anticipated the level of danger they would experience in Iraq. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, soldiers deployed ready to fulfill a heroic ideal of duty, service, and fighting for their country.

But as the famous nineteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote, “to someone who has never experienced danger, the idea is attractive” (1976/1984, 113) By prefacing each veterans story in the preceding chapters with a discussion of their expectations toward the military and war before their deployment, we can better define how experiences in warfare shape their political views toward the war.

The military is a social construction defined by shared expectations and values that are embodied in both formal regulations and traditions that together form a moral world that soldiers learn to regard as legitimate and personally binding (Shay 1994). The moral power of the military is so great that it can motivate young men and women to deploy half way across the world to kill an enemy they have never seen and about whom they know very little. When military and political leaders destroy the legitimacy of the military’s moral order by sending soldiers into combat with unclear objectives under uncertain circumstances, or by not fully supporting the mission, they provoke a powerful sense of betrayal among the men and women they send to war.

For the modern soldier, his life is dependent upon a complex chain of people above him who are responsible for war making decisions. Soldiers are trained to trust in the competence, professionalism, and sense of responsibility of political and military leaders to assure their safety and, ultimately, their lives in combat. Soldiers’ training teaches them to become so accustomed to relying on the knowledge of their leaders, and on the army to provide everything from food, water, and shelter that their dependency on the institution of the military becomes as complete as that of a small child on his or her family. As a result, their trust in the military is deeply tied to a social contract binding soldiers to each other, to their commanders, and to the society that sent them to war.

The experiences of soldiers who became anti-war political activists are fraught with a sense of gross betrayal by military and political leaders who broke the social contract and failed to meet the soldiers' expectations of professionalism, moral trust, and service. Indeed, the experience of betrayal led soldiers who were the most highly committed to the ideals of military service to break completely from their support for the war. They went to Iraq under the banner of bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people and avenging the attacks of September 11, 2001. But on the ground, their experiences of warfare were much different from what they expected, and when they questioned unethical orders in the field, they were told to "shut the fuck up" and suspected of not being "with the program," or of having nurtured a "personality problem" because they did not instantly obey orders from their chain of command. For anti-war veterans, the war in Iraq broke a very powerful level of trust they had placed in their fellow soldiers, their commanders, and political leaders responsible for their safety in war.

Veterans who maintain unwavering support for the military and war held minimal idealistic expectations of military service and regard military failures as unfortunate events that happen in any war. Pro-war veterans argue that failed military tactics are the result of military policies driven by civilian political leaders conceding to a growing anti-war sentiment perpetuated by the media. Thus, many of the pro-war veterans in this study have emerged as activists with a well-developed "stab in the back" theory akin to that developed by German veterans of World War I – the war is winnable so long as soldiers are not betrayed by politicians consenting to a home-front that has grown weary of the war. Moreover, returning home to growing anti-war sentiments creates a belief

that somehow winning in Iraq is being stolen by politicians consenting to a “media machine” and the small but vocal group of activists against the war.

The cases of veteran war support or opposition runs deeper than what can be captured in traditional research on political attitudes. Their political stance emerges through their experiences of warfare and sense of betrayal from the social institutions responsible for their mortal safety in combat. Pro-war veterans experience betrayal from the American public and politicians who turned against the war after sending them to Iraq. For anti-war veterans, political and military leaders violated their idealistic views toward service and moral trust they placed on their chain of command. Thus, an underlying theme in the stories of Iraq War veteran political activists is a sense of betrayal that can only be captured through delving into their experiences of warfare.

Rather than attempting to define the exact experience that influences political attitudes, I have found it more fruitful to remain within the tension created by multiple experiences and uncover the patterned meanings veterans have drawn from their participation in warfare. Veterans in this study have emerged transformed from their experiences of war in ways that have altered the way they think about their role as citizens in contentious politics. Although events in warfare are unique, the following section maps out the cumulative meanings that they have drawn from their experiences of warfare, which have produced a type of wisdom about war that they express through their participation in contentious politics.

## **The Sources of Iraq War Veterans' Political Attitudes**

The methods of studying political attitudes based on macro processes such as political alignments, or by inferring political attitudes from demographic characteristics provide little insight into how significant events and experiences influence the development of political consciousness. Rather than reducing actors to mere reflections of large political structures, this study employs a ground-up approach that uses in-depth interviews to demonstrate how people are shaped by personal experiences that are, themselves, shaped by contingencies, opportunities, and constraints.

Iraq War veterans' political attitudes emerged from their patterned expectations toward military service, and their subsequent experiences of warfare that either were or were not sufficiently jarring to produce a major rethinking of their support for the war. The findings show that during their deployment to Iraq, anti-war veterans expected their experience of warfare to coincide with the patriotic motivations that compelled them to join the military. In addition, they expected the military institution and senior leadership to adhere to the ideals and principles that they were trained to follow. For pro-war veterans, institutional practices before and during the war met or exceeded their more instrumental expectations of military service. But for anti-war veterans, the military failed to meet their idealistic expectations, which precipitated their turning against the war. In addition, the meaning that anti-war veterans drew from experiencing combat events finally ruptured a powerful set of ideals toward military service, which solidified their trajectory toward anti-war political activism.

The analysis in the preceding chapters traces how divergent political understandings of warfare were linked to particular events before, during, and after

participating in the Iraq War. The development of Iraq War veteran political attitudes are based on their expectations of military service, the meaning that they drew from combat events, and finally their motivations for becoming political activists. The aim of each chapter is to capture the unique life trajectories of soldiers who participate in warfare with an eye to the critical conjunctures that influenced their political attitudes and activist behavior.

Chapter 2 examines expectations and experiences of the military and war. It follows the life trajectories of four Iraq War veterans and their predispositions toward military service. The chapter describes how those veterans who entered military service with idealistic expectations of fulfilling a profound sense of patriotism, service, duty, self-sacrifice, and trust in government leaders became the most committed to anti-war political attitudes when they returned from war. In contrast, veterans who lacked idealism and joined the military for instrumental purposes become the most avid supporters of the war. These divergent patterns contradict the durability of political attitudes, as well as conventional assumptions that the most “gung-ho” soldiers are also the most politically hawkish.

Chapter 3 delves into experiences of combat in the development of political attitudes. I argue that the meaning that veterans draw from their participation in combat triggers an anti-war stance for veterans whose experiences failed to meet their expectations of military service. However, combat is equally salient for pro-war veterans, but they abated a major rethinking of their support for the war because their expectations of military service were either met or exceeded. In fact, events such as combat, participating in abusive violence, and/or witnessing abusive violence solidified

their support. Hence, significant events such as combat mark the critical juncture that solidified their pro- or anti-war political outcomes

Chapter 4 draws out the motivations for participating in post-war political activism. The chapter delves further into veterans’ transition from military to civilian life and their process of meaning-making during their post-war experiences. Eight veterans are grouped into four thematic categories – extension of military service, media, PTSD, and definitions of patriotism – to explain their motivation for participating in contentious politics. Through frame analysis, I refine how veterans cognitively organize their military experiences and meaningfully interpret their political activism. Participation in political activism is the final stage in the path to pro-war or anti-war political attitudes and activist behavior. Becoming a political activist is a contingent process based on veterans’ experiences before, during, and after the war, and is a reflection of a strong moral commitment to the ideals that initiated their calling to military service. The overall argument is summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3: Sources of Iraq War Veteran Political Attitudes**

	<b>Expectations of Military Service and Warfare</b>	<b>Experiences of Warfare</b>	<b>Political Outcome</b>
<b>Soldier</b>	Instrumental  Expectations are based on military training and strategy  Expectations are easily met or exceeded through military	No questioning of military service  Lack of idealism abated any questioning of war	Pro-war veteran  Motivation for political activism based on unquestioning loyalty and support for the war

	training.		Atrocities are simply “collateral damage”
<b>Soldier</b>	<p>Idealistic</p> <p>Expectations are based on idealistic notions of patriotism, duty, and service to country</p> <p>Military fails to meet idealistic expectations</p>	<p>Major rethinking of military service</p> <p>Combat events trigger a major questioning of ideals toward military service and warfare</p>	<p>Anti-war veteran</p> <p>Motivation for political activism is based on disclosing atrocities committed by American forces during war</p>

The findings explain how soldiers who volunteered for military service and participated in the same war came to embrace divergent forms of political attitudes and activist behavior. But their respective political outcomes did not follow expected patterns of durable political attitudes throughout military service. The paradox in this study is that the most patriotic and gung-ho soldiers do not continue supporting the war after they experience warfare. Instead, these soldiers become the most committed anti-war political activists. Those who become pro-war activists are the least committed to idealistic views toward patriotism, duty, and service to country. Therefore, pro-war veterans abate any questioning of military service or support for the war. These findings challenge our usual assumptions that military veterans who are pro-war political activists are the most strongly committed to patriotic ideals of military service.

These unexpected political outcomes only make sense by analyzing actual experiences of warfare – when one’s commitment to military institutional policies and practices are ultimately put to the test. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many soldiers in this study embraced the patriotic fervor that was rampant throughout the country and that reverberated throughout the military. Since the end of

the Gulf War in 1991, and following a decade of conducting peacekeeping missions, the U.S. military finally had a combat mission against what, at the time, was the fourth largest conventional army in the world. While political leaders were rallying the American public around patriotic tropes of spreading democracy and keeping America safe through preemptive attack, military leaders rallied their own rank-and-file for battle against the Iraqi Army and overthrowing Saddam Hussein. As a group, soldiers deployed for the invasion of Iraq motivated with a clear mission of keeping America safe by defeating the Iraqi Army and preventing Saddam Hussein from deploying weapons of mass destruction. But soon after the fall of Baghdad, and while President George W. Bush was declaring “mission accomplished” atop a Navy aircraft carrier, American troops in Iraq were being attacked by a growing insurgency against them. Indeed, the failure of post-war planning and naïve belief that Iraq would somehow automatically transform into a beacon of democracy in the Middle East is well documented (Ricks 2006). The military fought and won the conventional war, but failed to prepare the rank-and-file for the guerilla war that would follow for the next ten years.

### **Home to War**

Following the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Americans experienced several negative emotions, including grief, fear, and shame (Skitka et al. 2004). We experienced grief for the loss of life, fear of the threat against us, and shame because we were unprepared for such an event (Scheff 2007). American society managed these negative emotions by responding with anger and violence in the form of overwhelming support for our military to retaliate against those responsible

(Skitka et al. 2004). In addition, the Bush administration seized this moment of fear to plan a war against Iraq, and centered their discourse on framing the war as retaliation against anyone remotely responsible for the attacks.<sup>18</sup> This frame permeated national discourse, and America took a “macho” stance against Saddam Hussein not only because it was feared that he would provide terrorists with weapons of mass destruction (Christensen and Feree 2008), but also because many felt the need to redeem the country from the shame of the September 11 attacks.

As the US military deployed to Iraq, soldiers were provided with a bundle of justifications for war. They were told that they were fighting to rid the world of evil, remove Saddam Hussein from power, root out terrorism, free the Iraqi people, establish democracy, and keep America safe. But the argument that resonated most throughout the military was retaliation against those responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001.

America rallied around preventing another attack against the United States, which made the invasion of Iraq politically and morally defensible. Political leaders and the American public inspired trust in soldiers and showed their willingness to share the burden of going to war. Moreover, soldiers deployed to Iraq in 2003 motivated by an attitude of indestructibility that trickled down from the Bush administration to the lowest ranking private in Iraq. Thus, veterans in this study report training with bravado for full-scale war, rather than for a less violent “winning hearts and minds” campaign. Within

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<sup>18</sup> On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush in an address to a joint session of Congress stated: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” in response to the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center. This famous quote initially framed the justification for the invasion of Iraq. *New York Times*, March 19, 2004.

four days of the beginning of the ground war, American troops defeated the Iraqi Army and advanced to Bagdad, and two months later President George W. Bush declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq.

President George W. Bush's statement "you're either with us, or you're with the terrorists" resonated with soldiers who viewed the invasion of Iraq as synonymous to fighting against those responsible for the attacks of September 11. American soldiers who deployed to Iraq arrived full of emotions and ideas about bringing democracy and freedom to a people oppressed by a brutal dictator. But after U.S. troops defeated the Iraqi Army, and Paul Bremer, head of the U.S. occupation, banned thousands of Ba'ath Party officials from returning to their government jobs (Ricks 2006), soldiers were faced with fighting an insurgency rather than a conventional war. They became preoccupied with simply surviving insurgent attacks, instead of implementing abstract policies of liberating the Iraqi people and bringing freedom to Iraq.

When the soldiers in this study returned home from the war, they struggled to reintegrate into a society that was supposed to have shared the burden of war, but that has instead, for the most part, continued living their lives uninterrupted. Many veterans report feeling isolated and frustrated that the American public sent them to war, but then remained apathetic once it dragged on. For both veterans who oppose and who support the war, many describe their political activism as their "duty" to tell the "truth" about events in Iraq, in order to rattle the American public into finally reacting to the war and participating in sharing its burden.

If we are to comprehend the political aftermath of the Iraq War in the United States, then it is essential to understand the meaning of the war for those who fought it.

After a decade of war in Iraq, the war has officially come to an end, and is quickly receding from the memory of the American public. Iraq War veterans are now expected to move on with their lives and careers. But for many, reintegrating into civilian life is enormously complicated as a result of the stress caused by their war years. Some veterans have found a way to come to terms with their experiences through civic engagement. Thus, understanding the Iraq War as a political issue entails understanding the long-term social and psychological effects on its veterans and their efforts to come to terms with their experiences. My interviews revealed veterans who, on both pro- and anti-war sides, were excited to return home and wanted only to leave the war behind them. But once the excitement of returning home settled, many found themselves yearning to talk about their experiences. As one veteran in this study explained:

It's not the best time to talk to somebody about how bad they are feeling when they're getting home because it's a honeymoon period. I mean, however terrible things are, like you're going to see your wife, or your kids, or your dog, or your house, or whatever it is that you haven't seen through that whole experience; it's suddenly back in your life and you're very happy. But then once things normalize, you start to get down to realizing things are different.

As a social scientist, I am trained to assign categories and classifications to intellectually sort my data into mental bins. But like Jonathan Shay, who studied Vietnam veterans, after interviewing Iraq War veterans, I have learned that “before analyzing, before classifying, before thinking, before trying to *do* anything – we should *listen*” (1994, 4). After nearly a decade of war in Iraq, and the war in Afghanistan not showing any sign of truly coming to a complete end, many more veterans will return home and yearn to talk about their experiences of war. Indeed, my interviewees did not ask for monetary compensation, or even care about my own personal opinions toward the war. They

participated in this study because it gave them an opportunity to tell their stories, in an open-ended way, to a person who cared about how the war affected their lives.

Sociological studies of political attitudes tell us relatively little about happenings on the ground, nor give us very much insight into how participants develop a political consciousness. This study prioritizes the experiences of political actors over the typical emphasis on actors as mere reflections of larger political structures. Without denying how personal experiences are bound up in hierarchal institutions and social structures, this study highlights the value of examining the ways in which lived experiences project actors into contentious politics. In the case of Iraq War veterans, the ebb and flow of daily and direct wartime experiences, and broader institutional milieus of military service, along with American public opinion, shape how they make sense of and explain their views toward the war.

We have a very limited understanding of how the war in Iraq has affected the political views of those who have fought in it. The Iraq War has officially come to a close, but for those who fought, their experiences of warfare endure. As a result, there are a growing number of veterans reentering society and participating in the electoral process. Regardless of whether they support or oppose the war, the Iraq veterans in this study are young men and women who share a deep commitment to participating in politics and maintaining a vibrant democracy – one that allows for a wide spectrum of political views – in the very country they risked their lives to defend.

## Appendix A

### Demographic Questionnaire

#### Sources of Iraq War Veteran Political Attitudes

Name:

Date:

Email:

Time:

Phone:

Address:

Place:

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Top portion to be filled out by researcher  
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1. Date of Birth:
2. Age:
3. Place of Birth:
4. State currently living in:
5. Date you enter the military:
6. What branch of the military were you in?
7. What was your military specialization/job?
8. What was your rank when you were discharged, or what is your current rank?
9. What veteran organizations do you belong to and when did you join each?
10. What year did you decide to become politically active?
11. Did you go to Iraq, Afghanistan, neither, or both? (If neither skip to interview)
12. How many tours did you do?

13. What years were you in Iraq or Afghanistan?
14. What part of the country were you in?
15. Did you experience direct combat?
16. What political party do you identify with?
17. What religion do you identify with?
18. What race you identify with?

## **Appendix B**

### **Open-ended Questionnaire**

1. Let's just jump right into it. Describe to me how and why you began to publically express your own personal views toward the war.
2. Tell me about your own background. Let's begin with where you grew up, why you joined the military, up to what you're doing now.
3. Let's go back to what your impressions of the military were before joining. What did you imagine it to be like, what motivated you to join, what did your parents think, what did the recruiter tell you, did you think you would end up going to war?
4. Now let's talk about your own experience in the military. Was it what you had imagined? Tell me about what you thought of basic training or boot camp.
5. Explain to me what Iraq or Afghanistan was like. Can you tell me about a particular incident that influenced your way of thinking about the war? i.e. combat situations, or interactions with civilians, or anything else.
6. Tell me about how you felt about the war when you first came back? What did you think about how the population in general was reacting toward the war?
7. How and why did you become involved in this veteran organization?
8. Tell me what you think makes a war worth fighting for.
9. What do you think of other veteran organizations who oppose your point of view?
10. Have you been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? If so, can you tell me about the incident that caused you to have PTSD?
11. Has being politically involved helped you with your adjustment to civilian life?
12. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience or views toward the war that I didn't touch on?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix C

### Demographic Information

#### Pro-war Veterans

<b>Name</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Birth Place</b>	<b>Branch of Service</b>
Alfredo	E5	Male	White	38	Hackensack, NJ	Army
Andy	E5	Male	White	25	Tulsa, OK	Marines
Arnold	E4	Male	White	25	Richmond, VA	Marines
Baird	E4	Male	White	29	Virginia, MN	Marines
Carl	E7	Male	White	41	Grand Forks, MD	Army
Carson	E9	Male	White	43	Bucyrus, OH	National Guard
Chris	E5	Male	Black	29	Oklahoma City, OK	Navy
Craig	E8	Male	White	35	Temple, TX	Army
Dale	E3	Male	White	25	Tulsa, OK	Marines
Dalton	O5	Male	White	52	Los Angeles, CA	Marines
Daniel	E6	Male	White	34	Buffalo, NY	Army
Derrick	E6	Male	White	37	St. Paul, MN	National Guard
Gary	E5	Male	White	32	Columbus, OH	Air National Guard
Jack	O3	Male	White	38	Portsmouth, VA	Army
Jacob	E4	Male	White	26	Camp Pendleton, CA	Marines
Jarold	E7	Male	White	47	Indianapolis, IN	Air Force
Jereme	O3	Male	White	28	Charleston, NC	Marines
Jesse	E5	Male	White	30	Ann Arbor, MI	Marines
Kaden	O3	Male	White	37	Warren, PN	Marines/Army
Miguel	E5	Male	White	26	Lexington, SC	Marines
Nate	E5	Male	White	28	Sioux Falls, SD	National Guard
Paul	O3	Male	White	29	Minneapolis, MN	National Guard
Scott	E5	Male	White	34	Eire, PN	Marines
Steve	E5	Male	White	25	Shawnee, OK	Marines
Tanner	O3	Male	White	26	Indianapolis, IN	Marines
Tavis	E8	Male	White	40	Fayetteville, NC	Army
Tom	E5	Male	White	27	Columbus, OH	Army
Wyatt	O2	Male	White	31	Upper Darby, PN	Marines

## Appendix D

### Demographic Information

#### Anti-war Veterans

<b>Name</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Birth Place</b>	<b>Branch of Service</b>
Abel	E5	Male	White	27	Waukegeen, IL	National Guard
Alejandro	E6	Male	Latino	38	El Paso, TX	Army
Barbara	E4	Female	White	24	Ventura, CA	Navy
Brad	E4	Male	White	38	Beaver Damn, WI	Army
Cage	E4	Male	White	25	Austin, TX	Army
Cam	E4	Male	White	26	Torrington, CA	Army
Carlos	E6	Male	Latino	33	Nicaragua	Army
Dale	E4	Male	White	26	Berlin, Germany	Army
Damian	E5	Male	White	23	Emerson, NJ	Air Force
Edoardo	E4	Male	Latino	26	Burbank, CA	Army
Elias	E4	Male	Latino	22	Mexico	Navy
Elroy	E4	Male	Latino	26	West Covina, CA	Air Force
Eric	E4	Male	White	26	Burbank, CA	National Guard
Fabian	E4	Male	Latino	26	Brazil	National Guard
Gavin	E6	Male	White	29	Anaheim, CA	Army
Henry	E4	Male	White	33	Phoenix, AZ	Army
Jackie	E4	Female	White	25	Denver, CO	National Guard
Jamar	E5	Male	Black	25	Los Angeles, CA	National Guard
Jarvis	E1	Male	White	22	Morristown, NJ	Army
Jason	E4	Male	White	28	Cortez, CO	Army
Javier	E6	Male	Latino	35	Bronx, NY	Army
Jerry	E4	Male	Latino	25	San Jose, CA	Marines
Jim	E5	Male	White	28	Fresno, CA	Marines
Joel	E4	Male	White	26	Philadelphia, PN	National Guard
John	E5	Male	Native	30	Phoenix, AZ	Marines
Jorge	E4	Male	White	23	Milwaukee, WI	Air Force
Jose	E4	Male	White	27	Manhattan, NY	Marines
Jovanni	E4	Male	White	32	Ukiah, CA	Army

Kai	E5	Male	White	25	San Diego, CA	Marines
Larry	E7	Male	Black	45	Cleveland, OH	Marines
Mabry	E4	Female	Black	29	Madison, WI	National Guard
Maddox	E4	Male	White	24	Albuquerque, NM	Navy
Martin	E5	Male	White	33	Wichita, KA	Coast Guard
Mike	E5	Male	White	29	Pineville, LA	Marines
Neal	E4	Male	White	34	Tulare, CA	Army
Paige	E4	Female	White	26	Carbondale, IL	National Guard
Ted	O2	Male	White	25	Rochester, NY	Army
Thurston	E4	Male	White	22	Watseka, IL	National Guard
Wanita	E4	Female	Latina	22	Mexico	Army
William	E8	Male	White	59	Mankato, MN	National Guard

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