

Politicization Beyond Politics: Narratives and Mechanisms of Iraq War Veterans' Activism

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Abstract

There is growing interest in the implications of military service for the political attitudes, behaviors, and activism of military veterans. This article considers how promission and antiwar veterans' narrate their experiences of becoming political activists and the mechanisms that effect that transition. The research draws on narratives from 40 members of the antiwar organization Iraq Veterans against the War and 28 members of the promission organization Vets for Freedom. Using "exemplars" from opposing political groups, the article reveals the shared process of politicization for both groups of veterans, and how divergent promission and antiwar definitions of duty, service, patriotism, and narratives of experiences and interpretations of warfare activate meaning-making activities, mechanisms, and analytical frames that share more in common than surface political differences might suggest.

Keywords

Iraq War veterans, political attitudes, narrative, activism, war

Introduction

There is growing interest in the implications of military service for the political attitudes, behaviors, and activism of military veterans. Scholars who study the

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influence of military service on political attitudes and behavior typically center their studies around two general frameworks: partisan politics and the civil–military gap. Missing from these dominant frameworks, however, is an in-depth analysis of how political attitudes and behaviors are contingent upon the meanings that veterans draw from their experiences of military service and participation in warfare. This study focuses on U.S. combat veterans who participated in the Iraq War, how they narrate their experiences of becoming political activists, and the mechanisms that effect that transition. The study engages with two groups of U.S. Iraq War veteran political activists: members of the antiwar¹ organization Iraq Veterans against the War (IVAW) and members of the promission² organization Vets for Freedom (VFF). It highlights the voices of vets themselves, as they describe how their experiences of military service and warfare influenced their position vis-à-vis the war, albeit in divergent and unique ways; how and why they became involved in activism in the first place; and what impact that activism has had on their lives. The article identifies the predominant narratives through which both groups of veterans make sense of their transition to activism and the mechanisms by which they make this transition—regardless of whether they adopt a promission or antiwar stance. Ultimately, the findings reveal the shared process of *politicization* for both groups of veterans, and how divergent promission and antiwar definitions of duty, service, patriotism, and narratives of experiences and interpretations of warfare activate meaning-making activities, mechanisms, and analytical frames that share more in common than surface political differences might suggest. The following study also reveals (1) the nuanced processes of politicization for both groups of activists, (2) the narrative patterns of warfare used to justify their activism, and (3) the use of framing in their activism.

The article begins by locating the study in relation to existing scholarly trends that have shifted from comparing military veterans' political views with those of civilians and examining broad shifts in voting behavior to examining veterans' participation in social movement organizations and political activism. Next, I note how veterans on both "sides" of the issue draw on similar discourses in order to frame their transition to activism as consistent with their sense of identity as patriots serving the United States. The article then turns to veterans' narratives of how and why they got involved in activism, particularly noting the role of mainstream and social media. Finally, the article concludes by noting its broader contributions to the study of military veteran political attitudes and behavior.

Veterans' Political Attitudes, Activism, and Identity

In the United States, veteran organizations have historically exerted considerable political clout, particularly in support of campaigns for military interventions (Holcombe, 1999; Jensen, 2003; Skocpol, 1993). 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% of the voting electorate (Krueger & Pedraza, 2012; Teigen, 2006).

The conventional view of U.S. military veterans is that they are overwhelmingly conservative, Republican, and more prowar than the general population. This widely received image rests on scholarly research (Holsti, 1999; Klingler & Chatagnier, 2013; Krueger & Pedraza, 2012; Suid, 2002), journalistic accounts (Dunlap, 2010; Ricks, 1997; Thompson, 2008), and polling data (Gallup, 2004, 2009, 2012). Other scholarly research, however, suggests relatively little difference between the political attitudes of American veterans and nonveterans (Bachman, Freedman, Segal, & O'Malley, 2000; Ender, Rohall, & Matthews, 2013; Snider, Priest, & Lewis, 2001). Moreover, research on American Latino and Black military veteran political partisanship shows that they tend to be less supportive of politically conservative candidates and of the decision to declare war, particularly if they have participated in combat (Barreto & Leal, 2007; Ellison, 1992; Leal, 1999). Although yielding different results, research on veterans' political partisanship generally focuses on this question of whether military service is associated with more conservative and prowar political attitudes, thus producing an ideological gap between the military and the public.³

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, however, U.S. scholars of civil-military affairs have shifted their focus—productively, I would argue—away from this binary question of how military veterans compare politically to civilians and toward a more nuanced understanding of *how* military service affects veterans' political views (Krueger & Pedraza, 2012; Rohall, Ender, & Matthews, 2006). This new wave of scholarly work moves from analyzing low-intensity political participation (i.e., partisan politics) to understanding the influence of military service on high-intensity political participation, such as political activism. The shift in focus has been compelled, in part, by differences between military conflicts and political contexts themselves. The Vietnam War, for example, attracted much scholarly attention as the first conflict in American history in which military veterans and active duty service personnel participated in political protest against the war (A. E. Hunt, 2001). In contrast to Vietnam war veteran political activists, however, Iraq War veterans returned to a very different social and cultural context. Whereas several U.S. Vietnam veterans were draftees who returned home to an unprecedented civil rights movement and political protests against the war, Iraq War veterans volunteered for military service only to return to an American society largely ambivalent to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, scholars have been documenting the narratives of Iraq War veterans who returned from war and began participating in political activism (Coy, Woehrle, & Maney, 2008; DeGloma, 2010; Gutmann & Lutz, 2010; Heaney & Rojas, 2006; Leitz, 2011, 2014). This research has sought to understand the mechanisms that shape political understandings, the meaning of military service, and how veterans negotiate their identities as soldiers and civilians (Ender, 2013; Griffith, 2009; Leitz, 2011, 2014; Vest, 2013). This article seeks to contribute to this literature.

In political activism, how activists frame their identities plays a significant role in their political participation (Friedman & McAdam, 1992; S. A. Hunt, Benford, &

Snow, 1994; Robnett, 1997; Rupp & Taylor, 2003; Whittier, 2010). Frames offer political activists a schemata of interpretation that enables them “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” their experiences and transform them into expressions of political activism (Goffman, 1974, p. 21; see also Gamson, 1988; Snow & Benford, 1988, 1992; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). In the case of pro-mission veterans, their frames resonate with dominant discourse in support of the war and are often accorded significant influence in mainstream media outlets. In contrast, anti-war veterans’ frames challenge power holders and dominant discourses and, not surprisingly, receive less mainstream coverage, though they can sometimes influence the cultural context (Tarrow, 1992; Woehrlé, Coy, & Maney, 2008). For example, during both the Gulf and Iraq Wars, peace movement organizations effectively decoupled the dominant discourse of “support the troops” from a pro-mission stance by framing their antiwar opposition *as* support for the troops and developing a “discourse of betrayal” directed at political leaders (Coy et al., 2008, p. 162). Similarly, military veterans and their families within the peace movement have drawn on their simultaneous status as veterans and antiwar activists to frame their positionality as military insiders who oppose the war (Leitz, 2014).

Despite their opposing definitions of duty and service, this study reveals how both antiwar and pro-mission Iraq War veteran political activists frame their activism and military identities through the dominant patriotic discourses and ideals that motivated them to become soldiers in the first place and that make their service meaningful. Through processes of “identity deployment”⁴ (Bernstein, 1997), both pro-mission and antiwar veterans deploy their veteran identities via activism to justify their pro-mission or antiwar frames and to legitimize their political position in debates about the war. Beyond the study of political partisanship, contemporary studies work to capture not only the mechanisms that shape political views but also the meaning-making activities and identity formation of military veterans. The following section describes how the author gained access to veteran social movement organizations and established trust with veterans themselves who disclosed vivid details about their very personal transitions from combat soldiers to political activists.

Data and Method

The research is based on an in-depth interview sample of 68 U.S. Iraq War veterans who openly voice support or opposition to the Iraq War. Interviewees were drawn from two veteran organizations that represent opposing political attitudes and behaviors toward the Iraq War: 40 members of the antiwar organization IVAW⁵ and 28 members of the pro-mission organization VFF.⁶ 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. In accordance with institutional review board guidelines, pseudonyms are used in this final report; however, veterans unanimously stated that

confidentiality was not an issue and, indeed, noted that publicly sharing their stories is one of their primary forms of activism. Consequently, the article is more flexible with other forms of identifying information.

In-depth interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted at state chapter meetings; national organizational gatherings; and at homes, restaurants, bars, and coffee shops throughout the United States from August 2008 to December 2009. Several interviews were also clustered in major U.S. cities, where chapters of these organizations are most active, such as Washington, DC, Boston, Denver, Chicago, Oklahoma City, Columbus, and Los Angeles. Each interview involved open-ended questions that were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, providing the data used for the textual analysis. Using qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA 2007), issue-focused coding (Weiss, 1994) was used to analyze how veterans describe events and experiences before, during, and after their deployment to Iraq, in order to capture the contingent processes through which they developed their political thinking.

Each interviewee was initially contacted via e-mail from contact information listed on IVAW and VFF websites. Notably, this initial contact strategy failed. As Moelker (2014) has pointed out, veteran groups often feel vulnerable to and rejected by a wider society that fails to understand veterans' unique experiences. This, paired with accounts of some political activists falsely claiming veteran status, make it difficult to win veterans' trust.⁷ I was successful only after a former commanding officer of mine—a retired Colonel and well-respected member of VFF—vouched for me as “a straight shooter” and former Staff Sergeant who served under his command. After interviewing the president of VFF, he also vouched for me as a Marine Corps veteran and a researcher by sending an e-mail to the organization's listserv. Throughout the process of conducting fieldwork, I learned to consistently negotiate my insider/outsider status as a veteran who served in years prior to the invasion of Iraq and who is a member of neither IVAW nor VFF. My experience was similar to that of Lomsky-Feder (2004) who reported that she “felt like a stranger” (p. 90) while conducting fieldwork among Israeli war veterans, despite being Israeli herself and of the same socioeconomic and generation cohort. Respondents themselves were also aware of my insider/outsider status; for example, during one particularly important IVAW meeting, a research participant in this study respectfully asked me to leave the meeting because I am not a member of IVAW.

The strategy throughout the article is to present the voices of veterans themselves, as they describe their military experiences and political trajectories. In each section, “exemplars” are presented, whose voices and experiences represent and reflect those of others in their corresponding group.⁸ But though the sections are organized according to veterans' specific stance vis-à-vis the war, the article highlights this comparison not so much to emphasize this specific political difference, as to reveal the commonalities across veterans' processes of politicization. Finally, the article 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 and behaviors nor is the study generalizable beyond U.S. borders. Moreover, veterans were interviewed during their postwar political involvement, since the resources for a study that sampled political attitudes before, during, and after the war were not available at the time.

Narratives of Politicization: Framing Activism as an Extension of Military Service

Iraq War veteran political activists in this study adopt dominant discourses of patriotism and moral duty to frame their activism as grounded in the ideals that motivated them to become soldiers in the first place. Differences emerge, however, in terms of their expectations, experiences, and interpretations of the war, thus leading their narratives of continued service to have slightly different inflections. Consider, for example, promission veteran Paul who deployed to Iraq as an infantry Lieutenant and later became a senior leader in VFF, when asked 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

Paul eloquently frames his political activism as rooted in the same logic that initially compelled him to join the military, and thus his activism serves as “a logical extension of service.” His rejection of the notion of being “politically” motivated reveals a very particular understanding of the “political” as tied to partisan competition. Thus, rather than framing his activism as politically motivated, he identifies as a soldier who continues to fight for a virtuous cause, specifically, the Iraq War mission.

William describes slightly different interpretations of the war while similarly invoking his activism as an extension of military service. William is an antiwar political activist who served in Iraq as a First Sergeant. He describes why he became politically active:

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, so to speak. If you're gonna do a good job, you have to really care about the soldiers and take care of them 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.

William, a well-respected leader within the veteran antiwar movement, is a key figure shaping the “public discourse” of IVAW “in generally legitimate language”

for the organization's rank-and-file members (Meyer, Whittier, & Robnett, 2002, p. 254). Framing political activism as a moral "extension" of his "role as a First Sergeant" resonates with members throughout the organization and provides a legitimate justification for turning against the war. As leaders within their respective social movements, William and Paul both deploy the powerful concepts of "duty" and "service" and envision political activism as part of those obligations; they differ in terms of their definitions of these concepts and the actual political message they articulate. Although each veteran operates with multiple frames in their cognitive arsenal, so to speak, their diverse beliefs converge in common around this trope of extension of military service, which provides a fluid narrative of politicization, easing the transition from soldier to activist.

Mechanisms of Politicization: Political Activism, the Media, and Social Networking

For veterans in both groups, stories of engagement with media representations of, and broader public discourses about, the Iraq War loom large in their narratives. Indeed, elite news media is often the target of political action and is a significant mechanism through which information is developed and filtered (Gamson, 1995). Several veterans in this study describe what they saw as inaccurate reporting of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hence, for both promission and antiwar veterans, shifting public discourse and media framing around the war became an important goal (Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015). Furthermore, social media and various online resources and forums provided an important mechanism through which veterans were able not only to gather information (Ender, 2013) but also to express themselves politically and mobilize others.

Promission veterans. Derrick is a promission veteran who deployed to Iraq as a Staff Sergeant in March 2006 with the Minnesota National Guard. He describes himself as a "spoiled teenager" raised in an upper middle-class family in the suburbs of Minneapolis, MN. When Derrick was interviewed in October 2009, he laughingly recalled having no interest in the military and being the kind of teenager who would hang up on military recruiters. But 2 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.⁹

During Derrick's predeployment training to Iraq, his unit anticipated intense fighting against insurgents, but upon arrival, they found 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 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.

While there were “very intense” moments, to be sure, Derrick stated that during his 1-year tour in Iraq, IED attacks dropped from three to five daily to several weeks without attacks. He described most convoy missions as generally “boring” with only brief moments of intensity. Throughout his interview, Derrick repeatedly stressed the disjuncture between media reports and actual 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.

While “embedded” journalists did in fact provide real-time coverage of soldiers in the war (Ender, Campbell, Davis, & Michaelis, 2007), both pro-mission and antiwar veterans argue 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. Consequently, veterans such as Derrick felt that their firsthand accounts were needed to counterbalance (or, more often, correct) elite media coverage of the war.

Derrick began blogging about his experiences while he was still on the ground in Iraq.¹⁰ He explained his motivation:

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 read extensively by people back in the United States who wanted to learn more about what was happening on the ground in Iraq. This spurred him to become involved in political activism once he returned to the United States—an activism he describes as “a direct result of having been to Iraq.”

Carl joined the army in 1987 at the age of 19 after growing up in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana. He deployed to Iraq as a Gunnery Sergeant during the initial invasion with a mechanized unit and participated in convoy missions throughout the country. During our interview at a coffee shop in a suburb of Denver, CO, Carl described how his initial experience driving through Iraq contradicted public discourse opposing the war:

People say that, “Oh, Dick Cheney said we'd be greeted as liberators and that didn't happen.”¹¹ 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. . . . 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.

For Carl, this experience banished any doubts he might have gleaned from the media about invading Iraq. His unit was welcomed, as it drove through numerous Iraqi cities and this had a strong impact on his positive outlook on the war.

Carl continued to follow media coverage of the war closely during his deployment. But Carl reports that while major news networks in the United States focused on the negative aspects of the war, troops in Iraq were also exposed to military news such as the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, which provided much more "positive" reportage of events. Carl explained:

So the *Stars and Stripes* were giving us the human interest side of it. The *Stars and Stripes* guys were the ones reporting on all of the MEDCAP¹² 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. 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.

In addition to the *Stars and Stripes* military newspaper providing "the human interest side of it," the more positive reporting of events in Iraq fits into Carl's and VFF's promission narrative against mainstream coverage of the war from major news networks. Thus, for Carl, and several other promission veterans in this study, when they returned from the war, they argue that media reports were framing the war negatively, and to make matters worse, they no longer had the counterbalance provided by military reporting, which had provided stronger support for their promission views. The transition, as Carl describes it, was a harsh one:

You want to talk about the shock to come back to the [United] 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 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.

Carl soon became involved in political activism through attending antiwar counter demonstrations, lobbying Congress, blogging, and joining VFF—all in order to counteract what he defines as "negative reporting" of the war.

Thus, for both Derrick and Carl, their narrative formulas fit dominant promission discourses based on frustration with media coverage that fuels political activism. Promission veterans also reveal similar mechanisms of politicization, whereby social media and social networking provide avenues through which to express not only their own views but also what they felt were the more “grounded” perspectives of people who were on the ground in Iraq and could speak to the “truth” of what was happening (DeGloma, 2015). The irony, of course, is that the exact same motives and mechanisms can be found in the case of antiwar veterans.

Antiwar veterans. Jason served in the U.S. Army’s infantry as a Corporal and was interviewed in Denver, CO. He now considers himself an anarchist and was completely dressed in black when we met. After graduating from high school, 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. Eventually, he decided to join the army because he was not prepared for college and had limited work opportunities but also because he “grew up around guns, and kind of liked that, so thought it might be a fun way to spend 3 years.” He entered the army on October 1, 2001, soon after the September 11 attacks.

In February 2004, Jason’s unit was sent to Iraq. He recalls being told by military commanders and the Bush administration that they were there to help free the Iraqi people and bring them democracy. However, Jason says a crucial turning point occurred when his unit responded to a car bombing in downtown Baghdad:

We responded to a car bomb that had detonated outside of a Donut Shop . . . 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 toddler’s foot and a little pink toddler’s sandal . . . All the political reasons for being there, and all that propaganda, and the reasons as to why we were there were so crazy.

Jason cites this event as pivotal in turning him against the war. He soon began blogging about his experiences in Iraq on antiwar websites because he felt that mainstream news covered only the positive aspects of the war.¹³ 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:

Nothing was what it seemed. Nothing is what the American public thought we were doing . . . 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 Hajji¹⁴ 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. 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.

Jason began sending e-mails to friends back in the United States and to his brother, a student at Colorado State University, relating his negative experiences on the ground. Eventually, his challenging of prowar discourses became even more profound when he began contacting IVAW and blogging on antiwar websites.

Brad served as a prison guard in Iraq at Abu Ghraib prison where he was a Corporal with an Army reserve military police unit from Columbus, OH. Brad was interviewed in 2009 at a park near Ohio State University, where he was a graduate student at the time. Brad says he became politically active in order to highlight events about Abu Ghraib prison that went completely unreported in the media. His military police unit replaced the unit infamously involved in the "Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal" reported in 2004 on *60 Minutes II*.¹⁵ Despite the fact that the scandal had already broken, Brad reports that conditions at the prison remained dismal following the arrival of his unit. Although they were much better trained than the unit they had replaced, the structural conditions under which they were expected to properly supervise and care for prisoners were still, according to Brad, "dehumanizing" and "immoral":

... we had thousands and thousands and thousands of detainees living in t-shirts and tents outdoors and there's certain laws that we agreed to on an international level where we'd say that we're gonna take care of these people and treat them like humans. I was trained that you have to maintain your prisoners at the same living condition as the people that guard them and the water we gave them was like bad water that we weren't allowed to even brush our teeth with. There were actually memorandums stating that we had to brush our teeth with the bottle water that we drank, so 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 were trying to not have us die, but not so much for the prisoners.

In addition to a division between prisoners and soldiers, Brad describes a very clear division between prison guards on the ground and senior-level commanders in charge of the prison. While guards walked among the prisoners, engaged with them on a daily basis, and were often left on their own to deal with the overwhelming difficulties of managing the prison population, the senior command remained in bunkers hidden from mortar fire, did not engage with prisoners, and did nothing to improve conditions for guards or prisoners. Not surprisingly, by the time he left Abu Ghraib, Brad describes feeling that "our command element kind of abandoned us while we were there."

When Brad returned from his deployment in February 2005, he was highly disillusioned with his experiences in the military and the war in general. Compounding this, he felt that the American public was being led to believe, falsely, that the

horrific incidents at Abu Ghraib were the result of the isolated actions of a few soldiers rather than a result of broader structural and organizational conditions.¹⁶ Brad reports that seeing this disjuncture between news coverage of Abu Ghraib and what he had witnessed had a major impact on him:

It was pretty terrible and it fractured all my ideas about our purpose in the war and most definitely transparency in the media It made me absolutely question everything that I hear because I was some place observing events that were extremely significant. And I would just watch it go by everyday and never be reported in the news.

Brad recognizes that his experience in Iraq was unique because he only served at Abu Ghraib prison and did not observe what the military was doing throughout Iraq. Nonetheless, when he returned from the war, he felt that it was incredibly important for the American public to hear about what he saw and experienced.

Although each veteran's experience and narrative frame is unique, both promission and antiwar veterans share similar accounts of frustration and disillusionment with the mainstream media's representation of the war. They returned from the war longing to share their experiences with the American public and reveal a more "accurate" description of how the war unfolded on the ground. And thanks to the Internet and social media, Iraq War veterans were the first soldiers who could not only access but also participate in and shape the discussion about the war both during their deployments and upon returning home.

Conclusion

Studies of military veterans' political attitudes and behaviors that look at partisan politics and the civil–military gap are too macro-oriented to study mechanisms of politicization. Increasingly, scholars are beginning to pay greater attention to narratives of warfare from veterans who participate in high-intensity forms of politics such as political activism. By emphasizing the similarities in antiwar and promission veterans' processes of politicization, the findings from this study reveal that, despite divergent definitions of duty, service, patriotism, and interpretations of experiences of warfare, both groups of veterans engage in similar meaning-making activities and employ similar social mechanisms through their participation in contentious politics.

This study contributes to research on military veteran political attitudes and behaviors in the following ways: (1) its attention to narratives of warfare complements conventional research on military veteran political partisanship by providing a more nuanced understanding of the processes that shape the politicization of today's veterans; (2) it shows that veterans draw on different cultural tools to engage, support, and oppose dominant discourses which fit narrative promission or antiwar formulas to justify their respective political stance; and (3) it shows how veterans use framing to uniquely position themselves as credible political activists. In other words, for Iraq War veterans, activism is like a picture frame, marking off a part

of the world and holding their experiences together (Goffman, 1974). Political activism through social movement organizations such as IVAW and VFF provides a way to organize an array of civilian and military symbols, images, and arguments, linking veterans' underlying views of the world with their experiences and interpretations of warfare (Ryan & Gamson, 2006). Deploying their identity as veterans legitimizes their articulation of "facts" and helps their political views to resonate with both the military and the American public. Their narratives of warfare provide them with "boots on the ground" credibility that is difficult to refute. This "credentialing process," through which former members of the military draw upon their experiences of warfare to speak in support or opposition to war, also works to enhance credibility and legitimacy for the broader social movements to which they belong (Marullo & Meyer, 2004). For this group of veterans, there is no "gap" between their service as soldiers in the military and service as civilians through activism. Both pro-military and antiwar veterans adopt language and rhetoric from dominant civilian and military discourses to frame their activism as the highest form of moral and patriotic duty (Woehrle et al., 2008). Rather than supporting the view of military veterans as more pro- or antiwar than the general population, this study reveals a diversity of political attitudes and behaviors in today's armed forces and a range of meanings that they draw from their military experiences.

Veterans on both sides also participate in activism to combat mainstream media reports that do not align with their narrative experiences of warfare (Ender et al., 2007; Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015; Lembcke, 1998). While pro-military and antiwar veterans offer divergent interpretations of facts, they both argue that mainstream media is too distant from the complexity of events on the ground. For both groups of vets, social networking sites provide a space to write about their experiences and undermine what they see as inaccurate reporting from mainstream news reports.

Regardless of their specific political stance vis-à-vis the war, when we listen to the voices of veterans themselves, we discover important commonalities. Ten years after recent warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, if we are to comprehend the ebb and flow of military veteran political attitudes, we must consider the meaning-making process of participation in military service and warfare. This article draws on meaning-making through the lens of military veteran political activism because for veterans, 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.

Author's Note

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Notes

1. Members of Iraq Veterans against the War (IVAW) oppose both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and self-identify as “antiwar” veterans.
2. Members of Vets for Freedom (VFF) support the military missions in both Iraq and Afghanistan and self-identify as “promission” rather than “prowar” veterans.
3. For an in-depth overview of the civilian–military gap, see Peter Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (2001).
4. Mary Bernstein’s (1997) model of “identity deployment” as a form of strategic collective action has been used by an array of scholars to describe how movements celebrate or suppress identities in order to influence dominant culture, achieve policy reforms, or build community. This article makes use of identity deployment to explain the ways in which veterans draw on their military service to legitimize their respective arguments about war.
5. IVAW was founded on July 30, 2004, at the annual Veterans for Peace convention in St. Louis, MO, by seven Iraq War veterans. More information about IVAW, such as upcoming events, resources for veterans, and biographies of members, can be found at www.ivaw.org.
6. VFF was founded in 2006 as a political advocacy group by Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. The group was most active from 2006 to 2010. Since the official withdrawal of American ground troops in Iraq on December 18, 2011, VFF has been less politically active but maintains a vibrant Twitter account, which can be accessed at <http://twitter.com/VetsForFreedom>.
7. Most notable is Jesse Adam Macbeth who falsely claims to have been an Army Ranger and Iraq War combat veteran. In 2007, Macbeth served 5 months in jail and 3 years probation for making false statements about his record to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
8. The respondents were fully aware that I was interviewing members of both groups. This disclosure created interest on both sides, with interviewees expressing a desire to know how fellow veterans developed opposing views. An open-ended interview question that asked, “What do you think of other veterans who oppose your point of view,” generated diverse answers that ranged from discrediting the other group to respect toward their service and opinions because they too had “been there.”
9. Moskos (1977) has written compellingly about the “institutional to occupational” shift from “citizen–soldiers,” who served as an obligation to the nation, to today’s all-volunteer soldiers, who are motivated by individualistic opportunities such as job training, salary, and educational benefits. However, other scholars have found the idealized rhetoric of highly patriotic citizen–soldiers to be greatly 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). Although comparing these two "ideal-types" is not a primary goal of this article, it is worth noting that promission veterans generally described entering military service for occupational reasons while most antiwar veterans spoke of more institutional reasons. For the purposes of this study, what's interesting here is how these narrative formulas help support veterans' respective political stances. For promission veterans, the account of entering military service for occupational reasons narratively enables the veteran to relate an experience that actually exceeded expectations; conversely, antiwar veterans' citation of institutional reasons for volunteering enables a narrative of wartime disillusionment.

10. As Ender (2013) points out in *American Soldiers in Iraq*, 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.
11. In an interview on NBC's Meet the Press, prior to the invasion of Iraq, 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.nbcnews.com/id/3080244/ns/meet_the_press/t/transcript-sept/#.Vhuj5Zjotjo.
12. The Medical Civil Action Program treats local populations using military personnel and resources.
13. While members of the military continue to have the right to free speech under the First Amendment, these rights are limited under Department of Defense Directive 1344.10. In April 2007, Army Regulation 530-1 Operations Security ordered soldiers to stop posting blogs without first clearing the content with a superior officer.
14. *Hajji* is originally a term of honor given to a Muslim person who successfully completes a pilgrimage or *hajj* to the holy city of Mecca. However, during the Iraq War, the term *Hajji* was used by American soldiers as a derogatory term for Iraqis.
15. Initial reports of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison were reported on November 1, 2003, in the *Associated Press*. A broadcast story of the abuse was later reported in 2004 on *60 Minutes II*, an affiliate of CBS: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-at-abu-ghraib/>
16. Findings in reports commissioned by the U.S. Defense Department provide a comprehensive investigation of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and how senior government officials "allowed relaxed definitions of torture and acceptable interrogation techniques, which helped create a dangerous and chaotic prison environment" (Feitz & Nagel, 2008, p. 210).

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