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Correcting the Narrative: Veteran Activism in the Post-Iraq Era

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ABSTRACT

Motivated by a desire to tell narratives that accurately reflect their own experiences and to combat inaccuracies in media and government messages, American veterans turned to art, activism, and the internet as means through which they could reintegrate into civilian life, and create meaning in the struggles they faced.

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When she returned home from her service, US veteran Paige was dismayed to find herself in political arguments with her parents. As she recalled,

> 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 ****? Where did I just spend a year?
> (as quoted in Flores, 2016a, pp. 206–207).

A far cry from the patriotic nationalism often assumed of military personnel, Paige's experience reflects a wider trend of veterans who return from their service feeling disenchanted by the narratives told at home about themselves and the wars they fought. In fact, in the wake of the Iraq War, many returning soldiers found themselves becoming activists, feeling compelled to share their "narratives of conversion" (Flores, 2016a, p. 197). because of discontent with, or even anger at the political and military narratives told at home, of Iraq as the unequivocal antagonist, and the US as the ultimate savior. In this way, both art and activism become vessels through which veterans can share their stories. Additionally, as Mendible (2021) has suggested, the advent of the internet enabled veterans to more easily share their stories, as well as to more easily organize in grassroots and protest movements.

VETERAN ACTIVISM AS PATRIOTIC DUTY

Upon returning home from war, many veterans have found themselves experiencing anger or frustration at "the lack of critical media discourse about the war" (Flores, 2016a, p. 206), or at the stories and narratives being pushed that did not align with their own personal experiences. For example, antiwar veteran Jason recalled "being told by military commanders and the Bush administration that they were there to help free the Iraqi people and bring them democracy" (Flores 2016b, p. 173). But he began adopting antiwar beliefs after responding to a car bombing in Baghdad and witnessing "the Iraqi fire department hosing blood and body parts down the gutters, and seeing old ladies like, bleeding out of their head trying to get help" (Flores 2016b, p. 170). The aftermath of war has long-lasting ramifications for all who are involved, whether intentionally or not.

What is significant about veteran antiwar activism is that despite the fact that these veterans are protesting against the actions of the US military and government, it is very common for veterans to "frame their activism as grounded in the ideals that motivated them to become soldiers in the first place" (Flores, 2016b, p. 169). For veteran activists, involvement in protest and demonstration is viewed as an extension of their service to their country. Mendible (2021), using Ricardo Herrera's concept of the American "warrior ethos," suggested "that a citizen-soldier tradition is still deeply woven into the fabric of American culture" (pp. 51–52). It is this deeply-embedded element of American culture that spurs some veterans to point out injustice when visible, or to draw attention to places and events where the values they defended on the battlefield don't hold up in peacetime.

COUNTERARGUMENT: PROMISSION NARRATIVES AND SCAPEGOATING EXTREMISM

While it is true that the "warrior ethos" brought up by Mendible (2021) can in some ways contribute to the battling of injustice, Mendible also reported a darker side to this issue. In her own words, "In its need to defend against an enemy, a warrior ethos can then bolster the impulse to scapegoat—to blame certain groups for the perceived decline of America's 'greatness'" (p. 52). Mendible claimed that this is why some veterans end up joining white supremacist groups or right-wing extremist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, the neo-Nazi Anti-Defamation League, and the militia groups who participated in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol: the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys.

But while veterans who join white supremacist or other hate groups, and veterans who begin participating in political activism, may both be informed by a warrior ethos and citizen-soldier traditions, the decision to join extremist groups is influenced by several other conditions. Mendible (2021) cited a study by Kathleen Belew that indicated how "post-Vietnam War narratives centered on feelings of betrayal and crisis gave rise to alliances among antigovernment and race-based nationalisms… as many vets saw themselves as victims of government malfeasance and civilian contempt" (pp. 52–53). The influence of these far-right and white supremacy groups has had a major impact to this day: according to a *CBS News* article, out of 700 individuals charged with connections to the January 6 attack on the Capitol, more than 80 had connections to the military, many being veterans (Watson & Legare, 2021). While veterans who join far-right extremist groups and those who participate in antiwar activism may be informed by similar citizen-soldier traditions and disillusionment with the US government, veterans joining hate groups tend to be motivated by feelings of betrayal from the government

and people they fought for, while veterans participating in antiwar activism tend to do so out of a sense of duty and as an extension of their service.

ART AS ACTIVISM

Taking into account the implication that veterans seek out activism as a means of correcting the narratives they observe at home, it seems logical that so many veterans also turn to art. While activist movements are more connected to the governmental and political structures that develop the narratives they view as incorrect or inaccurate, art provides veterans a chance to put forth their own personal narratives, providing more opportunities to combat official government positions. Furthermore, turning their war experiences into art allows veterans a chance to dive deep into their personal experiences and cope with the trauma and stress they experienced during service. In his book *Fight to Live, Live to Fight: Veteran Activism after War*, Benjamin Schrader (2019) discussed his time participating in the Warrior Writers Project, a nonprofit organization run by Lovella Calica, and one of many programs across the US that encourage veterans to channel their experiences into art and poetry. As he explained:

> I remember the first time I did this [writing] drill. By the time I was done I was bawling my eyes out … The poetry worked to deprogram the hypermasculinity, the dehumanization, and trauma, as it shifted the way in which we looked at our time and experiences in the military. (p. 138)

However, despite the potency of these projects and organizations in helping veterans cope with wartime experiences, "there is currently a debate within the veteran writing and art community about the idea of art as a form of healing and therapy versus art as purely art" (Schrader, 2019, p. 139). Yet even with the existence of this debate, the people Schrader interviewed—from those running the programs to the veterans participating in them—all acknowledged the ability of art and writing to act as a healing experience for veterans.

The resistance to having veteran art and writing projects be viewed as a form of art therapy appears to stem from a desire to use such artworks to communicate with the public. As Schrader (2019) stated, "[while] these stories were primarily transformative for the veterans … many times they were also aimed at working toward telling their stories to a broader audience; thus, aiming to be transformative for society" (p. 140). The worry is that, by labeling these artworks as products of therapy, it would limit the art and artists' ability to inspire societal discourse.

The transformative power of veteran artwork becomes more potent when paired with Drew Cameron's Combat Paper Project, where veterans turn their old military uniforms into paper, often to be used for Lovella Calica's Warrior Writers Project. Schrader (2019) described his experience participating in one of Cameron's papermaking events as a "deconstruction and value-adding process," where the uniform "is literally and symbolically broken down to its bare fundamentals and reconstructed into something new" (p. 147). Cameron himself viewed the project in a similar way, as "rejecting all those things that I willfully put myself and became a part of, but still in some way felt alienated from; a separation and a reclaiming of that history for my, for our own" (Nesson, 2010, 33: 00). By the end of the event, Schrader equated the process to learning a new language, and creating artwork from such paper as akin to writing a narrative in that new language.

SHARING NARRATIVES THROUGH INTERNET

Many 21st century studies of US political activism cite the internet as having major influence on the way that activism has been organized and disseminated, through its ability to make information visible on a widespread scale. Several of the veterans Flores (2016b) interviewed actually began communicating their experiences in the Iraq War through blogging (pp. 171–173), and that desire to share their stories with the world led to their further involvement in activist movements.

The ability to send out information to be witnessed on a global scale is a "key tactical strategy utilized by the contemporary peace movement [that] allows for a pedagogical style that increases awareness about the global context of social problems and helps to create solidarity across borders through public civic education" (Carty & Onyett, 2006, p. 237). In other words, the internet has become the ultimate way to raise awareness about issues that would otherwise have gone unnoticed by the public; by putting power in the hands of the individual, it allows for more first-hand accounts and narratives to be published. And for veterans in particular, "The digital age magnifies their ability to reach hearts and minds, extending soldiers' access in ways that Vietnam War veterans could not have imagined … digital platforms help active-duty soldiers and veterans express their views and inform political discourse" (Mendible, 2021, p. 57), when their duties prevent them from direct, in-person participation in protest and activism. By providing individuals across the globe a way to instantly transmit stories and narratives that more directly align with the truth of the true nature of the wars in which they

fight, the internet has become the modern equivalent of the TV and news reports that made Vietnam War protest and discontent so powerful.

CONCLUSION

Antiwar activism is, at its core, about the desire to communicate stories. And in a world that is increasingly plagued with misinformation and bias, especially in the political realm, it is important to provide as many diverse groups of people as possible with the ability to cast their voice for others to hear. Furthermore, for veterans, this storytelling is an important part of being able to reconnect to society after their war has finished. As Jenny Pacanowski, founder/director of Women Veterans Empowered & Thriving, stated:

> I started to do research and be taught about rituals and how warrior cultures had a way to transition home to reintegrate into society, and the main ritual was storytelling. Writing and performing kind of gave me a bridge to civilians. (As stated in Williams, 2021, 47: 24)

Motivated by a desire to tell narratives that accurately reflect their own experiences and to combat inaccuracies in media and government messages, veterans turn to art, activism, and the internet as means through which they can reintegrate into civilian life, and create meaning in the struggles they have faced.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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