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VetBros: Masculinity, Militarism, Patriotism, and the Post-9/11 Veteran

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication

by

John E. Armenta

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert B. Horwitz, Chair

Professor Brian Goldfarb

Professor Valerie Hartouni

Professor Rebecca Jo Plant

2023

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University of California San Diego

2023

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## PREFACE

Some people are surprised to learn that I'm a military veteran. Of course, it's been sixteen years since I got out of the Army and I don't talk about it much, but I don't hide the fact that I'm a veteran. But since I don't meet the expectations many people have about veterans, they express shock when it comes up. And I guess I don't *look* or *act* how a typical veteran does. Which means there is a typical veteran. Actually, you may even be imagining him (and it usually is a "him") now: bearded, hair that is a little unruly, lots of tattoos with at least one involving a patriotic motif, probably wearing a ballcap, can be seen in jeans and boots or shorts and sandals, likes to talk about guns, is aggressively masculine, usually white, sometimes with a questionable sense of humor and politics, maybe has a drinking problem. You know...a "VetBro."

Obviously, not all veterans are VetBros—I'm an example of that, along with many others. But the strength of this particular image of veterans over the last 20 years does show there is some common understanding of how a veteran is imagined. This is partly due to civilians projecting an image onto veterans (and the military). And it is partly due to some veterans wanting to portray an image to others. If the VetBro is the common image of veteran identity in the US it also means their experiences and their views will be seen as standard for all veterans. And because of the respect and deference given to the military and veterans by civilians (respect and deference that some VetBros demand) we should look closer at what these views are.

The term "VetBro" or "BroVet" is only about ten years old. It generally refers to men who served in the US military after 2001 and who adopt a particular attitude and style that centers their masculinity and veteran experience onto everything they do. It's the veteran version of a "dude bro:" a younger guy (18-30) who is performatively masculine in matters of style and participation in activities such as weightlifting or "extreme sports." But the performative masculinity of the dude bro masks a certain degree of insecurity about his masculinity which



leads to a propensity for disrespect, sometimes even violence, against women and LGBTQ people. Regional variations of dude bros show that it is not a singular style as they adapt their look and activities to fit local definitions of masculinity. While a dude bro may not talk much about politics (or even vote), his attitudes towards women and LGBTQ people display a dedication to a patriarchal world view.

Veteran status adds militaristic values and patriotic fervor to the already potentially violent mix of masculine posturing and performance. The VetBro uses his veteran status as evidence of his masculinity. Shooting guns is added to the list of “tough guy” activities. But it is more than the look or participation in certain activities. VetBros also have similar attitudes about culture, politics, military service, and gender that stem from their military experiences, especially in war. These attitudes grew from the hyper-masculine environment of the military along with a perception of disintegrating gender norms in civilian society and they reflect their belief in the moral superiority of the military culture and their individual superiority over other men.

This dissertation is an attempt to understand VetBros and what they believe. VetBros represent more than a new generation of veterans. Their identity as veterans developed in a military and a political environment unique in US history: multiple multi-decade wars, and a military that includes more women than ever. Additionally, these veterans came to understand their identity as veterans from civilians who have few connections to the conflicts due to the use of an entirely recruited force; these civilians publicly acclaim their respect for the military and its moral superiority over civilian institutions, and at the same time privately fear veterans’ potential for violence. It is important that we understand veterans not just because their views matter (and they do), but because we can also see the effects of the military’s role in society through its effects on veterans.

I want to understand how VetBros fit into contemporary American culture and politics, how they have attempted to package their image of militaristic patriotism and masculinity. This combination of militaristic patriotism, aggressive masculinity, and a belief in the utility of violence to solve problems is important for understanding increasingly violent political rhetoric, jingoistic understandings of patriotism, and practically celebrating so-called toxic masculinity. The fact that almost 20% of the rioters and insurrectionists on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, were veterans and that veterans and civilians were seen wearing t-shirts and caps produced by VetBro companies shows that VetBro politics and worldview are representative of a larger reactionary political culture.

Many civilians look to the military and veterans as role models and as experts on military affairs and more. Since politicians and citizens seem willing to cede authority to veterans on issues regarding defense and national security, we should know what these veterans think and believe. Veteran and writer Phil Klay calls this imperative to defer to the military and veterans on matters related to the military “patriotic correctness.”<sup>1</sup> As Klay notes, this is both a problem of civilians ceding authority, and a problem of veterans self-righteously demanding it. By examining this contemporary way of being a veteran, I hope to better explain how they understand and imagine their role in society as well as patriotism, the military, war, and gender.

I believe that getting a fix on this common stereotype can provide a lens into US military culture, the effects of two decades of war, and the tensions between the “thank you for your service” imperative among civilians and their own misgivings about military service. It can also help us understand how these veterans understand their political and social roles and how they

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Klay, “The Warrior at the Mall,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/opinion/sunday/the-warrior-at-the-mall.html>.

will influence civil-military relations. I also believe that by focusing on the stereotype we can better notice the veterans who don't meet this stereotype or who directly reject it and can better understand their views and experiences.

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I enlisted in the US Army Reserves in 1998. What was supposed to be an eight-year commitment of being a “weekend warrior” ended up lasting nine years and included combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, and a “peacekeeping” deployment to Bosnia and Herzegovina. I saw the Army shift from a peacetime service to permanent wartime footing after the attacks on September 11, 2001. I also saw a shift in the people who were joining. Unlike me, they were enlisting in an Army that was already at war. “Combat patches”<sup>2</sup> went from being a rarity to being so ubiquitous that not having one would make a younger soldier stand out as a “cherry.” And older soldiers without them were seen to be effectively avoiding deployments. As I was separating from the Army, the so-called “surge” in Iraq was beginning as were debates about the conduct of counterinsurgency war. By then it was obvious to any honest observer that the US war efforts there and in Afghanistan would never be successful and not end anytime soon.

My time as a veteran began, like many other veterans, trying to make sense of the wars and my participation in them. I was never comfortable with the descriptions of people in the military as heroes and hearing “thank you for your service.” Veterans’ high rates of suicide and homelessness were featured in headlines, along with discussions of the “signature wounds” of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress

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<sup>2</sup> Unit patches worn on the right sleeve indicating that the wearer had deployed to a war zone.

Disorder (PTSD).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, veterans, it seemed, were almost universally praised by civilians. The problem of so-called “Stolen Valor” (a broad term applied to people faking military service) showed the uneasy relations between the adoration of the military by civilians and their lack of knowledge about it. And the reaction of many veterans to this showed a type of gatekeeping but also a frustration with civilians for not understanding the military well enough to spot the obvious frauds. So, despite the praise from civilians (or even because of it), veterans had difficulty getting their footing in civilian society.

The respectable image of veterans is necessarily related to how the military is depicted, understood, and viewed by civilians. The military consistently ranks as the most trusted institution in the country.<sup>4</sup> A majority of civilians see veterans as more patriotic and more disciplined than civilians.<sup>5</sup> And this is at a time when civilians have fewer connections than ever with the military.<sup>6</sup> Journalist and Army veteran Alex Horton sees this as putting veterans on a “pedestal.”<sup>7</sup> Not only does it distort a civilian’s view of veterans (hard to get a clear view when they’re up there), but it also causes some veterans to look down on civilians.

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<sup>3</sup> Terri L. Tanielian and Lisa Jaycox, eds., *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Brian Kennedy, Alec Tyson, and Cary Funk, “Americans’ Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines,” Pew Research Center Science & Society (blog), February 15, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/15/americans-trust-in-scientists-other-groups-declines/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Igielnik, “Key Findings about America’s Military Veterans,” Pew Research Center (blog), November 7, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/07/key-findings-about-americas-military-veterans/>.

<sup>6</sup> “War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era,” Pew Social and Demographic Trends (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, October 5, 2011), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2011/10/05/war-and-sacrifice-in-the-post-911-era/>.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Horton, “Help Veterans by Taking Them Off the Pedestal,” *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/11/help-veterans-by-taking-them-off-the-pedestal/281316/>.

And yet, there are regular reports of massive corruption in the military, gangs of white supremacists, rampant sexual assault in the ranks, and even murders of service members by their comrades. Veterans are only about 10% of the population and represented 20% of the insurrectionists at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.<sup>8</sup> Far-right extremist groups such as the Oath Keepers recruit veterans because of their tactical training, their commitment to a particular view of the United States, and willingness to use violence to secure it.<sup>9</sup> In fact, veterans have long been heavily represented in the leadership of right-wing militias.

Regardless of the frequency of these reports, few cast blame on the institution of the military itself. These issues are framed as isolated problems, not institutional failings. Perpetrators are generally labeled as “bad apples” and said to be unrepresentative of the armed forces more broadly.<sup>10</sup> And this is to say nothing of service members engaged in minor theft, their problems with alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and other problems that rarely make the news. More bad apples, just not bad enough to get noticed.

But as much as the “bad apple” metaphor is applied, it is rarely used in its original meaning—*one bad apple can spoil the barrel*. In other words, a “bad apple” is indicative of more rot. When service members are found to be criminals (or just behaving badly) few in the media or political establishments ever turn their attention to the military itself; that is, nobody cares to examine the barrel.

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Dreisbach and Meg Anderson, “Nearly 1 In 5 Defendants In Capitol Riot Cases Served In The Military,” NPR, January 21, 2021, sec. Investigations, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>.

<sup>9</sup> Ivana Saric, “Oath Keepers Members List Includes Military, Law Enforcement, Politicians,” Axios, September 7, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/09/07/oath-keepers-member-list-military>.

<sup>10</sup> The “bad apple” framing is also often applied to police.

My goal in this dissertation is to look at the barrel that is military culture to get a better idea of why some apples keep rotting. At the root of this rot, I suggest, is a problematic combination of reactionary cultural politics that includes military masculinity, a particularly aggressive understanding of patriotism, and a moral acceptance of violence. Together these provide insight into the more salient problems such as insurrection, sexual assault, and war crimes. As veterans are products of their militaries, they will often reflect those militaries long after they leave service. We can understand military culture through veterans and understand veterans through military culture.

I endeavor to illuminate military culture through veterans. Veterans are freer than currently serving military members to talk about their military experiences because they are no longer confined by the rules of the institution. In other words, they can be more honest because they are no longer subject to military regulations. I look at various texts produced by veterans about their own service or about the military more broadly. I examine war memoirs, how veterans use military imagery to create consumer brands, military humor, and how veterans position themselves in political campaigns. I use my own experiences and knowledge of military culture to help readers understand the meanings embedded in these particular texts and their meanings in the broader culture of the US military.

Patriotism, masculinity, and violence all seem to have obvious connections to any military (not just the US). What is less obvious is how these concepts are understood by the members of the military and what the consequences of these are after military service. Examining different types of texts created by veterans (memoirs, comedy, product merchandising, and political campaigns) and understanding them in the context of generation-long wars fought only by a volunteer force will help show how those in service have understood

what is valued and what is devalued. These texts are arguments and parts of broader conversations among veterans about military service. They show what veterans learn while in the military and that continue to deeply inform their identities afterward. Moreover, they reflect and create normative understandings about the military and its values that are then emulated by young soldiers and referenced by civilians.

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When I began this project, I didn't want to focus on the typical veteran. I wanted to focus on veterans who, like me, went against this grain and did not match the stereotype. Rather than write about memoirs of war-loving Navy SEALs, I wanted to write about books by veterans whose combat experiences challenge aggressive masculinity and came to hate violence. I was always interested in the potential of military humor for undermining the stereotypes civilians hold about the military, not the juvenile, frat-boy humor that predominates military comedy. But in my efforts to look at veterans who did not fit the mold, I always had to explain the baseline. And when I did find scholarship on military culture, it somewhat missed the mark by focusing on organizational culture or aspects of military culture that are unique but maybe not important.

My position as a formerly enlisted soldier gives me a unique place to understand the style, culture, and politics of VetBros, and explain it to others. Most veterans who move into academia were officers while in the military meaning they had college degrees before joining. Scholars who have never served often rely on representations of the military in popular media along with the military's own public affairs work. Military elites and scholars of Civil-Military Relations (CMR) generally look at military culture in terms of structure and interactions among elites. These perspectives are important: CMR scholars can show larger structural and political

issues at play and outsiders often notice things and ask questions an insider never would. But these perspectives often lack the viewpoint of regular soldiers.

If we are to understand the problematic aspects of military culture that VetBros come from, one place to look is their own representations. Official texts won't help; in fact, they would say that such noxious views and juvenile humor are antithetical to the "warrior ethos." Narrow understandings of the military based on popular representations may point to problems, but they will be confused due to misguided assumptions. Instead, I want veterans to speak for themselves by looking at how veterans represent themselves to each other, how they tell their own stories, and how they discuss military life and its values using their voice and their language.

This project has developed from knowing that typical civilian understandings of veterans are incomplete and that "insider accounts" will help to fill in the picture. I have learned from experience that the cultural products of the military are not always easily understandable to civilians, if civilians even know they exist. This is similar to how the perspectives of minority groups are often best explained by insiders. In a sense, they require a certain degree of translation and explanation of context. But giving background on a military operation to help understand the context of a war memoir or explaining the meaning of a raunchy military-related joke is not enough to elucidate the larger culture. Looking at the different ways that veterans communicate their veteran identity through traditional formats, online media, comedy, retail merchandising, as well as political campaigns shows not only the range of how VetBros conceptualize their identity, but also the continuity across different media and rhetorical situations.

Finally, I have written this dissertation while Veterans Studies is being established as an area of academic research. There is now a peer-reviewed *Journal of Veterans Studies*, a biennial "Veterans in Society" conference, and a professional organization, the Veterans Studies



Association. As an emerging multi-disciplinary field, Veterans Studies is finding its footing and is still in the process of defining what makes it unique. This dissertation is my contribution to this young field, and it represents an argument for what it can provide. Veterans Studies can help understand the effects of war-making on a society, not just the individuals who took on a direct role. It offers the potential to examine the cultural, political, and social effects of the state's war-making apparatus by examining the people directly involved and the effects on them. Even though this dissertation is focused on a particular stereotype of veterans, it can also aid the studies of veterans who do not meet stereotype as well as military families. Their experiences were surely shaped by the cultural environment of the military that produced the VetBros.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I must thank Professor Robert Horwitz for his guidance and assistance throughout writing this dissertation. I had unceremoniously quit this process and had to start again from scratch; without Prof. Horwitz's advice there is no way I would have been able to complete it. I also need to thank the faculty, staff, and students at Palomar Community College, especially the Speech Communication/ASL Department, for providing a bit of an academic home for the past several years. For all my friends from before, during, and after my time in San Diego, thank you for encouraging me to keep working and encouraging me to get out and take breaks.

I wrote this dissertation while living with two military veterans who could not be more different than the VetBros featured in this dissertation. For over two years beginning in 2021 I shared an apartment with Christian, a queer Dominican Navy veteran. From our apartment in downtown Oceanside, home of Marine Corps base Camp Pendleton, Christian and I had a great place to observe the VetBros and the "boots" who will probably become VetBros themselves (although hopefully not). I then finished writing in Escondido while living with Gilbert, a Black Marine Corps veteran, artist, musician, and hippy.

And finally, I thank my family, especially my parents Barbara and Richard. I could not have finished this without their love and support.

## VITA

1998-2007	U.S. Army Reserve
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“Patriotism as a Lifestyle (Brand).” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 7, no. 3 (2021): 71–82.  
<https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i3.258>.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

VetBros: Masculinity, Militarism, Patriotism, and the Post-9/11 Veteran

by

John E. Armenta

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Robert Horwitz, Chair

The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were marked by protracted wars fought by the United States. In addition to killing and displacing millions of Afghans and Iraqis, these wars called to question long-standing assumptions about the US military and its personnel. They challenged conceptions of patriotic obligations by relying on an “All-Volunteer Force,” a first for a prolonged conflict, and they challenged conceptions of military masculinity with the inclusion of women in combat roles. One response among some military veterans is seen in the rise of so-called “VetBros.” A VetBro is a stereotype, often used dismissively, to represent overbearing and aggressive veterans who interpret everything through their veteran identity and who express themselves with conspicuous displays of masculinity and patriotism which they see as linked to

militarism and violence. VetBros show the effects of broader problems in the relationship between state, society, and military that emanate from tensions in military culture with the waging of, at the time, seemingly endless wars of occupation by a democratic society. In this dissertation I examine different ways VetBros have expressed their understandings of the military, patriotism, masculinity by looking at how they express their veteran identity in war memoirs, a streaming video comedy network, military-themed lifestyle branding, and political campaigns. Through these various media I show how VetBros construct an identity and image united by similar styles of fashion, communication, and their assertions that they represent an authentic veteran identity. Military veterans have traditionally received a great deal of cultural capital to define matters like patriotism and masculinity and, as my analysis shows, VetBros believe that they have a privileged place among veterans to define these matters. Importantly, they see masculinity and patriotism as inextricably linked to militaristic beliefs and the justification of violent action. Due to the culturally symbolic position of veterans in the US, the VetBro visions of aggressive patriotism and masculinity may give legitimacy to support greater militarization of US society, justify war crimes abroad, and encourage vigilante violence at home.

## Introduction

The term VetBro represents an idea about military veteran masculinity and patriotism born in the era of the Post-9/11 Wars, especially the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Even though they are not a formal group, I talk about VetBros in terms of a group or subculture because this is a way to examine a collection of particular attitudes and understandings of identity and cultural expressions in an embodied form. The term has been used in online chat rooms and other social media since at least the early 2010s, sometimes as “BroVet,” and almost always as a joke or even an insult.<sup>2</sup>

A VetBro is a meme, or a stereotype that represents an overbearing and sometimes aggressive veteran who interprets everything through his military service, displays of masculinity and veteran identity.<sup>3</sup> VetBros are united by similar styles of fashion, communication, and through their assertions that they represent an authentic veteran identity. This dissertation shows that these expressions of veterans, through their understandings of masculinity and patriotism, are symptoms of broader issues in the relationship between state, society, and military emanating from tensions in military culture and the practical problems of waging seemingly endless wars of occupation by a democratic society.

While few veterans will refer to themselves as a VetBro they are typically identified due to ways of behaving online, media consumption patterns, style of dress, and particular beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Post-9/11 Wars” as a way to include all the various conflicts the US has engaged in after the September 11, 2001, attacks. This term avoids the political connotations and analytical messiness of the government’s official term “Global War on Terrorism.”

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Matthew Bartley, “Bro-Veterans: A Guide,” US Patriot Blog, September 11, 2017, <https://blog.uspatriottactical.com/bro-veterans-a-guide/> and Meaghan Mobbs, “What Is The ‘Bro-Vet’ In Veteran Culture, Anyway?,” *Task & Purpose* (blog), September 17, 2018, <https://taskandpurpose.com/entertainment/veteran-podcast-bro-vet/>.

<sup>3</sup> As VetBros are typically male I will generally refer to them using masculine pronouns.

around masculine identity, patriotism, militaristic values, and support for violent behavior. These aspects of veteran culture are also representative of military culture itself. In fact, many of the consumers of VetBro media and fashion discussed in the following chapters are still active-duty service members. As the VetBros represent the hegemonic values of the military, we can also better understand veterans who do not conform through knowing the cultural landscape they reject or that rejected them.

Cynthia Enloe reminds us that “it is analytically risky to imagine that any military force simply exists.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, veterans do not “simply exist.” They are products of social and political processes sometimes decades in the making. The tactics and personnel management used during the Post-9/11 Wars were far different than any other conflict in the nation’s history. Military units would deploy repeatedly, generally for about a year at a time with two years in between deployments.<sup>5</sup> This resulted in a small number of Americans involved in these overseas wars, challenging the notions of a military comprised of citizen-soldiers from across the entire population—it set them apart from their fellow citizens.

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq quickly turned into protracted counterinsurgency campaigns; this challenged the patriotic rhetoric of “protecting the homeland” and “defending freedom.” At the same time these were the first conflicts that involved a significant number of women in combat which challenged traditional notions of military masculinity. The nature of counterinsurgency operations itself also troubled military masculinity.<sup>6</sup> Counterinsurgency, despite its bloody violence, does not allow for the set piece battles and heroic actions common to

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Enloe, “The Recruiter and the Sceptic: A Critical Feminist Approach to Military Studies,” *Critical Military Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 4.

<sup>5</sup> This varied based on branch of service and time period.

<sup>6</sup> Synne L. Dyvik, *Gendering Counterinsurgency: Performativity, Embodiment and Experience in the Afghan ‘Theatre of War’* (London: Routledge, 2017).

war stories. And the violence of counterinsurgency was complicated by the necessity of women to be involved through so-called “Female Engagement Teams.”<sup>7</sup>

When veterans came home from the wars, they were often met with resounding acclamations of gratitude from civilians. But the expressions of “supporting the troops” seemed ritualistic and were combined with seemingly little public engagement over the wars. “Supporting the troops” became a social imperative rather than any actual attempt to provide the troops or veterans with the support they needed. Veterans’ reintegration into society after their participation in the wars came at a time when media discourse highlighted the challenges and the failures of reintegration for so many. The message veterans received from civilians was confusing: they were called “heroes,” but also “broken” or “damaged,” and sometimes “dangerous.” Veterans were reduced to stereotypes. And these stereotypes (the heroic warrior, the damaged victim, the dangerous killer) are all dehumanizing in their own ways.

This “support the troops” imperative was sometimes argued as a corrective response to the poor treatment of veterans from the Vietnam War supposedly received (apparently at the hand of anti-war protesters) even though there is little evidence that happened.<sup>8</sup> Support for the war was argued to be a patriotic obligation.<sup>9</sup> The lack of public support for the war in Vietnam was used to shift the blame for the war’s loss from the political classes and military leadership to the public and led to the myth that the military was “stabbed in the back.”<sup>10</sup> This has been a

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Keohane and Kelly Jakes, “Soldiers and Scholars: Evaluating Female Engagement Teams in the War in Afghanistan,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 44, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>8</sup> Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey P. Kimball, “The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War,” *Armed Forces & Society* 14, no. 3 (1988).



useful myth for successive administrations to shore up support or at least deflect criticism for military operations. The imperative to “support the troops” has been used as a rhetorical dodge by politicians and military officials to separate the wars from the troops fighting them.<sup>11</sup> And this imperative has resulted in less public engagement with the politics of the conflicts and perhaps even the troops themselves.

VetBros have responded to the ambiguous combination of prescribed respect and lack of engagement by assuming an identity and style that is unambiguous to them. They understand themselves as patriotic men and they believe that their experiences in war gives them the authority to speak on matters of patriotism, masculinity, and the military. Key to their understanding of these ideas, and how they are connected, is the justifiable (in their view) use of violence. Men must be aggressive and so must patriots. Likewise, militaries, to be effective, require violent men willing to risk their lives for the country. But they insist they are not violent sociopaths, rather they justify their support for violence as a way to defend and protect their families and their country, both of which they understand as being threatened. Importantly, they see themselves as reasserting (their narrow understandings of) “traditional” values associated with both patriotism and masculinity through their veteran identity.

In this dissertation I examine VetBros through various ways they have asserted themselves as men and as patriots—their understandings of conflict and war, their politics, and their cultural values. Specifically, I examine various ways they have communicated their veteran identity and show how that shapes their conceptions of patriotism and masculinity. By studying what veterans think about issues such as gender relations or patriotism, we can get a better sense

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah Bulmer and Maya Eichler, “Unmaking Militarized Masculinity: Veterans and the Project of Military-to-Civilian Transition,” *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 165.

of these cultural values as they are learned in the military. I look at more traditional forms of veterans expressing themselves such as war memoirs and their attempts at political office. I also look at newer media, including streaming video and lifestyle branding. Each of these cases show attempts to claim an “authentic” veteran identity and speak for all veterans.

VetBros show more than just a particular expression of veteran identity, attitude, and behavior. Their political beliefs extend beyond their narrow group and are quite common among parts of the political right. VetBros can help us understand the defenses for war crimes, the attitudes and motives of militia organizations such as the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, the rioters and insurrectionists on January 6, 2021, and the rise in small-scale violent vigilantism. While VetBros do not represent all, or even most, veterans they are the loudest and most public expression of veteran identity.

### **Who Are VetBros**

VetBros are obviously veterans, particularly veterans who served during the Post-9/11 Wars. Older veterans are not excluded, but they do not typically take on the style and other trappings of VetBros. They are almost exclusively masculine-presenting cis-men. Some women may adopt the style, but rarely. Gender non-conforming and queer individuals are not included, and they probably would not want to associate with VetBros due to their more conservative ideas around gender and sexuality. VetBros are outspoken about their patriotism, their support of aggressive US military action, the Second Amendment, and their masculine identity.

One thing that establishes one as a VetBro instead of just a veteran is the centrality of “veteran” to their identity, at least in public presentations. For many (even most) veterans, service in the military is just one aspect of their biography, just another job even if a more

interesting one.<sup>12</sup> For a VetBro, being a veteran is the defining feature of who he is and how he presents himself. But VetBro is not a permanent identity. One can easily look and act like a VetBro for the first several years after leaving the military and later downplay the centrality of being a veteran in their self-presentation. Conversely, one may avoid talking about their military service for years and then decide to highlight it.

In the early years of the Post-9/11 Wars there was small-scale but notable veteran activism against the wars, but it never gained the media attention these activists hoped for.<sup>13</sup> Later, there was widespread media coverage of veterans having difficulty reintegrating into civilian society and an epidemic of veteran suicide. The VetBro is not just defining his own image of veteran identity, he is also trying to differentiate himself from these other images of veterans. VetBros are not the antiwar veterans from the early years of the conflicts, and they are not the ones who came back “damaged” or “broken.” They demand a role for veterans in society, even if this role is unclear, because they believe veterans have shown their commitment to the country through their military service, particularly in overseas combat operations.

Military culture and personnel policies, along with the conduct and outcomes of the Post-9/11 Wars, further shaped the VetBros’ views. The relatively small number of Americans who served in the military made VetBros feel abandoned by civilians and left alone in seemingly endless wars. The nature of the fighting and how successive administrations chose to staff the armed forces during these wars required changes to gender and sexuality rules in the military: women were incorporated into “front-line” positions, the de facto ban on homosexual service

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Porter, “Conversations in Veterans’ Studies: ‘Veteran’ as a Post-Labor Category,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Schrader, “The Affect of Veteran Activism,” *Critical Military Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019).

members was lifted, as was the total ban on transgender service members. These conflicts upset and challenged traditional ideas about war, combat, and the place of masculinity in the “warrior” culture of the military. And contrary to what many VetBros claim, there is no evidence to suggest that these policy changes regarding gender and sexuality negatively impacted combat efficiency.

This is the military culture in which VetBros developed. They interpreted military loss (or lack of victory) through what they saw as attacks on traditional military culture, and they see themselves as upholding the traditions. They understand themselves as being different because they see their core beliefs in patriotism, traditional masculinity, and the primacy of martial values as not being respected by mainstream society. They argue that these traditional values situate them outside society.

#### VetBros as a Subculture

VetBros are not a “subculture” following how it is typically described in sociological theory, such as in Dick Hebdige’s classic study *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.<sup>14</sup> For starters, no one would earnestly claim “VetBro” as an identity in the way that punks would, for example. And VetBros also do not fit neatly in any of the other “post-subculture studies” terms for loose social gatherings such as “tribe” or “scene,” mostly because there is no particular music they organize around.<sup>15</sup> In Hebdige’s text, subculture studies were focused on youth, racial minorities, and immigrant groups trying to distinguish themselves against traditional authority and expectations of class, gender, and national identity. By contrast, VetBros align themselves with traditional authority through expressions of loyalty to the nation and conventional expectations

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<sup>14</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (London: Methuen, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, “Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005).

of gender identity. Even when they attack military leaders, they are doing so from a stated belief that those leaders are hurting traditions. And while many subcultures try to work outside of the traditional markets and even take on anti-capitalist positions, VetBros are quite supportive of market capitalism.

For a subculture to have an associated set of politics is quite common, but it is more common for the politics of a subculture to be somewhat oppositional to the dominant culture. Even white supremacist subcultures that take on the trappings of nationalism (as ethno-nationalism) are often at odds with their country's legal and political order. VetBros, however, purportedly support the US Constitution and the legal order (something the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists and rioters also try to claim). VetBros conflate patriotism with partisan politics and may even argue that a "real" patriot must be politically aligned with the Republican Party. There is a danger for any fashion or brand to become associated with a set of politics, as the VetBro brands do. The companies which supply the look and the media companies that cater to this audience may find that their customer base is limited and that their companies will not be able to grow.

It is still productive to think of VetBros as a subculture because they are trying to communicate intentionally through their style.<sup>16</sup> Subcultures have what Hebdige calls a "homology of style:" a fit between values and lifestyle, mode of communication and message.<sup>17</sup> To fully understand the larger message, one must consider all of the various elements and how they mutually inform and reinforce each other. And like the fashions of the punks or Rastafarians (two groups Hebdige examines in 1970s England), the actual politics of the fashion requires

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<sup>16</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 100-106.

<sup>17</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 113.

some background knowledge to fully “decode.” Now, this is not to say that there are “secret messages” or anything hidden in any of these fashions. Rather, the look and style have a history and tell a story that may not be fully known even by those engaged in it.

One of the chief indicators of a subculture is a distinct sense of fashion or a style—it is a form of communication. It should allow an insider to readily recognize another member of the group. Ideally, an outsider should also note the distinctiveness even if the style itself is not comprehensible or aesthetically pleasing. But unlike popular fashion trends that are available to a wide number of potential consumers hoping for a particular look, a subculture’s style should in some way be meaningful and the aesthetic choices of a subculture’s members also represent a broader message.<sup>18</sup> The choices in clothing and consumption reveal more about the ideology because even in the apparent lack of cohesion (to an outsider) there is an internal structure important to the group’s own sense of self.<sup>19</sup>

In Hebdige’s account, both punks and Rastafarians displayed their rejection of English working-class norms in ways that also challenged the middle-class culture of respectability. Both groups used their style, music, and communication to represent their cultural and political values. For punks, it was rejection of capitalist consumer culture that combined various styles already known and displayed through the “cut-up” technique.<sup>20</sup> For Rastafarians, their Black nationalist and anti-colonial politics took the form of a religious movement with its own standards of dress and behavior. In both cases, clothing, music, and socialization reflected the broader cultural and

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<sup>18</sup> Jonah Berger and Chip Heath, “Where Consumers Diverge from Others: Identity Signaling and Product Domains,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 34, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>19</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 113-114.

<sup>20</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 26.

political stances. Likewise, for VetBros, they use their style to communicate their worldview and emphasize their understandings of masculinity and patriotic commitments.

### VetBro Style

The VetBro fashion is characterized by various riffs on casual men's fashion from the previous twenty years. The look borrows from earlier men's fashion trends that were stylistic reactions to perceived androgyny and femininity in popular men's clothing, namely the "hipster" and the "metrosexual" which were argued to have been a "crisis" in masculinity.<sup>21</sup> These trends spurred various sartorial reactions, one of which, the "lumbersexual" so called because the style attempted to mimic the perceived look of loggers of the Pacific Northwest. It borrowed freely from earlier symbolism that established one as a "rugged individual."<sup>22</sup> Like its lumbersexual predecessor, the VetBro style is itself a reaction to perceived challenges to traditional gender norms and American patriotism.

Another feature of the VetBros style involves affirmations of patriotism, typically through connection to military service. Sometimes these displays are muted, limited only to an image of a flag or some other motif involving the colors of the flag or other symbol of national identity. At times, these expressions contain an element of playfulness, even apparent irony. But this should not be regarded as mocking patriotism, rather an example of how they conceive of themselves and outsiders. As self-styled "real" patriots, VetBros are allowed to have this fun when it comes to national symbols—others are not afforded this semiotic playfulness with the symbols and rituals of American patriotism.

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<sup>21</sup> Helene Shugart, "Managing Masculinities: The Metrosexual Moment," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth C. Hirschman, "Men, Dogs, Guns, and Cars: The Semiotics of Rugged Individualism," *Journal of Advertising* 32, no. 1 (2003).

The VetBro communication style fits with their fashion style in that it includes the trappings of deference to traditional authority and can also be used ironically, seemingly making fun of outward expressions of patriotism. It is respectful when it needs to be, yet unsentimental when it wants to be. Both the clothing and the use of ironic distance or humor present an individual who “tells it like it is” with “no filter,” unafraid to offend anyone. VetBros perform this attitude through traditional media, such as war memoirs, through newer online media, and in their fashion choices.

VetBros and their style have deep roots in military culture and are also adaptations using contemporary fashion and communications. Both fashion style and communications style have developed in reactions to perceived loss of status of veteran identity and changes in patriarchal gender standards. Their consistency of style across different media and in messaging makes it useful to study them as a subcultural group even if they do not associate themselves as a group. Studying these veterans, their communications, sartorial choices, etc. can be useful for understanding the effects of militarism and militarization on people, as well as how masculinity and patriotism themselves have been inflected through the lens of militarism.

### **Themes**

In this dissertation I examine texts created by VetBros with an emphasis on how they exhibit and forward particular understandings of patriotism and masculinity, often through the lens of militarism and violence. Taken together these concepts form what can be considered the worldview of the VetBro. While their particular understandings of masculinity, patriotism, militaristic values, and the utility of violence are common among the political right, VetBros are important for how many civilians understand them.



Members of the military and veterans have long received a great deal of deference in shaping the meaning of patriotism. Patriotism is, according to George Kateb “the readiness...to die and to kill for one’s country.”<sup>23</sup> VetBros have taken this commonly associated connection between patriotism and war and demand that they are the sole arbiters of patriotism. That they alone can define its meaning and who can claim title of “patriot.”

Veterans are also traditionally associated with masculinity. The military has long served as an institution that enabled “a boy to become a man.” But with more women in the ranks, including in combat roles, and the end of restrictions barring homosexuals from serving, this connection with heterosexual masculinity has changed. Some even argue that these changes regarding gender and sexuality are a threat to the military and the nation.<sup>24</sup> It is not enough to recognize that VetBros are aggressively masculine, I show what masculinity means to them and their role in their idealized gender hierarchy. Because VetBros are reacting to perceived “crisis in masculinity,” a crisis that is commonly referenced by conservative politicians, understanding how VetBros conceive of masculinity will aid in the broader critiques of reactionary calls for so-called traditional gender norms.

Militarism and violence are also key to understanding how VetBros interpret the world. They see reasonable justifications for the uses of violence (especially in defense of the country and the traditional gender order). And they fundamentally value military values and systems above civilian ones. Even their criticisms of the US Department of Defense as a bureaucratic institution take the point of view that it is going against military values and not using violence appropriately. Militarism and support for violence are not necessarily synonymous although they

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<sup>23</sup> George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Lori Holyfield et al., “Masculinity under Attack: Melodramatic Resistance to Women in Combat,” *Critical Military Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019).

can support each other. Militarism is the belief in the superiority of military institutions and values over civilian ones. Its proponents often extol the virtues of veterans simply because they are veterans. They look for military solutions to problems, whether they are warranted or not. And not just overseas or in relation to national security, but also to “solve” domestic issues. VetBros and like-minded civilians often take the stance that the military and veterans have a special authority to speak on issues or to act due to their military experience.

VetBros are not theorists of any sort. They do not present deep conceptual understandings of their belief structures or the philosophies that undergird them. In the empirical chapters I explore how they express their own “common sense understandings” of these central issues. While they do talk freely about the importance of masculinity or patriotism, they frame their own discussions as giving their own personal take on the issues. Their entire self-presentation then becomes their mode for expressing their values and beliefs about patriotism, masculinity, and militarism. By looking at this self-presentation I show the implications behind their interpretations which have been influenced by and influence broader right-wing understandings.

### **Chapter Outline**

I have selected a range of media and texts that highlight different aspects of VetBro communications and style from across the two-decade course of the Post-9/11 Wars. This wide range of time and media highlights the consistency of the VetBro style through the various forms it takes on. How they talk about the importance of patriotism, masculine identity, and militaristic violence does not change much from the accounts made in the early 2000s to the 2022 Congressional races. In the first chapter I further explain the theoretical framework that guides my research.

I begin my empirical study in Chapter 2 with a look at some of the most popular non-fiction books written by veterans of the early stages of the Post-9/11 Wars, all written by US Navy SEALs. Due to their highly selective and rigorous process for screening members, and their dangerous and risky missions, the Navy SEALs are considered some of the most elite members of the US military. They are looked up to and emulated as the model of what a “warrior” should be. As a result, their stories attract a lot of attention and are widely consumed. They serve as a frame of reference for civilians to understand the military and war, and shape how other veterans understand war and the meaning of their own participation. These Navy SEAL authors all see the superiority of military institutions and culture, and the necessity of the violence of war. They also see anyone who tries to contain their violence as being misguided, cowardly, or even an enemy. These war memoirs also show how easily their communications style transferred from older media forms to the newer ones featured in the following chapters.

The communications style of VetBros values authenticity and an apparent lack of regard for the feelings of others. This is often demonstrated in a certain lack of sentimentality and also through a somewhat irreverent sense of humor. In Chapter 3 I turn to military humor as a way to understand how VetBros define their community and its limits. Early in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the web comic Terminal Lance and the satirical news website Duffel Blog used their respective forms to highlight the quotidian aspects of military life often ignored in mainstream media. The focus of the chapter is a subsequent veteran-run comedy venture, the online streaming video network Vet TV. This network’s products show how VetBros craft humor about the military and the people in it. By considering jokes as a form of group identification, I show how these veterans understand both their own identities and who they find worthy to make fun

of. The targets of their humor are almost always women or men who do not fit a particular form of aggressive military masculinity. Other frequent targets are Afghans and Iraqis.

Chapter 4 looks at the outward style of VetBros with an examination of the two biggest veteran-themed and owned lifestyle brands, Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company. These two companies have built their brands off their founders' veteran identity and attaching that veteran identity to the products they sell with a combination of patriotic slogans and irreverent humor. Using the lifestyle brand organizational and marketing strategy, these two companies provide the clothing and accessories for VetBros, and their marketing shows them how they should look and even act. The respective founders of these companies argue that their sometimes playful and irreverent nature of their products and designs comes from their veteran identity. This has been matched with a similar lack of business professionalism by treating their employees in ways that resemble the hazing environments of a military unit and their businesses as extensions of their personality.

In Chapter 5 I move to looking at VetBros trying to transfer their military experience and the esteem gained from it into electoral politics. The political campaigns of veterans who are first-time Congressional candidates show how some veterans attempt to use their military experience to argue that they are qualified to serve in elected office. They base their personality and arguments for their candidacy off of being a veteran. I focus on six campaigns of veterans who ran for the House of Representatives in 2022. The VetBro candidates I focus on (three who won their races and three who lost) all have their own ways of talking about their military experience that are consistent with the broader VetBro style. They also show how they conceive of American citizenship and patriotism, the role of the military in the nation.

In Chapter 6 I conclude by returning to looking at VetBros as a subculture. VetBros are attempting to define a unique identity because they want to be associated with something they see as outside the mainstream. Like their alt-right civilian peers, they try to make their reactionary politics into a counter-cultural identity. This desire for greater connections and purpose is somewhat dangerous as it leads them to show their commitment to their values in the forms of violent action.

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Studying VetBros is more than an effort in looking at a curious expression of veteran identity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Veterans show how relationships between state-society-military are constructed; any pathologies in those relationships can be seen in veterans. When VetBros are trying to represent the military and war they are telling their audiences how they understand their participation in both. They are showing how they understand contemporary patriotism and masculinity in the United States and the engagement of both with militarism and violence. As veterans, these men are culturally and historically granted a great deal of credibility on these topics. Because masculinity and patriotism are two key symbolic pillars of state legitimacy knowing how they are constructed in contemporary discourse is crucial to critiquing state power and recognizing its uses.

These VetBros are not writing any treatises on the meanings of patriotic masculinity and militarism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They do not outright say what these things are, their meanings, or histories. They are, in their own accounts, just telling stories. But embedded in these stories are messages about what they value and what they despise. They need a degree of decoding to show what the messages are, something a fellow veteran like me can help with. In order to effectively critique problems such as rampant misogyny in the military or veteran participation in anti-

government extremist groups, we can be assisted by understanding the aggressive and violent patriotic masculinity of VetBros.

## 1. Conceptual Framework

VetBros construct their identity around their military service and their attempts to negotiate what feels to them as a unique identity among civilians. What distinguishes the VetBro from the average veteran is that they embrace not fitting in. They forward their veteran identity as evidence of their uniqueness and even superiority. This identity, for them is aggressively masculine and aggressively patriotic. Importantly, they treat these as self-evident—that is, they treat the connections between their former military service and their aggressively masculine patriotism as the only proper way one can be a veteran.

This aggressively masculine patriotism has developed in a climate where some argue that there are ongoing crises in gender identity and national identity which can only be solved by empowering men and the military. The veterans featured here do not always claim to be making moral or political arguments about war or patriotism or masculinity. Rather, they frame their contributions as showing their personal take on issues such as masculinity, patriotism, and the role of military in society. The VetBros I examine in this dissertation talk about issues like patriotism and masculinity as if their meanings are uncontested and obvious—they do not consider alternative ways they could be understood.

This chapter lays out the conceptual framework that grounds the empirical chapters which follow. First, I situate my research on VetBros in the field of veterans studies and argue what can be gained from an examination of veterans. I then turn to the major theoretical concepts that are illuminated and challenged by the VetBro texts that form the basis of my empirical work: masculine identity, patriotism, and militarism. While there are traditionally strong connections between these ideologies, those connections are too often understood as “natural” and therefore

are taken for granted. The purpose of this discussion is to “de-naturalize” the connections in order to show the efforts that VetBros go through to base their identities on them.

## **Veteran Identity and Studying Veterans**

### **Why Study Veterans?**

Veterans have complicated relationships with both state and society. While they are often recognized for their service, they are also understood as potentially destabilizing threats. In fact, the earliest veterans’ benefits (except for disability or widows’ pensions) were not to recognize veterans for their service; rather they were recruiting tools, offers to quell mutinies, or “insurance” against destitute veterans from becoming bandits.<sup>1</sup> As late as the “Bonus March” in 1932 many argued that veterans were owed nothing special due to their wartime service and that any special payments were an insult to the patriotism of veterans.<sup>2</sup>

During WWII, sociologists were writing on the “problem” of veteran reintegration and identified veterans as a potentially violent and destabilizing force. In 1944, Willard Waller noted that the culture of the military and the violence of war could prevent a veteran from being able to resettle in the civilian world.<sup>3</sup> In particular, he was worried about how they could become a reactionary force and cited the rise of the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War and the Nazi Party after WWI. A contemporary of Waller’s, Alfred Schuetz, saw the disconnect between civilians’ idealized image of veterans and how veterans understood themselves as part of the tension preventing veteran reintegration.<sup>4</sup> This disconnect between the idealized image of service

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<sup>1</sup> Emily J Teipe, *America’s First Veterans and the Revolutionary War Pensions* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 11-15.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen R. Ortiz, *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 26-40.

<sup>3</sup> Willard Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back* (New York: Dryden Press, 1944).

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Schuetz, “The Homecomer (1944),” in *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans since the War*, ed. Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman (New York: Praeger, 1980), 120-121.



members and veterans and how they understand themselves has reemerged as subject of research in more recent years.

The fields of military sociology and civil-military relations developed in response to the need to understand the effects on society of a large peacetime military and how to balance military effectiveness and a democratic political order.<sup>5</sup> But veterans largely fell out as an object of study with far more attention paid to subjects such as the composition of military units, racial integration, or relationships between senior officers and civilian leaders. More recently, social scientists have responded to the deep ties between military institutions and academic research by developing the field of critical military studies. Drawing from feminist international relations research, anthropology, and critical disability studies, critical military studies looks at societal effects of militarism. Veterans studies has the potential to broaden this research and examine the effects of the military and its associated ideologies on individuals and understand their experiences developing from connection to the military.

As a field, veterans studies is concerned with the post-military experience in the civilian environment. More than just being about how the military has changed a person, the focus is what happens when that person comes into contact with the civilian world. Veterans studies does share features with identity studies but has not yet shown the unique contributions that it can offer. Like other fields related to identity, veterans studies emphasizes the role of in-group research. Due to the uniqueness of the military experience, researchers are at an advantage if they can draw from personal military experience. My own military experience and veteran

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<sup>5</sup> The key texts of this field include Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier, a Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).

identity has been essential to understanding and interpreting the objects of study in this dissertation. But unlike the roots of most identity studies fields, veterans studies has not developed from a recent history of discrimination and marginalization. Rather, this field developed during a period in which veterans have held positions of esteem and privilege.<sup>6</sup>

A singular focus on veterans can help inform the nature of the relationships between state, society, and military. Civilians have been removed from the effects of war. Not only are American civilians spared from the violence of war, they are also not subject to conscription or wartime privations and taxes to support a war effort. As Mary L. Dudziak argues, “instead of a polity shaped by collective engagement with death and suffering, contemporary [American] civilians are isolated from violence, and profound apathy leaves war without a broad-based constituency...in this way, the culture of war lays the basis not only for civilian disengagement; it helps shape the structure of government war power.”<sup>7</sup> Veterans, along with their families, are not similarly isolated from the violence and are not able to disengage. Their proximity to war shows the direct effects of state policy and military action on their very lives.

Veterans studies has yet to cohere into a recognizable academic discipline. In a systematic review of veterans studies literature, Leonard Lira and Janani Chandrasekar show some emerging trends in the field’s research as well as some limitations. They claim that researchers are mostly looking at “physical, mental, social experiences of veterans,” but mostly as a dependent variable.<sup>8</sup> The authors specifically argue that more research on veterans should focus on veterans as an “independent variable” and how veterans actively contribute to “their

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<sup>6</sup> Leonard L. Lira and Janani Chandrasekar, “The State of Research in Veterans Studies: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6, no. 2 (2020): 46–47.

<sup>7</sup> Mary L Dudziak, “‘You Didn’t See Him Lying ... beside the Gravel Road in France’: Death, Distance, and American War Politics,” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 1 (2018): 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Lira and Chandrasekar, “The State of Research in Veterans Studies,” 59.

communities, companies, and society in general.”<sup>9</sup> One of the goals of this dissertation is to do exactly that: to look directly at the contributions of veterans and examine how they are trying to interact with their peers and the civilian public.

Importantly, Lira and Chandrasekar ask why veterans studies is emerging now. They recognize that the veteran population is smaller than it has ever been, which arguably means the impact of veterans on society is less than it has ever been. And yet, only in the last decade has interest in veterans studies research grown.<sup>10</sup> The VetBros I examine in this dissertation and veterans studies developed during the same time and are results of and reactions to changes in military force employment and the military’s relationship with civilian society. VetBros and veterans studies have grown out of an environment of novel military force structures being used to fight protracted (and for a time, seemingly endless) overseas wars along with a civilian public unsure how to respond to the small part of the population engaged in these conflicts.

Some veterans studies research may unintentionally be advancing the project of militarism. For example, work directly related to veteran reintegration into civilian life can support the longevity of the All-Volunteer Force. Problems of veteran reintegration (perceived or actual) can lead to recruitment problems if the public sees the military taking young people, ruining their futures, and destroying their lives. This perception can lead to fewer recruits to volunteer for service. So, by helping veterans have better reintegration outcomes, these scholars may be assisting the state by alleviating the problematic image of the veteran rather than addressing the actual reasons for the reintegration problems (namely, the military itself and war).

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<sup>9</sup> Lira and Chandrasekar, “The State of Research in Veterans Studies,” 60.

<sup>10</sup> Lira and Chandrasekar, “The State of Research in Veterans Studies,” 60.

The large proportion of research on veterans Lira and Chandrasekar note devoted to education, employment, and health shows this focus.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that veteran reintegration is not an important problem or that resources should not be devoted to assisting people transitioning out of military service into civilian life. Only that veterans studies researchers should be aware of how their work can be used to advance militarism, state violence, and the associated patriarchal values these involve. In this way, veterans studies does show some problematic connections to state power in the same way that area studies has historically. But it can also be used to critique militarism, patriarchy, and state violence. Veterans being able to reintegrate into society involves coming to terms with the violent potentials of patriotism and militarized masculinity.<sup>12</sup>

#### Formation of Veteran Identity

A veteran's identity as a veteran is constructed in the tensions of the relationships between state, society, and the military. These tensions initially develop in how civilians understand the role of the military. This shapes their understandings of veterans, sometimes as "heroes," or as "damaged," or even as "dangerous." Communications and journalism scholar Scott Parrott has looked at how veterans are portrayed in broadcast and social media, and how these shape civilian perceptions of veterans. In a study of word associations and mental imagery civilians have of veterans, Parrott and colleagues found a common set of themes civilians use to describe veterans in terms of character and physical appearance.<sup>13</sup> Their respondents overwhelmingly described veterans as being white men. Other common associations they found

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<sup>11</sup> Lira and Chandrasekar, "The State of Research in Veterans Studies," 59.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Bulmer and Maya Eichler, "Unmaking Militarized Masculinity: Veterans and the Project of Military-to-Civilian Transition," *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Scott Parrott et al., "Mental Representations of Military Veterans: The Pictures (and Words) In Our Heads," *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6, no. 3 (2020).

were descriptions such as “hero,” “honor,” and “patriotic.”<sup>14</sup> Importantly, a sizable minority (about 40%) of respondents reported that their conceptions of veterans were learned solely from media and not from any personal knowledge.<sup>15</sup> With another group of researchers. Parrott also looked at the types of images news organizations use when publishing stories about veterans.<sup>16</sup> While they did find that these photos tended to avoid certain stereotypes (e.g., women veterans were over-represented), they did support others (e.g., white veterans, especially WWII-era veterans, were also over-represented).

Parrott and other researchers have examined news broadcasts and social media to show the dominant frames used to describe veterans and the veteran experience. They found, for example, the prevalence of discussing veterans in extremes, that is, veterans are either courageous heroes, or damaged victims.<sup>17</sup> They also note the importance of news media in shaping attitudes about veterans,<sup>18</sup> as well as guiding social media conversations based on news coverage.<sup>19</sup> This prevalence of extremes in the representations is consistent with representations from previous wars and points a reliance on stereotypes, possibly due to the relatively small number of veterans in the population. This reliance on stereotyping is likely due to civilians

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<sup>14</sup> Parrott et al., “Mental Representations of Military Veterans,” 65-67.

<sup>15</sup> Parrott et al., “Mental Representations of Military Veterans,” 67.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Parrott et al., “The U.S. Military Veteran in News Photographs: Representation and Stereotypes,” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>17</sup> Scott Parrott et al., “Hero, Charity Case, and Victim: How U.S. News Media Frame Military Veterans on Twitter,” *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 4 (2019).

<sup>18</sup> Scott Parrott, David L. Albright, and Nicholas Eckhart, “Veterans and Media: The Effects of News Exposure on Thoughts, Attitudes, and Support of Military Veterans,” *Armed Forces & Society* 48, no. 3 (2021).

<sup>19</sup> Scott Parrott et al., “When We Post About #Veterans: The Role of News Media in Guiding Social Media Dialogue about Military Veterans,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022).

lacking personal connections to veterans.<sup>20</sup> Also important to much of the research on veterans is the role that “military culture” plays on them after they leave service. The problem is that “military culture” is often undefined or presented uncritically.

The study of veteran identity often begins with the idea of a distinct “veteran culture” to help explain the different reactions veterans have when they are thrust into the civilian world. But labeling veterans’ experiences as being the product of “veteran culture” is somewhat circular reasoning. There is also a flaw in the idea of a distinct veteran culture in that it conflates all veterans into one demographic unit and does not account for their varied experiences in or out of the military, especially with regard to race, gender, and sexuality. A compounding problem happens when researchers who are veterans approach the idea of veteran culture without any reflection or critique. Any understanding of veteran culture must begin with military culture, and that also must begin with the military and its culture, as well as the understanding that military culture itself is incredibly diverse.

Scholarly literature on military culture regularly looks at the purpose of a military and its role in society and then derives values from the military’s functions as being the military’s cultural values. For example, good order and discipline are critical for the proper and effective functioning of a military force, so scholars claim that military culture values discipline in personal and professional life. These are then identified as things that make military (and therefore veteran) culture unique, even though traits such as self-discipline are important for any job field. The qualities of military and veteran culture supposedly possess are rarely critiqued. Part of this comes from the fact that these supposed cultural values are gleaned from military

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<sup>20</sup> “War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), October 5, 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2011/10/05/war-and-sacrifice-in-the-post-911-era/>.

members and veterans themselves, in interviews and surveys. In other words, researchers hoping to elucidate what makes military/veteran culture unique ask veterans to describe what makes them unique.<sup>21</sup> One of the aims of this dissertation is to address these methodological limitations by examining how veterans represent themselves for public audiences instead of through interviews or surveys.

In some of these self-reported data veterans often claim to feeling like “outsiders” when dealing with civilian institutions. This builds off of common perceptions of how veterans from the Vietnam War were mistreated, even though the most egregious stories are unfounded.<sup>22</sup> A common example cited is that veterans are subject to microaggressions from civilian colleagues, university staff, and teachers.<sup>23</sup> Examples typically involve some sort of being “singled out” and put on the spot to report on military matters or give opinions about national security policy. More problematic is asking questions about combat experience, especially death and killing. The combination of shared experiences through the military and shared experiences (by some) of oppression has led veterans and veterans studies scholars to claim that veterans are a marginalized group in American social life.

### Theories of Veteran Identity

In order to attempt to explain the differences between veterans and civilians as well as promote better outcomes for veterans, scholars in fields such as criminology, education, and health have attempted to identify what makes veteran identity unique. While these offer

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Wesley H. McCormick et al., “Military Culture and Post-Military Transitioning Among Veterans: A Qualitative Analysis,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 4, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Don Gomez, “An Army Vet’s Take On Trigger Warnings In The Classroom,” Task & Purpose, September 28, 2015, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/an-army-vets-take-on-trigger-warnings-in-the-classroom/>.

interesting perspectives to understanding veterans they are fairly instrumental in their approaches based on their respective fields. Each of these seem to be attempts at creating a unified theory of veteran identity. And while they do offer some insights, their grander ambitions cause them to lose sight of important differences that are often at odds with empirical data.

Eric Hannel presents what he calls the “Veteran Peoplehood” model to argue that veterans are indeed a specific group.<sup>24</sup> This draws on a models used in Native American legal communities to establish the existence of a particular tribe’s sovereignty. The model defines a group as having a unified identity, a unique “peoplehood,” due to its distinctive language, histories, ceremonies, and ties to specific locations.<sup>25</sup> While this may be a useful way for Indigenous people to make claims in court to establish their independence and sovereignty against a settler state’s claims otherwise, when applied to veterans it is rather contrived. Saying that militaries, and therefore veterans, have their own language and ties to specific locations is being rather generous with these definitions. Overall, the argument is somewhat circular: veterans are different because they joined the military, and the military made them different.

Charles Warner attempts to draw on criminologist Emma Murray’s term “veteranality” and proposes “critical veteranality” as a social ontological approach to understanding veterans lived experiences and their own veteran subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> Murray’s original coinage is a portmanteau of “veteran” and “criminality” to refer to veterans caught in the legal system. Her term is meant to reflect the tension between these social identities: the prestige afforded to the

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<sup>24</sup> Eric Hannel, “Veteran Peoplehood: A Theoretical Framework,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 9, no. 1 (2023).

<sup>25</sup> Hannel, “Veteran Peoplehood,” 182.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Oscar Warner, “(En)Acting Our Experience: Combat Veterans, Veteranality, and Building Resilience to Extremism,” *Journal of Regional Security* 17, no. 2 (2022): 273-274.



“veteran” and the stigma of being an “offender.”<sup>27</sup> Warner’s “critical” addition is based on his ethnographic approach that acknowledges that veterans can control their own narratives.<sup>28</sup> One point of interest in Warner’s theorization is that he proposes the existence of “toxic veteranality” in which some veterans attempt to enforce normative understandings of veteran identity and expression.<sup>29</sup>

Army veteran of the Iraq War, Travis L. Martin helped set up the first Veterans Studies academic program in the US at Eastern Kentucky University. In his venture to examine veteran identity he looks at popular media accounts and attempts to dispel the common stereotypes about veterans, specifically, the “hero” and the “broken/damaged” veteran.<sup>30</sup> These stereotypes are taken on by many veterans, even if reluctantly. Martin argues that this adoption of a stereotype (that is, allowing others to define one’s own experience) hinders a veteran’s growth and reintegration. The corrective he offers is for veterans to tell their own stories and craft their own narratives, something he demonstrates with the organization “Military Experience and the Arts” (MEA). The objects of study in this dissertation are similarly engaged in the process of defining their own experiences and veteran identity. But unlike the veterans working with MEA in Martin’s book, the veterans here are aiming at commercial products and political campaigns. They even embrace negative aspects of the stereotypes.

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<sup>27</sup> Emma Murray, “Post-Army Trouble: Veterans in the Criminal Justice System,” *Criminal Justice Matters* 94, no. 1 (2013): 20-21.

<sup>28</sup> Warner, “(En)Acting Our Experience,” 275.

<sup>29</sup> Warner, “(En)Acting Our Experience,” 274.

<sup>30</sup> Travis L. Martin, *War & Homecoming: Veteran Identity and the Post 9/11 Generation* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2022).

The idea of “veteranness” is described by social work researcher Sharon Young and colleagues as going beyond just veteran identity or veteran culture.<sup>31</sup> “Veteranness” extends beyond the basic category of whether someone has served in the military and considers how veteran identity is expressed in a veteran’s lived experiences.<sup>32</sup> “Veteranness embodies the lived experiences of veterans as it changes over time. The transformation of a veteran involves longing for and replication of military camaraderie and feeling like a stranger in the civilian landscape.”<sup>33</sup> It is an intersubjective understanding of veterans that argues veterans really only feel as if they are veterans in the presence of others. They either notice their differences when with civilians or their sameness with other veterans. Their stated desire to be around other veterans or alone stems from not wanting to feel like an outsider.<sup>34</sup>

Veterans (really, all formerly military-connected people)<sup>35</sup> are a unique population to treat in medical settings or engage with in higher education. Much of the literature trying to describe veteran/military culture is framed as being useful for providers of services for veterans in healthcare and educational settings.<sup>36</sup> The research is presented as helping civilians who “don’t get it” and who need to learn about military/veteran culture in order to serve veterans better. This research often proposes more training for civilians working in veteran services so they are better prepared to deal with their veteran clients. Due to the applied nature of much of this research, it is rarely critical of the institutions of the military or the ideologies of militarism.

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<sup>31</sup> Sharon Young, George Ondek, and Glenn Allen Phillips, “Stranger in a Strange Land: A Qualitative Exploration of Veteranness,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>32</sup> Corrine E. Hinton, “‘I Just Don’t Like to Have My Car Marked’: Nuancing Identity Attachments and Belonging in Student Veterans,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6, no. 3 (2020).

<sup>33</sup> Young, Ondek, and Phillips, “Stranger in a Strange Land,” 183.

<sup>34</sup> Young, Ondek, and Phillips, “Stranger in a Strange Land,” 182-183.

<sup>35</sup> This includes families of military members, contractors, and war refugees.

<sup>36</sup> Lira and Chandrasekar, “The State of Research in Veterans Studies,” 60.

This is not to say that this research is not without merit. In fact, it provides valuable data on the veteran experience. It is just important to take note of the research that does not explore the role of ideology in its analysis.

As veterans studies is still quite new there are not many robust theories or models to rely on. The empirical studies in the literature are useful but limited to their particular settings such as education or healthcare. These studies often focus on veteran identity as the researcher understands it, often as compared to civilians. This dissertation adds to this literature by focusing on how veterans choose to represent themselves and their experiences for public audiences (i.e., not in clinical or research settings). While many of the VetBros featured in the following chapters also compare themselves to civilians, they are doing so using their own standards and rubrics, not those of an academic researcher. By letting veterans speak for themselves and tell their own stories about being a veteran I am able to focus on how ideologies and identities are expressed, maintained, and reproduced. By breaking off VetBros as a particular set of veterans I am better able to focus on how this very vocal subset of veterans imagine gender and masculinity, patriotism, and the role of the military in society.

### **Masculinities and Military Masculinities**

Veteran status earns one a set of privileges in US society: certain financial benefits, healthcare, prestige, and traditionally, access to masculinity. But the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare and the US military's personnel structure challenge the connection between military service and masculinity. The inclusion of women in the military means for some that one can no longer "prove their manhood" simply through military service. So, a "boy" wanting to prove that he is a "man" must find additional ways to enact masculinity in ways that puts him at the top of the gender hierarchy.

The cases I examine in this dissertation each have their own way of highlighting the importance of masculinity. In doing so, each of the featured creators work to establish their masculinity as both normative and hegemonic. They believe their expressions of masculinity are the only correct ones and they put themselves at top of the gender order. VetBros, like many conservative commentators, see the inclusion of women in the military as a threat to the masculine nature of military service and even as a threat to national security. As masculinity is used as a source of power, and military action is often justified through its relationship to masculinity, it is important to interrogate these relationships.<sup>37</sup>

### Masculine Identity Construction

The military as long been a place for masculine identity construction. It has a traditional role in rites of passage for “a boy to become a man,” and participation in combat has been regarded as a way for one to prove one’s “manhood.” The military also helps one gain the status as “breadwinner.” But the increasing role of women in the military has challenged the masculine identity construction offered by the military. Megan H. MacKenzie argues that the traditional exclusion of women from combat service has less to do with any inherent gendered differences and more to do with allowing men a vehicle with which to promote the image of military masculinity as an elite and exceptional part of society.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the role of women in the military has not changed the fact that the institution privileges expressions of masculinity. And militaries are large, complex institutions with many different ways masculinity is expressed.

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<sup>37</sup> Jeff Hearn, “So What Has Been, Is, and Might Be Going on in Studying Men and Masculinities?: Some Continuities and Discontinuities,” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 1 (2019): 55.

<sup>38</sup> Megan H. MacKenzie, *Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth That Women Can’t Fight* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The stories that people tell about the military and its role in establishing masculine identity begin even before they enter formal military training.<sup>39</sup> Recruiting advertisements have long played to this idea that the military is a place to “earn” masculinity.<sup>40</sup> And young recruits even seem to be aware of the many different masculine identities at work in military service. Unsurprisingly, they also emphasize that the masculine traits exhibited by their own chosen military career path is ideal.<sup>41</sup>

Changes in personnel policy regarding the participation of women and LGBTQ service members has challenged the traditional understandings of the military’s role in masculine identity formation. Attempts to integrate women more fully into the services have often centered around placing a supposedly gender-less “warrior” as the ideal for all to achieve; of course, this “warrior” is described with possessing qualities typically used to describe masculine ideals.<sup>42</sup> This connection is, obviously, not natural. And to fully explore veterans’ relationships to their military service and broader understandings of their own identity, it is important to examine this connection.

Kimberly Hutchings argues that there is no natural link between masculinity and war, even though these two are often conceived as being related.<sup>43</sup> She notes that there are two ways of understandings how masculinity is linked to war: masculinity is a driver of war and states

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<sup>39</sup> Jon Swain, “Changing the Identities of Young Army Recruits and New Ways of Looking at Hegemonic Forms of Military Masculinity,” *Culture, Society and Masculinities* 8, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>40</sup> Melissa T. Brown, *Enlisting Masculinity: The Construction of Gender in U.S. Military Recruiting Advertising during the All-Volunteer Force* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Ramon Hinojosa, “Doing Hegemony: Military, Men, and Constructing a Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 18, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>42</sup> Steven L. Gardiner, “The Warrior Ethos: Discourse and Gender in the United States Army Since 9/11,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 5, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>43</sup> Kimberly Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 4 (2008).

needing masculine men to pursue war-making.<sup>44</sup> Hutchings argues against any type of mutually-reinforcing or causal links, instead stating that “war is linked to masculinity because the formal, relational properties of masculinity as a concept provide a framework through which war can be rendered both intelligible and acceptable as a social process and institution.”<sup>45</sup> As a way of making war understandable, masculinity also works to make war morally defensible and to distinguish wars fought well or properly or for the right reasons. Framing war as being masculine is a specific political project. “The difficulty of thinking about war without invoking discourses of masculinity, and vice versa, is not simply a reflection of the ways war and masculinity are, but of the dependence of both on a capacity to frame the world in a certain way.”<sup>46</sup> We speak about masculine qualities in war-like ways to justify certain attitudes and behaviors and we speak about war as having masculine qualities in order to justify fighting.

Since masculinity is discursively linked to war, it takes on a sense that it is inherently violent instead of relational processes.<sup>47</sup> These relational properties are what gives so-called hegemonic masculinity its power. It is not due to any substantive properties of masculinity, rather it is due to its differentiation from femininity and subordinate masculinities. That is, hegemonic masculinity is a process of defining itself in opposition to other gendered identities and creating a hierarchy with itself at top.<sup>48</sup> As war fighting has changed, so have militaries as institutions. Hutchings notes that both critics and supporters of these changes turn to masculine ideals as a way to defend the old structures or to welcome the new. By doing so they reveal the

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<sup>44</sup> Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” 391.

<sup>45</sup> Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” 389.

<sup>46</sup> Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” 402.

<sup>47</sup> Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” 394.

<sup>48</sup> James W. Messerschmidt, “The Salience of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 1 (2019).

actual instability of masculinity as a substantive category and show that it only exists in its relations to other categories.<sup>49</sup>

R.W. Connell introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a way to describe how masculinity is used as a site of power in relation to other forms of masculinity and domination over women. “[Hegemonic masculinity] embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men.”<sup>50</sup> The concept emphasizes the historical and social contingencies of gender relations.<sup>51</sup> This makes it a good concept for looking at how masculinity reproduces and is reproduced by power in an institution such as the military. It also helps us understand the legitimation of unequal gender relations more broadly.<sup>52</sup>

Following the hegemonic expression of masculinity there are various subordinate, thwarted, and even oppositional masculinities. What is hegemonic not only tries to defend its position at the top but also gives legitimacy to the gender order more broadly, that is, the subordination of women. Importantly, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not an assertion that masculinity is a fixed thing or that certain traits or behaviors are more masculine than others.<sup>53</sup> Like all other cultural forces, what appears as hegemonic or normative can change. The stability is how what is hegemonic is used to legitimate a particular social order.<sup>54</sup>

Changing what “counts” as masculine does not necessarily change the gender relations. Marissa Smith observed group therapy sessions for PTSD conducted by the VA for veterans of

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<sup>49</sup> Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” 400-401.

<sup>50</sup> R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 832.

<sup>51</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 833.

<sup>52</sup> Messerschmidt, “The Saliency of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’” 85-86.

<sup>53</sup> Messerschmidt, “The Saliency of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’” 88.

<sup>54</sup> Messerschmidt, “The Saliency of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’” 88-89.

the Vietnam War.<sup>55</sup> The all-male participants had many common behavioral traits associated with PTSD such as outbursts of violence and excessive drug and alcohol use. The patients reported that they sometimes felt overwhelmed by negative emotions and responded with binge drinking or violence against their wives and children. The therapists framed these reactions as “un-masculine” and taught the patients that “real men” are able to confront negative emotions productively and without violence. The therapists were able to use masculinity as a way to entice the patients to change their ways by getting them to reconsider how they imagined masculine behavior. These adjustments in behavior were effective because they use masculinity as a motivating factor.

What is or is not considered masculine can change, but that is not the same as changing the overall gender order. “If the gendered attributes deployed as the basis of maintaining men’s hegemony are social products, they are subject to social change.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, just because the way of being masculine may change, it does not necessarily mean that it is a dismantling of the men’s hegemony. So even as women now have access to the position of “warrior,” in order to gain it they must participate in the domination of femininity and non-dominant masculinities by adopting military masculinity through violence in combat.<sup>57</sup>

Masculinity, or any gender expression, is a performance; it is something that one does through activities and interactions, rather than an innate property or identity.<sup>58</sup> And VetBros are

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<sup>55</sup> Marisa M. Smith, “Medicalizing Military Masculinity,” in *Medicalized Masculinities*, ed. Dana Rosenfeld and Christopher A. Faircloth (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Accounting for Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 23, no. 1 (2009): 114.

<sup>57</sup> Kacy Crowley and Michelle Sandhoff, “Just a Girl in the Army: U.S. Iraq War Veterans Negotiating Femininity in a Culture of Masculinity,” *Armed Forces & Society* 43, no. 2 (April 1, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987).



constantly and consistently “doing gender” in their public performances. Through their public performances in the form of war memoirs, commercial enterprises, comedy, and political campaigns, these VetBros are actively engaging in a particular gender expression. This expression is tied to military violence through this identity of the warrior which establishes the hierarchies of military masculinity with the hegemonic defined through proximity to combat.<sup>59</sup>

When masculinity is boiled down to specific core attributes instead of being understood in a relational system, other problems with analysis can occur. For example, Regina Titunik attempts to show that the idea of a “macho military” is false.<sup>60</sup> She cites numerous examples of military officials restraining action or violence in opposition to pressure from civilian leadership. She argues that this disproves the idea that the military blindly supports and rewards violent actions. But she misses the point that a military may want to constrain and control violence not for reasons regarding morality, but ones regarding effectiveness. Just because masculinity looks different, it does not mean it is profoundly reshaping the gender order or in some way not “macho.” In many ways, she makes the same errors in judgment that VetBros make: assuming restraint of violence means evidence of a lack of masculinity. This will become obvious in Chapter 2 in how the VetBro war memoirists complain about Rules of Engagement, the military legal codes governing the use of deadly force in combat.

Militaries wanting to adhere to rules constraining violence or therapists telling their patients to control their anger or changing rules about sexuality do not fundamentally mean that militaries are less “macho” or that men must be less masculine. But interpreting these as such is analytically problematic because it avoids examination of wider structures of the gender order

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<sup>59</sup> Cynthia Enloe, “Combat and ‘Combat’: A Feminist Reflection,” *Critical Studies on Security* 1, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>60</sup> Regina F. Titunik, “The Myth of the Macho Military,” *Polity* 40, no. 2 (2008).

and the violence of state power. This interpretation also reinforces the connections between masculinity and violence as timeless attributes. Critiques of a constrained military and praising a constrained military both assume that masculinity and men are “naturally” violent.<sup>61</sup>

#### Personnel Policies, Counterinsurgency, and Military Masculinity

While often not considered when charting the course of wars, personnel policy influences how wars can be fought. The changes made by the DoD with regard to gender and sexuality may not have happened if the military could rely on conscription to fill its ranks during a long-term war. In a similar vein, the services would not have needed to contract out so much of their logistical operations (e.g., truck drivers, mechanics) if they had larger forces to draw from. Changing personnel policies, namely the wider role for women in the military, the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) rule that prevented homosexuals in the military from being open about their sexuality, and the lifting of the blanket ban on transgender people from serving, were argued by some as the military caving to progressive political forces and taking away from the “true” masculine nature of the military.<sup>62</sup> But rather than fundamentally changing the masculinist nature of the military, these changes expanded the franchise of masculinity.

Over the course of the Post-9/11 Wars women made up 15-20% of the US’s uniformed military strength. The nature of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq put women in direct combat roles even if they were formally prevented from serving in occupational specialties designated as “combat arms” (e.g., infantry). But even these formal restrictions were loosened and since 2015 women can serve in any military occupational specialty except certain Special Operations units. The end of the DADT rule extended access to military masculinity beyond heterosexual

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<sup>61</sup> Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” 400-401.

<sup>62</sup> Lori Holyfield et al., “Masculinity under Attack: Melodramatic Resistance to Women in Combat,” *Critical Military Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019).

masculinity. Rather than undermining masculinity, Liz Montegary argues that the campaigns to end DADT strengthened the connections between citizenship and violent masculinity through participation in the military.<sup>63</sup> In critiquing the homophobia inherent in DADT, the campaigners to end the policy avoided critiquing, and as a result were complicit in, the violence of capital and state power.<sup>64</sup> A certain “homonormativity” developed instead helping gay men achieve access to esteem once withheld so long as they aspired to the “warrior” ideal and fulfilled the role of “homopatriotic” citizens.<sup>65</sup>

The inclusion of larger numbers of women and LGBTQ service members did not cause any observable changes to combat effectiveness, and their inclusion also did not change the cultures of masculinity, misogyny, and homophobia pervasive in the military either.<sup>66</sup> Sexual assault and sexual harassment are still common in the ranks. Some victims have even been murdered by fellow service members to prevent them from speaking out. Women continue to be the largest group of victims, but LGBTQ service members of any gender are also at risk for sexual harassment and assault.<sup>67</sup> Military masculinities can create what are called “rape-prone cultures.”<sup>68</sup> The privileging of masculinity also causes women and non-heterosexual men in the military to engage in discursive practices that place femininity as a “threat to military

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<sup>63</sup> Liz Montegary, “Militarizing US Homonormativities: The Making of ‘Ready, Willing, and Able’ Gay Citizens,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 4 (2015).

<sup>64</sup> Montegary, “Militarizing US Homonormativities,” 910-911.

<sup>65</sup> Montegary, “Militarizing US Homonormativities,” 893.

<sup>66</sup> Jarrod Pendlebury, “‘This Is a Man’s Job’: Challenging the Masculine ‘Warrior Culture’ at the U.S. Air Force Academy,” *Armed Forces & Society* 46, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>67</sup> Sitaji Gurung et al., “Prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma and Sexual Orientation Discrimination Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Military Personnel: A Descriptive Study,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 15, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>68</sup> Ben Wadham, “Violence in the Military and Relations Among Men: Military Masculinities and ‘Rape Prone Cultures,’” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*, ed. Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017).

effectiveness.”<sup>69</sup> They take on the language of military masculinity in order to claim a higher position in the gender order at the expense of others.

Beyond changes in personnel policy, the wars themselves forced the US military to change how combat itself was imagined. The US military’s prolonged engagements in counter-insurgency warfare in support of the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq forced the military branches to adapt to a type of combat they were largely unprepared for. This caused reimagining and rewriting doctrines and tactics that incorporated distinctly gendered terms for how warfighting was understood by both military leadership and on-the-ground troops.<sup>70</sup> Specifically, this entailed a gendered understanding of how to frame the various “killing and caring” aspects of the counterinsurgency mission. As counterinsurgency operations requires a different relationship with civilian populations, it upset the connections between military violence and combat effectiveness assumed by many.

The military still serves a cultural role in the idealization of masculinity by some, even with the inclusion of women. So much so that even non cis-gendered, heterosexual men must conform to the broader institutionalized masculinity and socialization.<sup>71</sup> The role of masculinity in the military needs to be understood in relation to the growing role of women in the services during the Post-9/11 Wars, including how concepts such as combat are understood.<sup>72</sup> The growing importance of women in combat roles may be the most obvious place where military

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<sup>69</sup> Bobbi J. Van Gilder, “Femininity as Perceived Threat to Military Effectiveness: How Military Service Members Reinforce Hegemonic Masculinity in Talk,” *Western Journal of Communication* 83, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>70</sup> Synne L. Dyvik, *Gendering Counterinsurgency: Performativity, Embodiment and Experience in the Afghan ‘Theatre of War,’* War, Politics and Experience (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> Crowley and Sandhoff, “Just a Girl in the Army: U.S. Iraq War Veterans Negotiating Femininity in a Culture of Masculinity.”

<sup>72</sup> Enloe, “Combat and ‘Combat.’”

masculinity has become unsettled. Women in combat roles upset adherents of patriarchal systems because their participation upends the gender order, and they challenge war's relationship with masculinity. This further disrupts the stability of gender as a descriptive category and masculinity's ties to legitimate uses of violence.

As a concept, military masculinity can only do so much explanatory work and can sometimes be used as a cognitive shortcut.<sup>73</sup> Even scholars fall into the trap of thinking that it refers to a fixed thing instead of a collection of contested ideas.<sup>74</sup> The veterans featured in this dissertation present overlapping and sometimes competing versions of military masculinity often attributable to their different ranks, branches of service, and occupational specialties. And even though some of them range from boorish to outright repulsive, it is too easy to explain them away as being “toxic masculinity,” a term I consciously avoid. For “toxic masculinity” to be a useful term it needs to be operationalized beyond “behaviors that are toxic.”<sup>75</sup> More importantly, this term is often used to characterize subordinate masculinities (especially ones that are racialized) and justify their subordination.<sup>76</sup>

For their part, VetBros are taking an active role in what they see as the defense of traditional masculine traits and behaviors. Trying to legitimate the gender order through what they see are traditional performances of masculine behavior such as participation in state violence, or demeaning women and sexual minorities. Their defense of the gender order is part

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<sup>73</sup> Victoria M. Basham and Sarah Bulmer, “Critical Military Studies as Method: An Approach to Studying Gender and the Military,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*, ed. Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 61-64.

<sup>74</sup> Marysia Zalewski, “What’s the Problem with the Concept of Military Masculinities?,” *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>75</sup> Carol Harrington, “What Is ‘Toxic Masculinity’ and Why Does It Matter?,” *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 2 (2021): 350.

<sup>76</sup> Harrington, “What Is ‘Toxic Masculinity’ and Why Does It Matter?” 348-349.

of their defense of the state, so for them patriotism is tied to their understanding of gender. In their telling, being a patriot and serving the country is just the right thing for a “real man” to do. Therefore, we can also consider VetBros’ expressions of masculinity and patriotism as being complementary. This is why non-conforming performances of gender or patriotism are treated by them with such hostility.

Hutchings argues war and masculinity are used to secure the meaning of the other, but neither is a stable category of its own.<sup>77</sup> And as MacKenzie claims, the ideal of the all-male combat unit works as a myth to justify war as necessary and male privilege as legitimate.<sup>78</sup> In this dissertation I show that VetBros make assumptions about the universal and timeless natures of both masculinity and war, as well as their “natural” relationships. They argue that they are unchanging and that anyone who disagrees is somehow deceiving themselves or attempting to deceive others. They use this supposed connection to argue their positions as masculine defenders are deserving of loyalty and praise. But in relying on one to define the other, they present the instability of the connection as being a circular argument. And the instability of the connections between masculinity and war, connections that historically have been accepted as truth, show the possibility that other connections that seem natural may also be unstable.

### **Patriotism**

US military veterans occupy an unusual place in the practice of American patriotism. On the one hand, they are private citizens who may (or may not) observe the rituals of patriotism, and on the other hand they are seen by many to represent the military services and the associations between service and patriotism. Travis Martin even suggests “It’s as though

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<sup>77</sup> Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War.”

<sup>78</sup> MacKenzie, *Beyond the Band of Brothers*, 4.

veterans occupy the same symbolic space as the National Anthem or Pledge of Allegiance.”<sup>79</sup> In polling by the Pew Research Center, sizable majorities of civilians and veterans alike see veterans as more patriotic than civilians.<sup>80</sup> So how veterans talk about patriotism is instructive because so many civilians look to them as models and even teachers of what it should mean.

### Patriotism During War

Debates around patriotic practices become more intense at times of national anxiety, not times of national strength.<sup>81</sup> Wartime in particular is a dangerous period for any nation and enforced patriotism becomes a way to ensure public support for the war.<sup>82</sup> The narrative that connected patriotic displays to supporting the troops during the war in Vietnam were crafted to shore up support for the unpopular war. Historian Sandra Scanlon claims that the most popular arguments offered by the pro-war side had less to do with the merits of the war and more with accusations of the anti-war movement being “un-American.”<sup>83</sup> Patriotic imagery was co-opted by the pro-war groups, some supported by the Nixon White House, to attract Americans who were ambivalent about the war but still felt compelled by demands to national duty or loyalty.<sup>84</sup> This lay the rhetorical groundwork that enabled conservative actors to successfully claim years after the conclusion of the war that it had been a “noble cause,” and was lost at home and not on the battlefield.<sup>85</sup> Even thinkers on the left criticized anti-war protesters for not being patriotic

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<sup>79</sup> Martin, *War & Homecoming*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Kim Parker et al., “The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation” (Pew Research Center, September 2019).

<sup>81</sup> Kristin Hass, *Blunt Instruments: Recognizing Racist Cultural Infrastructure in Memorials, Museums, and Patriotic Practices* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2023). EPUB.

<sup>82</sup> Cecilia O’Leary and Tony Platt, “Pledging Allegiance: The Revival of Prescriptive Patriotism,” *Social Justice* 28, no. 3 (2001): 41–44.

<sup>83</sup> Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

<sup>84</sup> Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 185-188.

<sup>85</sup> Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*, 331-334.

enough.<sup>86</sup> The “Vietnam Syndrome,” a claimed unwillingness of the public to support overseas military action, was seen as the primary reason for the US defeat. By the time of the first invasion of Iraq, this narrative was widely accepted.<sup>87</sup>

VetBros were still in school when they first saw a war play out on TV. The United States’ first invasion of Iraq in 1991 was treated not just as a major event of international politics, it was also a cultural event that drew together people in support of the cause.<sup>88</sup> In the buildup to the invasion and throughout combat operations, supporting the war was equated with supporting the troops—the two were argued to be inseparable. Displays of patriotism were all but a requirement. The narrative that veterans of the war in Vietnam were mistreated upon their return home was treated as a cautionary tale that the country must not repeat in the current war. This narrative was accepted as truth regardless of the lack of any contemporary reporting.<sup>89</sup> After the successful completion of the war, President George Bush exclaimed in a speech that the country had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome.”<sup>90</sup>

The use of patriotic rhetoric connected to military actions following the September 11, 2001, attacks and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq shared many of the features of the previous conflicts. But this war had some unique features, namely the commercial nature

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<sup>86</sup> John H. Schaar, *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1981), 285-309.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas D. Beamish, Harvey Molotch, and Richard Flacks, “Who Supports the Troops? Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the Making of Collective Memory,” *Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (1995): 354-356.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel C. Hallin and Todd Gitlin, “Agon and Ritual: The Gulf War as Popular Culture and as Television Drama,” *Political Communication* 10, no. 4 (1993).

<sup>89</sup> Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>90</sup> George H.W. Bush (American Legislative Council, Arlington, VA, March 1, 1991), <http://vandvreader.org/george-h-w-bush-proclaims-a-cure-for-the-vietnam-syndrome-01-march-1991/>.



of patriotism and how it was sometimes used seemingly ironically. One month after the attack and two weeks after the invasion of Afghanistan, Pres. George W. Bush told the nation that the most important thing they can do to support the nation is to keep buying things.<sup>91</sup> Rather than discussing patriotism in terms of shared sacrifice, he argued that it was about the maintenance of commerce. Jennifer Scanlon notes in the period following the 9/11 attacks, it is not enough to be a patriot, one must show their patriotism to everyone else and that being a patriot means supporting war.<sup>92</sup> During this time, entrepreneurs had already begun selling patriotic apparel and kitsch in New York City around the site of the former World Trade Centers.<sup>93</sup>

Cultural studies scholar Marita Sturken argues that kitsch plays an important role in how American political culture addresses tragedy and attempts to avoid discussion as it “conveys a kind of deliberate and highly constructed innocence, one that dictates sentimental responses and emotional registers.”<sup>94</sup> In Chapter 4 I will return to Sturken’s work to help explain the kitsch-like quality of the products made by VetBro companies. While sentimentalism might be an immediate response to tragedy, VetBro patriotism sometimes actively eschews it. Their patriotism is serious when the time calls for it (such as the playing of the national anthem), but it can easily shift into an ironic register with no sense of ill feeling.

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<sup>91</sup> George W. Bush, “President Holds Prime Time News Conference” (The White House, October 11, 2001), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, “‘Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore’: U.S. Consumers, Wal-Mart, and the Commodification of Patriotism,” in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity*, ed. Dana A. Heller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 178-181.

<sup>93</sup> Molly Hurley and James Trimarco, “Morality and Merchandise: Vendors, Visitors and Police at New York City’s Ground Zero,” *Critique of Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>94</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 21.

In late 2004, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of South Park, released their second feature-length film, *Team America: World Police*. It is a raunchy satire of American militarism, blockbuster action movies, and Hollywood liberals, all made with puppets. The movie's theme song, "America (Fuck Yeah)" quickly became a favorite among service members, especially when deployed. The song, like the movie, is satirical and completely over-the-top. But this appearance of mocking patriotism is not conceived as such by many VetBros. In the same way many service members and veterans will watch a war movie, even an anti-war movie, for pleasure if the action is compelling enough. The excessive, almost to the point of self-parody, displays of patriotism are common among VetBros. Because patriotism is understood through displaying patriotic iconography, the deeper meaning is not important.

When Colin Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, chose not to stand for the national anthem in 2016 as a protest against police violence, the focus was on the practices and rituals of patriotism and not the meaning of his protest itself.<sup>95</sup> Regardless of how many times Kaepernick explained himself and his motivation, and regardless of how many service members and veterans supported his right to protest, the narrative that took hold was that by not participating in the ritual he was disrespecting the flag and disrespecting the troops. Even in these accusations of being unpatriotic, it was the ritual of patriotism not a deeper meaning of what it means to be a patriot that was the point of debate.

For VetBros, patriotism is about the outward expressions and devotions. It is about the rituals and practices; it is about *being seen to be* patriotic, not any grand theory of patriotism. These ritualized practices of patriotism have become part of the broader "culture wars" in US partisan politics. This focus on the rituals and expressions of patriotism cannot make space for

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<sup>95</sup> Victoria E. Johnson, *Sports TV* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 117-120.

someone who sees the country as flawed and needs to be improved (unless they believe the flaws are the country straying from its tradition and it needs to return to its past). So, even as a progressive-minded person may invoke patriotism to promote a sense of community and inclusiveness, this would be illegible to those who focus on the ritualized aspects of patriotism.

### History of Patriotism and How It Is Understood

Patriotism is typically defined as a loyalty and even love for one's country. It is distinguished from nationalism which also entails love for one's country but also hostility to the country's enemies or even any outsiders.<sup>96</sup> But this distinction becomes unclear when looking at how VetBros understand patriotism. Social science research on patriotism tends to operationalize it as if the meanings and expressions are shared regardless of cultural background. Some social scientists have noted the problems with this assumption and show that actually different groups in different circumstances understand the meanings of patriotism differently. For example, researchers looking at how Black Americans engage with patriotism shows that its expressions are culturally conditioned.<sup>97</sup> Others have tried to examine under what conditions different ethnic groups have different attachments to patriotism.<sup>98</sup> Political psychology research has noted that this line between patriotism and nationalism is quite permeable and susceptible to change, especially in reaction to real or perceived threats, something easily imaginable for a nation at war.<sup>99</sup> This is helpful for understanding the slippage from one to the other—someone with

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<sup>96</sup> Steven Smith, *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 4-9.

<sup>97</sup> Marcus J. Coleman et al., "A Cultural Approach to Patriotism," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 11, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>98</sup> Jennifer Wolak and Ryan Dawkins, "The Roots of Patriotism Across Political Contexts," *Political Psychology* 38, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>99</sup> Qiong Li and Marilynn B. Brewer, "What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism, and American Identity After 9/11," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (October 2004).

patriotic motivations can become a nationalist given the right circumstances. The military and veterans are important for shaping civilian understandings about patriotism, including in connection to why some are motivated to serve.<sup>100</sup> And for those who believe that people serve in the military due to a sense of obligation and patriotism as opposed to benefits of lack of other opportunities, they are less likely to oppose sending the military to war.

Historian John Bodnar sees American patriotism in the Post-9/11 period as divided into either “war-based” or “empathetic” and he further claims that this division over the meaning of patriotism is one of the key divisions in the US.<sup>101</sup> He argues that this is “a contest between sustaining grand patriotic myths and acknowledging the shocking realities of violent conflict.”<sup>102</sup> This typology is not simply the differences between how conservatives and liberals differ over what patriotism should be, although that is how the divisions appeared in the Post-9/11 era. The empathetic strain of patriotism focuses the patriot’s attention on their love for their fellow humans and recognizes the suffering of others and tries to limit it. The war-based version is how VetBros understand patriotism. This type of patriotism justifies the violence committed in the name of the country, and sometimes may even demand it. The adherents of war-based patriotism not only see the violence committed on behalf of the state as righteous, they see criticism of the violence as criticism of the state and of patriotism itself.<sup>103</sup>

The difficulty of defining patriotism is that it can mean different things to different people. As political theorist Steven Johnston notes, “Patriotism comes to possess remarkable

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<sup>100</sup> Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston, “Patriotism or Paychecks: Who Believes What About Why Soldiers Serve,” *Armed Forces & Society* 48, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>101</sup> John Bodnar, *Divided by Terror: American Patriotism after 9/11* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 1-2.

<sup>102</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 9.

<sup>103</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 15.

powers: it can cure any ill because it can assume the shape it needs to become the remedy to the ill it has identified.”<sup>104</sup> Patriotism’s malleability is part of its power—its proponents can point to it without really needing to say what it means, and few will criticize it. The history of patriotism and its practices in the US shows a struggle for meaning even though these seem to be long-standing.<sup>105</sup> In fact, patriotism as a tool of social organization works best when it is assumed to be “natural.”<sup>106</sup> How one envisions patriotism, its meaning, and its practice shows their own political views and even points to a particular understanding of historiography.

Even though VetBros (and most conservatives) see patriotism as a timeless, never-changing quality, it is contingent on the problems of the day. Following Johnston, since patriotism “can cure any ill,” we can see the different shapes it has taken by looking at the different problems it has been put to use to solve. Cecilia O’Leary shows a history of American patriotism that seamlessly moves from inclusive to exclusive and back again based on the needs of the state.<sup>107</sup> Prior to the Civil War patriotism was incredibly regional. Except for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, there was no national patriotic culture in the US. Even then, the celebrations varied based on the region with many focusing the celebration on the regional militias that participated in the Revolutionary War. Among free Blacks in the north, the spirit of the holiday was used to push for abolition, while others chose to boycott it outright.<sup>108</sup>

During the Civil War, patriotism was used to garner support for the cause of the Union. O’Leary even notes that the US flag did not even hold special meaning prior to its lowering after

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<sup>104</sup> Steven Johnston, *The Truth about Patriotism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 25.

<sup>105</sup> Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die for: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>106</sup> Hass, *Blunt Instruments*.

<sup>107</sup> O’Leary, *To Die For*.

<sup>108</sup> O’Leary, *To Die For*, 19-20.

the fall of Fort Sumter.<sup>109</sup> After the war, the flag and patriotism were used to bring the country back together, “to bind the nation’s wounds.” This idea of bringing together the two parts of the country was combined with the growing imperial project and the influx of a large number of immigrants. Patriotism was used as an organizing principle to connect the continental nation and its overseas holdings and also justify the extermination and subjugation of indigenous peoples and put down labor union organizing at home.<sup>110</sup>

In the decades after the Civil War, large numbers of immigrants were coming into the US and patriotism was put to task to assimilate them. The belief that “Americans are made, not born” was seen as a way to extend to the new immigrants the rights of citizenship and used patriotism as a way to secure loyalty.<sup>111</sup> Schools played a vital role and teaching patriotism was even seen as part of a teacher’s responsibility. Due to the lack of a shared culture or ancestral ties to the land, a devotion to the political system was seen as the best tool to assimilate the new European immigrants. Of course, this was not extended to the indigenous peoples, the descendants of enslaved Africans, or Asian immigrants. But for European immigrants, patriotism became a way to “prove” their American identity.

This focus on identity and assimilation is how US patriotism is conflated with nationalism. If a person’s identity as an American is predicated on their patriotism, then, according to this view, not fully identifying with one forecloses their access to the other. Further, if patriotism is defined only as the outward expressions and following the rituals, then not participating in these rituals means one is not a patriot and therefore not even American. This can easily be applied to anyone critiquing the actions of the state, especially during times of war.

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<sup>109</sup> O’Leary, *To Die For*, 23-24.

<sup>110</sup> O’Leary, *To Die For*, 59-61.

<sup>111</sup> O’Leary, *To Die For*, 150.

## Nationalism

A common refrain in the news media regarding the large number of military veterans who participated in the insurrection and riot at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, was asking how someone who swore an oath to protect the Constitution could act in a way to subvert it.<sup>112</sup> In examining the motivations of the veterans who took part in the insurrection, Eric B. Hodges notes that many of them advanced claims that they were acting as “patriots.”<sup>113</sup> Hodges contends that they were not actually acting as patriots, but really as “nationalists.”<sup>114</sup> While this distinction may be appropriate following standard definitions, it somewhat misses the point when trying to understand the motivations of the veterans who participated in insurrectionary acts. They did believe (wrongly, to be sure) that they were protecting the political order from malign election interference. This would be consistent with patriotic demands. But their purported defense of the election system masks a far more exclusionary understanding of the political order, one that claims only certain people have the right to vote.

The line between patriotism and nationalism is porous and few self-described patriots will argue to also be nationalists. Some would even consider it an insult. Whereas patriotism is a devotion to a political system, nationalism is a devotion to a particular group identity. But when political system and group identity become conflated it is difficult to parse the distinctions. As novelist and ethnic studies scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, “nationalism is nothing more than identity politics so triumphant that it can deny being about identity and politics, as nationalists

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<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Marshall Cohen and Hannah Rabinowitz, “These Veterans Swore to Defend the Constitution; Now They’re Facing Jail Time for the US Capitol Riot,” CNN, November 9, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/09/politics/january-6-veterans-military/index.html>.

<sup>113</sup> Eric B. Hodges, “‘Storming the Castle.’ Examining the Motivations of the Veterans Who Participated in the Capitol Riots,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 7, no. 3 (2021).

<sup>114</sup> Hodges, “Storming the Castle,” 53-55.

accept both national identity and national politics as being simply natural.”<sup>115</sup> The nationalist sentiments of the veterans Hodges studies, and VetBros more broadly, are seen by them to be “simply natural” and require no further explanation.

Rather than make a case for defining VetBros’ commitment to the US as either patriotism (love of a political system) or as nationalism (love of a particular group), perhaps we should understand their patriotism as nationalism. For them, these two are inseparable. Their understanding of a democratic political order is that one must love the system and only the “right people,” (i.e., patriots as they understand them) should be allowed to participate. It is less about hating outsiders and more about loving insiders, but their understanding of who is on the inside is limited.<sup>116</sup> In other words, VetBros deeply love and are committed to democratic political systems and want to defend their fellow citizens, but they see that only certain people share that same love and commitment and no one else should have a say in the democratic decision-making process. Because they envision patriotism this way, anyone else must not be a patriot, are probably a threat to the system, and therefore should not be allowed access to democratic rulemaking. And how one understands the history of the country and the development of its government will influence how they envision being a patriot.

### Militia Movement

Right-wing militias have long used appeals to patriotism to defend their reputations and attract new members. After Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, groups like the Tea

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<sup>115</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 74.

<sup>116</sup> Crystal L. Hoyt and Aleah Goldin, “Political Ideology and American Intergroup Discrimination: A Patriotism Perspective,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 156, no. 4 (2016).



Party and the Oath Keepers used populist and patriotic messaging to build their movements.<sup>117</sup>

The Oath Keepers specifically sought to attract service members and veterans, partly due to military skills they may have acquired and partly due to a belief in their willingness to live up to their oath of enlistment and defend the Constitution against perceived enemies.<sup>118</sup> Veterans make up a sizable minority of these militias, and in some cases like the Oath Keepers, the leadership.

Historian Darren Mulloy notes that while there are several key events these militia groups use to help with recruitment (e.g., Ruby Ridge, Waco), patriotism has long been the organizing concept.<sup>119</sup> Importantly, these groups that are typically labeled as “extremist” have their ideological roots in mainstream US history and culture.<sup>120</sup> Mulloy shows how they draw on rhetoric and imagery from the period around the War of Independence and the westward expansion in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with a focus on ideas around individual liberty. He emphasizes this point that militias draw from mainstream history to show that these militia groups show uncomfortable truths about US history and political culture rather than being aberrations.<sup>121</sup>

Right-wing militias not only believe themselves to be patriots, but they believe their patriotism is rooted in history and a deep understanding of the Constitution. Of course, much of their history and legal knowledge are misguided, but that does not change the earnestness of their beliefs. Their vision of the US is focused on individual rights and liberties, which is why the founding period and westward expansion are so important to their world view. Both emphasize

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<sup>117</sup> Robert B. Horwitz, *America's Right: Anti-Establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).

<sup>118</sup> Sam Jackson, *The Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>119</sup> Darren Mulloy, *American Extremism: History, Politics and the Militia Movement* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>120</sup> Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 30-32.

<sup>121</sup> Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 32.

expressions of individualism. This is what being an American patriot means for them. Mulloy points out that many of these militia groups talk about the importance of “education” and learning history.<sup>122</sup> In many ways they are frustrated that so few people are aware of their “correct” understandings.<sup>123</sup>

Patriotism continues to be the favored route for right-wing extremist and militia groups to recruit veterans into their ranks.<sup>124</sup> Veterans will remain popular targets for extremist recruiting efforts, even if their military service was not in combat arms.<sup>125</sup> To be clear, veterans are a minority of such extremist groups. But due to their organizational skills as much as their combat training, they are highly sought and quickly rise to fill leadership roles.<sup>126</sup> And just as patriotic appeals are useful for recruiting veterans into these organizations, patriotic appeals could help efforts to persuade veterans to quit militia groups, but only if the appeals are legible to veterans who join up. If right-wing militias are simply written off as being “extremist” it is difficult to address their grievances on their own terms, in ways legible to their members.

How patriotism is valued, what it means, and how it is practiced are contingent on political and social context. The patriotism expressed by VetBros cannot be understood without understanding how patriotism itself appeared culturally and was utilized politically in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks and during the invasions and occupations of

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<sup>122</sup> Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 40-45.

<sup>123</sup> Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 45-46.

<sup>124</sup> Travis Tritten et al., “Trading on Patriotism: How Extremist Groups Target and Radicalize Veterans,” *Military.com*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/02/22/trading-patriotism-how-extremist-groups-target-and-radicalize-veterans.html>.

<sup>125</sup> Travis Tritten et al., “The Threat from Extremist Groups Is Growing. Service Members and Vets Are Getting Sucked into the Violence.,” *Military.com*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/04/05/threat-extremist-groups-growing-service-members-and-vets-are-getting-sucked-violence.html>.

<sup>126</sup> Tritten et al., “Trading on Patriotism.”

Afghanistan and Iraq. Patriotism was tied directly to supporting the troops, and by extension, the wars. To oppose the wars was argued to be opposing the troops. To not participate in the patriotic rituals was seen as unpatriotic and an insult to the troops. Looking at VetBro patriotism, it is not important whether VetBros are patriots or are nationalists. What is important is how they understand their own expressions of patriotism, how they connect it to historical practices, and how they value patriotism and its role in contemporary US social and political life.

### **Violence and Militarism**

The way VetBros understand both their patriotism and their masculinity is through the lenses of militarism and violence. That is, they see their identities as patriots and men as requiring the legitimate (in their minds) application of violence when necessary; and their military connections and experience pervade their understanding of the world itself. Violence does not necessarily need militarism to be justified, but militarism always assumes the potential for violence.<sup>127</sup> VetBros will sometimes avoid talking about both by framing problems in terms of “security” or “protection.”

Violence is not essential to either masculinity or patriotism but is sometimes associated with both. In the VetBro line of thinking, a patriot must be willing to defend, even die for, their county; a man must be willing to defend, even die for, his family. However, VetBros will attempt to deny that they are violent sociopaths (although they sometimes tell jokes as if that were true). In order to (self) justify their seeming desire to use violence, VetBros tend to frame it as “security.” They are violent only when they need to defend what they love, their family and their country. And even when that violence is in the form of offensive military action, they justify it in

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<sup>127</sup> James Eastwood, “Rethinking Militarism as Ideology: The Critique of Violence after Security,” *Security Dialogue* 49, no. 1–2 (2018): 49.

terms of its necessity for the protection of their country. They understand violence as a necessary tool that can be used by a responsible person with appropriate training (such as in the military) and used only in legitimate circumstances (such as for their country or for their family).

Militarism is often conflated with militarization. The latter is better understood as the discursive and material processes of organizing a society around the application of violence against perceived enemies.<sup>128</sup> Militarization is taking non-military issues and turning them into military concerns.<sup>129</sup> Militarism is the ideology that supports the militarization of state and society: “[Militarism] requires a strong military ethos, a social system threatened with rupture, a mythical reading of the nation’s past, and a sense of fear—of one’s neighbors or of ideological foes—that subsumes political culture.”<sup>130</sup> It can generally be seen in the belief of the aggressive use of the military for almost any situation, or at least unqualified support for the military.

VetBros are not unique in their advocacy for militarism. This set of beliefs is quite common among the political right in the US. Civilians supporting military solutions to domestic problems is one example. Joanna Tidy shows that even among peace activists, veterans and their families use their connection to the military to claim greater credibility for their anti-war political organizing.<sup>131</sup> In fact, I am basing some of my own credibility off my military background. But this highlights the complexity of militarism. For VetBros, the ideological penetration of

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<sup>128</sup> Catherine Lutz, “Making War at Home in the United States: Militarization and the Current Crisis,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 723-725.

<sup>129</sup> Eastwood, “Rethinking Militarism as Ideology,” 53.

<sup>130</sup> Ingo Trauschweizer, “On Militarism,” *Journal of Military History* 76, no. 2 (2012), 542.

<sup>131</sup> Joanna Tidy, “Gender, Dissenting Subjectivity and the Contemporary Military Peace Movement in *Body of War*,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 3 (2015): 455–456.

militarism is that the military becomes the preferred route through which masculinity and patriotism can be expressed.<sup>132</sup>

The VetBros examined in this dissertation do not seem to see any difference between aggressive support for the US military and their love of the country; simply put these two are the same thing. In this view, one cannot “support the troops and oppose the war,” which even some anti-war activists and scholars will contend.<sup>133</sup> This sentiment has been shared by prominent military leaders such as then Lieutenant General John Kelly (who later became commander of US Southern Command and then part of President Trump’s cabinet) who in a speech said “if anyone thinks you can somehow thank them [the troops] for their service, and not support the cause for which they fight—America’s survival—then they are lying to themselves and...they are slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to the nation.”<sup>134</sup> This combination quite problematically denies other expressions of patriotism that exclude the military, but it is all too common among VetBros. Any affront to one is an attack on the other in this view.

Nationalist and patriotic ideologies are similarly caught up in the logics of militarism, which themselves are caught up in the ideologies that support masculinist power structures. “Military is the guardian of national identity. Militarist ideology lying at the heart of nationalist identity reproduces the myths of masculinity and femininity that serves the oppression of women.”<sup>135</sup> So, just as the military can be linked to patriotism, it is similarly linked to masculinity and gendered power structures. Scholars in feminist international relations and

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<sup>132</sup> Eastwood, “Rethinking Militarism as Ideology,” 49.

<sup>133</sup> Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 49-50.

<sup>134</sup> John Kelly, “Six Seconds to Live” (speech, Semper Fi Society of St. Louis, November 13, 2010), [https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2010/12/an\\_extraordinary\\_speech.html](https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2010/12/an_extraordinary_speech.html).

<sup>135</sup> Sule Toktas, “Nationalism, Militarism and Gender Politics: Women in the Military,” *Minerva: Women and War* XX, no. 2 (2002): 37.

security studies have long noted the gendered nature of war. This is somewhat distinct from the connections between militaries and masculinities. Instead, their claims focus on how relationships between warring parties resemble gendered relationships.

The violence promoted by VetBros, indeed by many with similar masculinist ideologies, is often framed as violence for the sake of defending another. An important aspect of military masculinity that is always explicit in any understanding is its relationship to legitimate application of violence, and even restrictions about the proper use of violence. Militaries are legitimated in their uses of violence in service of the state, so military masculinity is similarly framed as a more legitimate expression of violent masculinity. The use of violence by subordinate masculinities is often punished. It is also generally described as “toxic.”<sup>136</sup> Hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily assume violence—legitimation of dominance can be achieved in other ways. The military masculinity of VetBros requires violence. Acts of aggression, risking one’s life, and even killing are all justified in combat. Violence against civilians is framed as a predictable outcome. This is not limited to violence in war against an enemy, but also includes violence against recruits through hazing practices and is offered as an explanation for sexual assault in the ranks as well.<sup>137</sup> But other masculinities are viewed as illegitimate when using violence and therefore made subordinate.<sup>138</sup>

With military masculinity it is vital to understand this legitimation of violence not given to subordinate masculinities, especially those labeled as racialized enemies. As VetBros espouse their belief in the utility of violence, they also claim their legitimacy in wielding it. It is more

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<sup>136</sup> Harrington, “What Is ‘Toxic Masculinity’ and Why Does It Matter?” 348-349.

<sup>137</sup> Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Facade of American Empire, 1898-2001* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>138</sup> Marsha Henry, “Problematizing Military Masculinity, Intersectionality and Male Vulnerability in Feminist Critical Military Studies,” *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017).

than thinking violence is the “manly” response; they believe their use of violence is justified legally and morally. Their justifications for violence do not necessarily come from a desire to control others (although surely it does for some). This legitimation of violence can come from a belief that it is intended to defend others. The popularity of the “sheepdog” meme in the military and law enforcement is an example of what political theorist Iris Marion Young calls the “logic of masculinist protection.”<sup>139</sup> The “sheepdog” is justified in its violence against “wolves” to protect “sheep.” Meanwhile, the “wolves” deserve what they get, and the “sheep” owe deference to their protectors.<sup>140</sup> While this may seem more benign, it still results in defending patriarchal and racist institutions under the rhetoric of protection.<sup>141</sup> While the rise of right-wing vigilantism is a complex problem, some of the apologists’ rhetoric employs this “sheepdog” meme.

This rhetoric of protection is a way to reframe the inherent violence of military action and it is sometimes referred to in the national/international context under the concept of “security.” But militarism always includes (even if unconsciously) a legitimation of violence.<sup>142</sup> This use of security is sometimes extended to include other aspects of state violence (e.g., border control, police, private security). But the principles of security can only be fully understood through their militarist logic.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, in interpersonal violence “protection” and “self-defense” are often invoked to justify the use of violence.

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<sup>139</sup> Iris Marion Young, “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>140</sup> Lawrence Lengbeyer, “Rhetoric Matters: Inviting Military Overreach with the Sheepdog Analogy,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 20, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>141</sup> Young, “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State,” 19.

<sup>142</sup> Eastwood, “Rethinking Militarism as Ideology,” 50.

<sup>143</sup> Annick TR Wibben, “Why We Need to Study (US) Militarism: A Critical Feminist Lens,” *Security Dialogue* 49, no. 1–2 (2018): 144.

This conceptual framework will be important to understanding VetBro identity because these concepts are key to how VetBros understand themselves and the world. They construct their identities around an image of violent, militaristic, patriotic masculinity. The salience of one or another of these concepts will be featured depending on the example being discussed, but all are present in the overall self-understanding of VetBro identity. Furthermore, VetBros are a useful example with which to study contemporary understandings of masculinity, militarism, and patriotism. Veterans' privileged cultural legitimacy in defining masculinity and patriotism can illuminate how these concepts are re/produced during military service. Furthermore, veterans (along with other formerly military-connected people) are a unique population to observe the effects of militarism.



## 2. “It’s hard to explain if you haven’t lived through it:” War Memoirs

In this chapter I will discuss and analyze the top-selling memoirs written by veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars.<sup>1</sup> Two of these books have been adapted into big-budget films each grossing hundreds of millions in the box office.<sup>2</sup> These books have been influential on how civilians and veterans alike understand the Post-9/11 Wars, the military, and war in general. Their authors’ willingness to give interviews on conservative media platforms and the adaptability of their stories to other media (especially film) have helped these books extend their reach beyond the printed word. They provide archetypal characters of hyper-masculine “warriors” who see war and their commitment to the US as inextricably linked. As the authors are members of well-known “elite” units, their accounts are often privileged. Obviously, the experiences of Navy SEALs are not representative of many veterans, and yet these authors are held as exemplars of the entire military even as they are seen as being an “almost mystical element” of the military.<sup>3</sup>

The three books I have selected for this chapter all spent multiple weeks on the top of *The New York Times*’ Non-Fiction Bestseller List.<sup>4</sup> Marcus Luttrell’s *Lone Survivor* (2007) is the first Post-9/11 war memoir to top the *NYT* list and was later turned into a 2013 film of the same name. Chris Kyle’s *American Sniper* (2012) is probably the best known of these books, selling over 1.2 million copies, and was also made into a popular film directed by Clint Eastwood. *No Easy Day*

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<sup>1</sup> Top-selling according to presence on *The New York Times* Non-fiction “Bestsellers List.”

<sup>2</sup> “American Sniper,” Box Office Mojo, accessed September 23, 2021,

<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r12923660801/>;

“Lone Survivor,” Box Office Mojo, accessed September 23, 2021,

<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r11516340737/>.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Warren, “US Special Forces: An Other within the Self,” *Critical Military Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019), 55.

<sup>4</sup> The *NYT* “Best-Sellers List” is not without its problems and has been criticized for its accuracy. See, for example, Laura J. Miller, “The Best Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction,” *Book History* 3 (2000). Regardless of the problems of best-seller lists, they still remain a useful, if imperfect, indicator to the popularity of a book.

(2012) by Mark Owen<sup>5</sup> is focused on the raid that killed Osama bin Laden but also covers his career in the Navy's Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU), formerly known as SEAL Team 6.

The authors of these books all enlisted in the military prior to 2001, but their combat experiences all came in the course of the Post-9/11 Wars. Their stories have been important for setting the tone and the beliefs of VetBros. They present themselves, and have been held up by others, as models of how elite warriors should behave and what they should believe. They are self-confident to the point of arrogance; they believe in aggressive action and have little time or need for self-reflection; and they attach their understanding of masculinity to war-fighting and patriotism. And in the hierarchy of military masculinity, Navy SEALs are as close to the top as one can get. VetBros learned about these men early in their military careers due to the books' presence on command "reading lists" and the popularity of the movies. And perhaps younger VetBros even wanted to be like them.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the themes presented by the VetBros elsewhere in this dissertation appear in these war memoirs. These memoirists present war in starkly "good vs. evil" terms while complaining about senior leadership preventing them from killing the enemy and even civilians. They even seem to have fun with killing. They allow themselves a certain degree of playfulness in their interactions with other SEALs as well as the patriotic rituals that they also seem to revere. Overall, they present themselves and their fellow SEALs as being exceptional warriors because they believe themselves to be exceptional men and patriots.

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<sup>5</sup> A pen-name for Matt Bissonnette who was still on active duty when the book was published.

<sup>6</sup> Synne L Dyvik, "'Valhalla Rising': Gender, Embodiment and Experience in Military Memoirs," *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 2 (2016): 136.

Most academic studies of war memoirs focus on texts that have a high degree of literary merit while eschewing texts that do not. I am adding to the academic literature on war memoirs by focusing on texts that are part of popular culture. These texts have played an important role in the “politics of knowledge about war and war experience which insists that only those who have been to war know what it is like and are qualified to comment on it.”<sup>7</sup> The narratives presented in these books are predictable and offer no real reflections or insight and the authors do not claim to offer anything beyond a telling of their experiences. Their reactions, in their view, are common sense and not an expression of politics, but their claims to truth and moral authority invite political critique and analysis.<sup>8</sup> Due to their popularity, these books have done more to contribute to common understandings of war and the military than any other war memoir written in the Post-9/11 period and have been foundational in military culture and therefore veteran culture.

### **Studying War Memoirs**

#### War Stories and War Memoirs

War stories have long served an important purpose for societies engaged in combat. While the war memoir as a defined genre is only a couple hundred years old, telling stories about one’s service in battle is as old as war itself. The war story works to connect those who fight on a group’s behalf to the group members removed from the fighting. In certain traditions, the act of storytelling is a ritualized part of warriors’ homecoming after a battle.<sup>9</sup> The war story in these contexts works to strengthen the connections of the larger community to its warriors by

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<sup>7</sup> Nick Caddick, “Life, Embodiment, and (Post-)War Stories: Studying Narrative in Critical Military Studies,” *Critical Military Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 156.

<sup>8</sup> Myra Mendible, *American War Stories: Veteran-Writers and the Politics of Memoir* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Usbeck, *Ceremonial Storytelling: Ritual and Narrative in the Post 9-11 Wars*, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 56-66.

reminding the non-combatant members in the group of their shared role in the violence. They also function to “cleanse” the fighters of their moral culpability of killing another human because that killing was done on behalf of the community.<sup>10</sup> Within militaries the war story helps socialize members in the particular history and traditions of their unit.<sup>11</sup>

War memoirs, like the more informal war stories, are a “social gesture.”<sup>12</sup> They attempt to connect a civilian audience to the success or failure of their nation’s army engaged in war through the stories of the lived, experiences of a combatant. By providing this subjective experience of combat they contribute to the public memory and consciousness of the broader war.<sup>13</sup> This differs from the wider lens that a journalist or historian may use to report on a battle or campaign.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, war memoirs by general officers tend to use the genre as a way to launder their reputations and provide justifications for their decisions.<sup>15</sup> These are much different than the war memoirs written by actual combatants who focus on their personal experience.

The existence of war memoir as a genre “is predicated on the idea of the authority of the person relating a powerful and profound set of insights about war, that most fundamental of human experiences, on the basis of their own lived experience.”<sup>16</sup> Whether the audience is civilians wanting to know the “truth” of the conflict or young soldiers learning what is expected of them, they are drawn to the fact that the war memoirist presents a privileged point of view as

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<sup>10</sup> Usbeck, *Ceremonial Storytelling*, 66-70.

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Caforio, “Rhetorical Persuasion and Storytelling in the Military,” in *Armed Forces, Soldiers and Civil-Military Relations*, eds. Gerhard Kümmel et al. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2009), 90-95.

<sup>12</sup> Mendible, *American War Stories*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Mendible, *American War Stories*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book: Writing and Producing the Military Memoir* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 45-48.

<sup>15</sup> Yuval N. Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History, and Identity, 1450-1600*, (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2004), 19-21.

<sup>16</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 21.

they are recounting their own bodily experiences. The authors are seen as presenting their own, unvarnished account of the war and are not seen as trying to present government propaganda or social media gloss. They are presented as authorities on war that is never conferred to combat journalists or civilians in war zones, even though those accounts can provide a richer understanding of the broader war experience.<sup>17</sup> Memoirs are still an important form of communicating about war even in the digital media environment that characterizes Post-9/11 media. The printed book still conveys a great deal of social and cultural capital not afforded to most veterans that is rewarded through media interviews and other speaking engagements.

Popular media are important for understanding the formation of attitudes and beliefs, but they also can shape the meaning applied to memories.<sup>18</sup> Popular representations of war and the military have been influential not only in how civilians understand war, but also in how veterans give meaning to their own experiences in war.<sup>19</sup> They understand their experience in combat based on the stories about war that they were brought up on.<sup>20</sup> Memoirs take up an important place in the representations of war because their authors write from lived experience which is argued as evidence of the memoir's factual accuracy.<sup>21</sup> "The memoirists *perform* and *construct* warrior identity and masculinity by evoking for the reader the intimate details (both pleasurable and painful) of bodies in war."<sup>22</sup> The memoirist by detailing their physical presence in the

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<sup>17</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Nigel Hunt and Sue McHale, "Memory and Meaning: Individual and Social Aspects of Memory Narratives," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 13 (2008): 52.

<sup>19</sup> Dyvik, "'Valhalla Rising,'" 136.

<sup>20</sup> Philip G. Dwyer, "Making Sense of the Muddle: War Memoirs and the Culture of Remembering," in *War Stories: The War Memoir in History and Literature*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> Caddick, "Life, Embodiment, and (Post-)War Stories," 162, emphasis in original.

conflict presents an example of what they believe a “warrior” should be, thus giving future “warriors” a standard on which to judge their own experience in war.

### Usefulness for Research

War memoirs continue to be useful for study across many different academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>23</sup> In their study of British war memoirs, Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkins argue that the writing and publication of war memoirs can illuminate a set of social practices between author, government, and reader among others.<sup>24</sup> That is, war memoirs can show a great deal about a society’s understanding and engagement with its military and war beyond the text itself. Many war memoirs are ostensibly written for the families of the authors as a way to help explain to them wartime service, and also for the families of those who were killed as a way to memorialize them.<sup>25</sup> The authors of these books are also aware that their work will be taken up in larger conversations about the history of a conflict or the politics surrounding a current one.<sup>26</sup> In some cases, that is their specific goal—to “correct the record” or give the view from the battlefield they believe ignored by others.

Because military veteran authors are offered a high degree of trust and credibility (whether or not it is deserved) their works can be influential in shaping narratives about war and the military.<sup>27</sup> War memoirs also play roles in military public relations by glorifying the lives of these “warriors.”<sup>28</sup> This is particularly true of memoirs authored by the recipients of awards for heroism and valor, such as Medal of Honor recipients Clint Romesha and Dakota Meyer. The

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<sup>23</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 45-49.

<sup>24</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 93-101.

<sup>26</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 101-102.

<sup>27</sup> Mendible, *American War Stories*, 97-100.

<sup>28</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 227.

focus of war memoirs like theirs is on the action of battle and the exploits of the respective authors and their teammates.<sup>29</sup> War memoirs like these are able to leave out any discussion of politics. This is also the broader goal of the imperative to “support the troops:” focus on the individuals and teams fighting overseas and ignore the political decisions that put them there. Of course, ignoring the politics of a war is itself a political choice. Even the focus on the acts of an individual (as opposed to the larger collective in which they serve) plays a formative role in shaping public perceptions of conflict.<sup>30</sup> And just as the exploits of a war memoir’s author may serve as an example to inspire other service members, they also serve to inspire potential recruits into the military.<sup>31</sup> Of course, some war memoirs may attempt to be counter-recruiting tools and tell of the horrors of war and its aftermath, but those are not as widely read.<sup>32</sup>

None of this is to say that war memoirs present accurate accounts of war. In fact, many of them are prone to censorship by the state or by the author, as well as embellishment or outright lying.<sup>33</sup> But these issues of accuracy are not important for my purposes here. Rather, I am interested in *how* they tell stories of the military and combat because these are the stories that are most often retold and imagined by civilians and then further repurposed and reimagined into other cultural products such as films or television shows. The books featured in this chapter are the most popular war memoirs to come from the Post-9/11 Wars, and as a result of their

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<sup>29</sup> Dakota Meyer, *Into the Fire* (New York: Random House, 2012); Clinton Romesha, *Red Platoon* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Brenda M. Boyle, “Lone Wolf Family Man: Individualism, Collectivism and Masculinities in American Sniper(s) and Lone Survivor(s),” *European Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 2 (2019): 118-119.

<sup>31</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 103-104.

<sup>32</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 104.

<sup>33</sup> K. Neil Jenkins and Rachel Woodward, “Communicating War Through the Contemporary British Military Memoir: The Censorships of Genres, State, and Self,” *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 7, No. 1 (2014).

popularity they have become key reference points that civilians have in order to understand war. The military veteran authors of these books all have a deep interest in their own masculinity and the “warrior ideal,” the superiority of the military over civilian institutions, and militarism’s role in defining American patriotism, so any scholar interested in these issues would be remiss to ignore these texts.

### The “Kill Story”

The books discussed here have helped create the sub-genre of the “kill story” and have established typical themes and tropes present in later entries, including those that never became bestsellers.<sup>34</sup> These memoirs typically tell stories of how “badass” the author is, how much “action” they saw in combat, and of course how many people they killed.<sup>35</sup> This sub-genre is problematic for several reasons. The claims made by the authors are sometimes too outrageous to even be possible. The racism of the authors ranges from thinly veiled to unapologetic. Myra Mendible goes so far to argue that these works constitute “dehumanizing propaganda.” She argues, “Here killing is both just and entertaining, a myth that is useful in marketing wars as thrilling spectacles for civilian consumption.”<sup>36</sup> The narratives presented in this sub-genre are also over-simplistic and attempt to present war in a strict “good vs. evil” frame. But the public does not seem to be interested in other stories.<sup>37</sup>

Many of these “kill stories” have been written by members of special operations units, particularly current and former members of the US Navy SEALs. Navy SEALs (short for SEA

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Van Reet, “A Problematic Genre, the ‘Kill Memoir,’” *New York Times: At War Blog* (blog), July 16, 2013, <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/16/a-problematic-genre-the-war-on-terror-kill-memoir/>.

<sup>35</sup> Reet, “A Problematic Genre, the ‘Kill Memoir.’”

<sup>36</sup> Mendible, *American War Stories*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Mendible, *American War Stories*, 102.



Air Land) are the keystone units of the Navy's special operations forces, primarily responsible for direct action missions. These missions range from capturing or killing a "high-value target" (e.g., the raid to kill Osama bin Laden) to securing a bridge or key logistics facilities in preparation for a larger invasion (e.g., taking control of Iraqi oil wells in the Persian Gulf immediately before the second US invasion of Iraq in March 2003). They also perform "special reconnaissance" missions that place small groups of SEALs (sometimes only four) in remote locations monitoring enemy positions for long periods of time.

The fact that the only war memoirs to top nation-wide best-sellers lists are "kill stories" by Navy SEALs is partly due to the fact that there are more books written by them than by other service members, including other special operations members. Also, the missions SEALs carry out are just easier to explain to a lay audience and make for a more interesting story. Training for and executing dangerous missions fits into an easily identifiable story line common to popular narratives of military action. There is a clear beginning, middle, and end. But in the case of Army Special Forces (aka the Green Berets), spending a year training and working with local security forces may not have the same narrative appeal. The books discussed in this chapter each possess the narrative elements that have engaged readers and have been compelling enough to attract film deals. But after the publication of Owen's *No Easy Day*, the pace of these books slowed considerably. Owen failed to follow the pre-publication review process which resulted in him being sued and forced to forfeit all the earnings from book sales.<sup>38</sup> Also, public

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<sup>38</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, "Matt Bissonnette Settles 'No Easy Day' Case for \$6.6M," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 20, 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2016/0820/Matt-Bissonnette-settles-No-Easy-Day-case-for-6.6M>.

condemnations from senior leaders in Navy Special Warfare Command has also had a chilling effect on subsequent published accounts.<sup>39</sup>

These are by no means the best books written by US veterans, or even the best war memoirs written by participants of the Post-9/11 Wars, but they are still among the best known. These books are fast paced, intensely focused on action, and show little concern for reflection or analysis. And because of this “rough” quality they are often overlooked by scholars in favor of the more refined and “literary” offerings of the genre.<sup>40</sup> There are dozens of other memoirs written by US veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but none of them have matched the influence of Luttrell and Kyle’s respective accounts. Owen’s book is important because of the publicity of the missions in which he participated.

Other memoirs by veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars, such as by former Army infantry officers Brandon Friedman and Andrew Exum discuss not only their involvement in the wars, but also the authors’ coming of age emotionally, spiritually, and politically.<sup>41</sup> Exum’s *This Man’s Army* (2004) was initially published anonymously because he was still on active duty. His book is a fairly standard war memoir made unique by his position of being Ivy League-educated and quite open about his progressive political leanings while serving in line-infantry units and later commanding a Ranger platoon.<sup>42</sup> Friedman’s *The War I Always Wanted* (2007) shows his path

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<sup>39</sup> Brad Knickerbocker, “US Navy SEAL Robert O’Neill Backs off Claim That He Was Bin Laden ‘Shooter,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 8, 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2014/1108/US-Navy-SEAL-Robert-O-Neill-backs-off-claim-that-he-was-bin-Laden-shooter>.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Molin, “War Writing: The Raw and the Cooked,” *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature* (blog), August 14, 2016, <https://acolytesofwar.com/2016/08/14/war-writing-the-raw-and-the-cooked/>.

<sup>41</sup> Exum and Friedman both later served in the Obama administration as officials at the Deputy Assistant Secretary level.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Exum, *This Man’s Army: A Soldier’s Story from the Frontlines of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Gotham, 2004).

from wanting to be a warrior as a boy and young man, entry into a pre-9/11 Army, and then being able to participate in (as the title suggests) a war that he and many of his fellow infantry soldiers had always desired. But this initial excitement is replaced with dread and disillusionment.<sup>43</sup>

These reflective memoirs and others like them seem to meet the need for readers who wish to read about the consequences of war and critics' taste for compelling writing. Exum, who studied English literature and Classics while at University of Pennsylvania, freely quotes from or cites authors ranging from Thucydides to Shakespeare to Reinhold Niebuhr. Friedman's narrative of disappointment with the political classes running the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq combined with the horrors of combat leads to a broader disillusionment with his previously held beliefs and a political awakening. Even though these books do not shy away from fast-paced combat action, they do not seem to have the popular appeal of the "rouger" stories more singularly focused on that combat action.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of whether one approach is better than the other for depicting the experiences and consequences of war and combat, the fact remains that the books I discuss in this chapter, due to their popularity, have done more to shape how many civilians understand war and combat and are the stories most likely to be told in popular media.

#### "Flesh-Witnesses"

Part of the war memoir's appeal is that they claim to present a privileged view into the experience of war. This claim to credibility is due to the fact that these books are based off the lived experiences of authors who have intimate knowledge of war because they "were there." Their experience is their claim to factual accuracy. Combat veterans have a unique status as

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<sup>43</sup> Brandon Friedman, *The War I Always Wanted: The Illusion of Glory and the Reality of War*, (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Molin, "War Writing: The Raw and the Cooked."

being thought of as especially trustworthy.<sup>45</sup> This is not to say their accounts are more accurate, only that they are more likely to be taken at face value. Woodward and Jenkins even say that this claim to accuracy based on authentic experience is a “defining feature” of the genre.<sup>46</sup> To cast doubt on the accuracy is to cast doubt on the honor of the author, a relic of the modern war memoir’s origins as accounts of heroism written by nobility.<sup>47</sup>

Yuval N. Harari coined the term “flesh-witness” to describe how war memoirists consider their role when they are presenting their stories and also how they frame their right to do so without being questioned by others.<sup>48</sup> They are more than “eye witnesses” who saw something from the outside. That is what journalists and bystanders do.<sup>49</sup> Rather, a flesh-witness has knowledge through their direct involvement and the experiences of their body. It is an un-mediated experience and therefore is more “real” knowledge according to these war memoirists.<sup>50</sup> Harari takes this term from a WWI French soldier who wrote that when talking about war, the person “who has not understood *with his flesh* cannot talk to you about it.”<sup>51</sup> An eyewitness is looked to for their objective knowledge of facts because they were present.<sup>52</sup> The flesh-witness, however, draws their authority “not on the observation of facts but own having undergone personal experience.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mendible, *American War Stories*, 86-88.

<sup>46</sup> Woodward and Jenkins, *Bringing War to Book*, 9-10.

<sup>47</sup> Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs*, 39-42.

<sup>48</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 231-240.

<sup>49</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War: A Tense Relationship,” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 7, no. 2 (2009): 215.

<sup>50</sup> Harari, “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War,” 225.

<sup>51</sup> Harari, 215, citing Samuel L. Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (1998), emphasis in original.

<sup>52</sup> Harari, “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War,” 215.

<sup>53</sup> Harari, “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War,” 217.

The source of knowledge, therefore, is “experience rather than data, and we need to observe experience with sensibility rather than with objectivity.”<sup>54</sup> For the war memoirists, their experience of war and the feelings it involves will always be far superior knowledge about war than anything one can read or watch on the news or in a book (including their own). A frequent sentiment in war memoirs is “If you have to ask, you’ll never understand.” But even as war memoirists argue that it is close to impossible to properly convey the “truth” of war to one who has never experienced it, Synne L. Dyvik notes that they still try anyways. She writes that for many war memoirists, “This can be crudely summarized in the much-repeated phrase ‘You don’t know what it’s like’...However, I suggest that there is a logical follow-on phrase: ‘But I’m going to try to tell you anyway.’”<sup>55</sup> Each of the authors featured in this chapter tell their readers some version of this: only those who have been a SEAL and been in combat will truly understand, and yet they still try to tell these stories because others should know. Their experience *is* their authority. This “superior” form of knowledge is the reason they should be listened to; it is what makes them a credible source. But it is also their responsibility—because they have witnessed with their flesh they have a duty to tell their story.

This idea of the flesh-witness is rhetorically similar to men’s storytelling, especially with “cool guy” stories or relaying tales of old injuries and scars. There is an almost stereotypical way of beginning such stories in the military and in other men-only spaces: “So there I was.” Whether used seriously or in jest, this opening signals to the audience that the following story is based on real, lived experiences (with maybe some embellishments). It is not about things that the storyteller witnessed, but about things that they did, or they experienced. In fact, the many

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<sup>54</sup> Harari, “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War,” 218.

<sup>55</sup> Synne L. Dyvik, “Of Bats and Bodies: Methods for Reading and Writing Embodiment,” *Critical Military Studies* 2, no. 1–2 (2016): 58.

seemingly tangential stories all of these war memoirists tell about events inconsequential to the narrative function as a way to demonstrate their lived, bodily experiences.

### **Navy Special Warfare Memoirs**

#### *Lone Survivor* (2007)

Marcus Luttrell (with Patrick Robinson) wrote the first best-seller by a US service member who fought in the Post-9/11 Wars.<sup>56</sup> Luttrell's *Lone Survivor* (2007) was later adapted into a big-budget film in 2013 starring Mark Wahlberg as Luttrell. The film made \$38 million in its opening weekend, the number one film that week. By the end of its theatrical run it had grossed over \$155 million.<sup>57</sup> The book centers on Luttrell's role in a failed June 2005 mission where, as part of a 4-person reconnaissance team, he and his teammates were discovered and attacked by Afghan insurgents, leaving only Luttrell alive. He eventually found a remote village where the people risked their lives to give him sanctuary from the Taliban forces who were looking for him. After several days of hiding he was rescued, and after recovering from his wounds returned to duty and to combat.

In the beginning of the book Luttrell introduces to the readers his teammates Danny, "Axe," and their team leader "Murph," and also indicates that they were killed in the mission. The first several chapters follow a similar pattern: narrating the trip to Afghanistan in 2005, and then jumping back to discuss first his upbringing in east Texas, his initial entry training in the Navy beginning in March 1999, and then training to become a SEAL in Basic Underwater and

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<sup>56</sup> Tommy Franks, the former commanding general of US Central Command from 2000-2003, published his memoir *American Soldier* in 2004 which topped the best-seller list for 1 week. But Franks was not a combatant.

<sup>57</sup> "Lone Survivor," Box Office Mojo, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl1516340737/>.

Demolition/SEAL training (BUD/S) in Coronado, CA. The chapters on BUD/S make almost no mention of the story the book is focused on except that he is impressing on the reader the difficulty of the training and how that, along with his character, carried him through the actions central to the book. This back-story takes up almost the first half of the book, the rest follows a chronological account of the mission and his ordeal.

After arriving in Afghanistan Luttrell discusses the type of missions he and his team were expecting to be a part of. He does not leave any room for doubt about how he feels about the Taliban/Al Qaeda insurgents he is faced with fighting.<sup>58</sup> On the one hand, he demonstrates a lot of respect for their tactical prowess and ability to use their “home-field advantage.” On the other hand, he is completely dismissive of their motives and frequently refers to them as “evil” or “fanatics” or “bearded lunatics,” or in other highly racialized terms. He also believes strongly in the abilities of himself and his fellow SEALs as well as their devotion to duty and the US. Luttrell spends several pages discussing the Rules of Engagement (ROE) and heavily-handedly foreshadows how, according to him, the ROEs were responsible for the death of his teammates. This gives the reader the backdrop for the mission that will be the focus of most of the second half of the book: capturing or killing a Taliban bomb-maker, Sharmak, who was skilled at his craft and very elusive.<sup>59</sup> Luttrell’s four-man team’s role is to occupy a position where they can observe the target, guide the Marines who were tasked with attacking the position, and provide sniper support if needed.

The team is inserted by helicopter and then spend several grueling hours moving across difficult terrain to their target location. But this location is less than ideal to surveil their target

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<sup>58</sup> He frequently conflates the two organizations who rarely, if ever, fight together regardless of their similar ideologies.

<sup>59</sup> The Taliban leader who Luttrell calls “Sharmak” is better known as Ahmad Shah.

and their leader, LT Michael Murphy (sometimes called Mikey or Murph), has them move to another location that will offer better concealment and lines of observation. After a couple hours at this new site observing the target village, three Afghan goat-herders, one of whom a boy, and their flock of goats stumble upon the team. Luttrell claims that he and his teammates had to decide whether to kill these three civilians or let them go. Luttrell is insistent that the “correct military decision” would be to kill them outright because they might be Taliban spies, but they were concerned that once word got out the SEALs would be tarnished in the “liberal media” and the deaths of these goatherds would be used as anti-American propaganda.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of their choice to kill the three or let them go, they recognize that they must cancel their mission.

They eventually let the three civilians go. After they are out of sight, the team returns to their original position and soon after their return to this site they see a large number of Taliban fighters (about 150 according to Luttrell) forming on the ridge above them, moving in their direction. Luttrell claims to have fired the first shot that begins the ensuing battle. While attempting to move to better positions Luttrell and the other team members misstep and slide down the mountain, getting injured and losing much of their equipment not attached to their bodies. They regain their composure and continue to fight as best they can.

As the battle continues one by one the three other members of the team are killed. Luttrell is now alone. He estimates the fight had been going on for several hours and in that time he had not drunk any water. Hiding from the enemy fighters he notices them all moving together in the same direction. In his narration he says that at the time he did not know why they were moving and only later learned about the fate of the Quick-Reaction Force (QRF) sent to save them.

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<sup>60</sup> Marcus Luttrell, *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 202-205.



Luttrell breaks away from his story line to narrate that of the QRF: ten SEALs, some from his platoon, most from another, had loaded on a US Army special operations MH-47 (a modified Chinook helicopter) to find and rescue Luttrell and his team. As the QRF prepared to insert at the same place where Luttrell's team had, they were hit with an enemy rocket-propelled grenade destroying the helicopter, killing the entire crew and all ten SEALs.

The narration returns to Luttrell still hiding and waiting a reasonable amount of time after he sees the enemy hunting him leave. By this point he is injured, has several broken bones, and incredibly thirsty. He knows that he must find water because even if the Taliban fighters do not kill him, dehydration will. Making his way through the rough terrain he finds water and is discovered by local villagers. After arriving at the conclusion that they are not Taliban sympathizers he asks them for assistance. He then briefly explains to his readers the concepts of *Pastunwalai*, the “governing code” or “way of life” of Pashtun communities, and *lokhay*, the imperative to grant refuge to anyone who needs it even if that person is an enemy. While he is grateful for their help, Luttrell does confess that he is still in great danger and now so are these men and their entire village. Most of this time Luttrell is assisted by Muhammed Gulab, the son of the village's “head elder.”

After four days of hiding in the village and surrounding caves, Gulab and some of the other villagers try to move Luttrell and this time they are intercepted by Sharmak and his men. Sharmak presents an ultimatum for Gulab to turn over Luttrell or they would kill Gulab and his family. They refuse and return to their village and find Afghan security forces along with US Army special operations forces. The US soldiers secure Luttrell and Gulab and then fight off the Taliban forces. Luttrell is evacuated to the large US military base at Bagram where he stays for several days in intensive care before being sent to Germany to further recover. The rest of the

final chapter is the account of Luttrell's return to the US, his welcome home, and then traveling to pay respects to the families of his fallen teammates. The book ends with him returning to duty and meeting President Bush to receive the Navy Cross.<sup>61</sup>

A frequent critique of all memoirs has been about their inaccuracies, embellishments, and outright fabrications.<sup>62</sup> There is little reason to doubt most of Luttrell's book: his experiences in training, the lead-up to the mission, the actual firefight, him finding sanctuary, and being rescued. All of these can be verified by others or, in the case of the firefight, through physical evidence. Although this physical evidence does call into question Luttrell's claim that there were over 100 fighters attacking him and his team—there were probably only a couple dozen at most.<sup>63</sup>

The importance of the goat-herders who Luttrell blames for the discovery of his team has been disputed by Gulab himself.<sup>64</sup> According to Gulab and others, the Taliban fighters tracked the 4-man team from their insertion point and even claimed that it was quite easy because the SEALs were all heavily loaded and walking noisily across the mountain. They claim that they were going to attack the SEALs but held off when they saw they goat herders approaching. LT Murphy's family also has trouble believing parts of Luttrell's story, such as Murphy asking his

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<sup>61</sup> The Navy Cross is the second highest award, after the Medal of Honor (MoH), for combat heroism in the Navy and Marine Corps. Luttrell and two of his deceased teammates received the award and the fourth, team leader Michael Murphy, was posthumously awarded the MoH.

<sup>62</sup> Jenkins and Woodward, "Communicating War Through the Contemporary British Military Memoir."

<sup>63</sup> Ed Darack, *Victory Point: Operations Red Wings and Whalers - the Marine Corps' Battle for Freedom in Afghanistan* (East Rutherford: Penguin Publishing Group, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Nick Enoch and Ollie Gillman, "Lone Survivor Navy SEAL's Saviour 'Was Manipulated by Handlers in Afghanistan,'" Daily Mail Online, May 13, 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3589248/Lone-Survivor-Navy-SEAL-s-saviour-manipulated-handlers-Afghanistan-financial-gain.html>.

men to “vote” on a decision about the fate of the goatherds.<sup>65</sup> Further, even if this story of the vote were true, killing unarmed civilians is clearly against the Rules of Engagement (ROE).<sup>66</sup>

But Luttrell needs this story for the rest of his narrative to work. First, this incident is central to his lengthy criticisms of the ROEs he and his team had to follow and his claim that they were the fault for all the problems that befell his team and the mission. Without this story all of his complaints about politicians and lawyers getting in the way of the military would not make much sense. Second, if the reports from the Taliban are true then Luttrell’s argument about SEALs being great at everything they do would be proven false. He states early in the book, “It’s a SEAL thing, our unspoken invincibility, the silent code of the elite warriors of the U.S. Armed Forces. Big, fast, highly trained guys, armed to the teeth, expert in unarmed combat, so stealthy no one ever hears us coming.”<sup>67</sup> Being found out by accident by some local goatherds is bad enough; being tracked over the course of miles by the enemy cuts against his claims of his team’s skills and prowess.

### *American Sniper* (2012)

Of the books covered in this chapter, Chris Kyle’s *American Sniper* (written with Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen) is probably the best known. It was originally published in 2012 and was quickly turned into a big-budget Hollywood film produced and directed by Clint Eastwood, starring Bradley Cooper as Kyle. Just prior the beginning of the film’s production, the real-life Chris Kyle and a friend, Chris Littlefield, were murdered at a gun range on February 2, 2013. At

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<sup>65</sup> Ed Darack, “Operation Red Wings Misinformation,” blog, darack.com, May 20, 2010, <http://www.darack.com/sawtalosar/misinformation.php>.

<sup>66</sup> Darack, “Operation Red Wings Misinformation.”

<sup>67</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 9.

that time, Kyle had been offering a type of “gun therapy” for PTSD when he and Littlefield were shot by one of the men they apparently were trying to help.<sup>68</sup>

*American Sniper* spent 17 weeks in the top spot of the *New York Times* “Bestseller List,” 7 weeks in 2012 when it was first published, 2 more in 2013 after Kyle’s death, and 8 more weeks in 2015 after the movie’s release on Christmas Day in 2014. The film was an unqualified success, earning over \$350 million in its first week alone making it the top-grossing film of 2014 despite only being in theaters less than a week. It eventually grossed \$547 million worldwide making it the most successful war film ever.<sup>69</sup>

The book begins with a prologue that covers the events of Kyle’s first sniper kill. He clearly establishes his feelings about his role and what he does as well as how he values certain lives over others: “I had a job to do as a SEAL. I killed the enemy—an enemy I saw day in and day out plotting to kill my fellow Americans. I’m haunted by the enemy’s successes. They were few, but even a single American life is one too many lost.”<sup>70</sup> The first chapters of the book discuss Kyle growing up in north-central Texas, his enlistment in the Navy, and training to become a SEAL. At this point he meets Marcus Luttrell for the first time, and they quickly become friends. Kyle even plugs Luttrell’s book.<sup>71</sup> He continues to discuss the remainder of his

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<sup>68</sup> Chris Lett and Ralph Ellis, “‘American Sniper’ Trial: Deputy Says Defendant Explained Killings,” CNN, February 15, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/14/us/american-sniper-chris-kyle-trial/index.html>.

<sup>69</sup> McClintock, Pamela. “Box Office Milestone: ‘American Sniper’ Hits \$500M Globally, Becomes Top 2014 Title in U.S.” *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), March 8, 2015. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/box-office-milestone-american-sniper-779977/>.

<sup>70</sup> Chris Kyle, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. History* (New York: Harper, 2012), 5.

<sup>71</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 43-45.

SEAL training, getting assigned to a team in Coronado, CA, meeting his wife Taya, and then learning the news about the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Kyle and his team participated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq in an air assault mission ahead of Marine infantry. Kyle makes clear his feelings: “I wanted to fight...I wanted to defend my country, do my duty, and do my job. I wanted, more than anything, to experience the thrill of battle.”<sup>72</sup> He describes his first taste of combat and expresses how much he loves it, a theme that appears throughout the book: “*Fuck, I thought to myself, this is great. I fucking love this. It’s nerve-wracking and exciting and I fucking love it.*”<sup>73</sup> But after this initial engagement his team rarely left the base they were sharing with Marines. He emphasizes at many points that he and his team members all wanted to fight, but that their higher command was too risk averse. Kyle claims that the driving force behind his and his teammates desire to fight was patriotism.<sup>74</sup>

The next few chapters cover Kyle’s first several deployments to Iraq and describe the different type of missions he and the other snipers took on, the various units he would support, and how he and the other snipers adapted to and used the local environment to set-up their shooting positions. Kyle jumps from story to story about various events that happened with little regard for narrative structure. Some of these demonstrate his abilities as a marksman, others give examples of the more typical missions or settings he would work in, and some seem to be included to show his somewhat grim sense of humor or to show that he is a “badass.” Whether or not these events are in chronological order does not seem to be important as he is using these chapters to set the scene and familiarize the reader with his missions in Iraq.

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<sup>72</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 81-82.

<sup>73</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 88, emphasis in original.

<sup>74</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 95-97.

At times, Kyle turns to issues with his family, particularly his marriage to Taya. Like many military families he and his spouse did not see eye-to-eye on his enlistment and frequent deployments. Kyle states that his duty to the Navy and the country come over his duty to his family, while his wife disagrees.<sup>75</sup> He also talks about life between deployments: training, personnel changes, hazing the new guys, getting ready for the next deployment. Kyle returns to Iraq in preparation for the Army's assault on Ramadi where he continues his discussions of how much he enjoys being a sniper and killing people. There are more "cool guy" stories in no real apparent order, including one about how his platoon used the "Punisher" logo on their trucks and equipment because they related to the character from the comic books.<sup>76</sup> This was likely the beginning of trend among military and law enforcement co-opting the Punisher symbolism, something the creator of original Punisher character does not approve of.<sup>77</sup> The practice was even adopted by Norwegian special operations units in Afghanistan.<sup>78</sup>

After two of his teammates are severely wounded, one blinded the other killed, in fairly short succession, Kyle's team is taken off duty for some time to rest and bring in replacements. Like Luttrell, Kyle also opines on his frustrations with "the rules" the military has to follow and "the media." He is confident in his belief that the military needs to be left alone to do its job.<sup>79</sup> At the end of the chapter Kyle receives the news that his daughter is sick and so he redeploys from

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<sup>75</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 243.

<sup>76</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 263.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Cronin, "A History of The Punisher Logo Being Used By Police, Military & Politicians," *Comic Book Review*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.cbr.com/punisher-history-logo-used-police-military-politicians/>.

<sup>78</sup> Synne L Dyvik, "'Valhalla Rising': Gender, Embodiment and Experience in Military Memoirs," *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 2 (2016): 140.

<sup>79</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 340-343.

Iraq before the rest of his team. He briefly mentions that his blood pressure is now so bad that it prevents him from sleeping, a condition that he blames on losing his two teammates.<sup>80</sup>

Even at home while recovering from knee surgery Kyle presents more “cool guy stories,” again in no apparent order, but instead of war stories these are about bar fights. Towards the end of the chapter Kyle prepares to go out for his fourth deployment. He also mentions that he is still having issues with elevated blood pressure, foreshadowing another early redeployment. Regardless of his health problems and frictions in his marriage, Kyle works to stay in the SEALs because he “still loved war,” that being a SEAL is the core of his identity, and he “was ready to kill some more bad guys.”<sup>81</sup>

For the first time in his telling, Kyle admits how scared he was during and after an incident that almost killed him. While not calling it PTSD, some of the symptoms he mentions do seem to fit the description such as restlessness, irritability, unwanted reliving of the incident, and an elevated vigilance.<sup>82</sup> He brings up the incident again later in the chapter as it was now causing him to consider his own mortality. While pondering this, he also considers the physical toll to his body from the years of being a SEAL. There are more “cool guy stories” including his telling of a confirmed kill at 2,100 yards.<sup>83</sup> The chapter ends with Kyle discussing his medical and mental problems. By this time his blood pressure is so high that medically evacuated ahead of his team.

The final chapter discusses Kyle getting out of the Navy, followed by his immediate work after his discharge. He and several others started a company that would train military and

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<sup>80</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 344.

<sup>81</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 370-376.

<sup>82</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 404.

<sup>83</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 396.

law enforcement snipers in tactics he had learned during his career. More PTSD-like symptoms continue to plague him (although he still does not call them that) including self-medicating with alcohol that eventually causes him to crash his truck while drunk.<sup>84</sup> Kyle ends the book talking about how his life as a SEAL and in war have changed him and his outlook on life and reiterating that he enjoyed killing people and only regrets not killing more.

*No Easy Day* (2012)

Released the same year as Kyle's *American Sniper*, Mark Owen's book (written with Kevin Maurer) covers enlisting in the Navy, attending SEAL training, and his experiences in combat similar to Kyle and Luttrell.<sup>85</sup> But Owen spends considerable time discussing the selection and training for the Navy's Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU), more popularly known by its former name "SEAL Team 6," as well as some of the high-profile direct action raids in which he participated. The bulk of the book details the raid to kill Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. While all SEAL Teams are trained for Direct Action (DA) missions, DEVGRU exclusively trains for them.

Like the other books, Owen begins with his stories of training. He has already been a SEAL for almost six years at this point with several combat deployments, but he emphasizes training for DEVGRU is the most difficult thing he has ever gone through. He presents a very brief history of DEVGRU and singles out some of the more famous missions. He attempts to show what the instructors are looking for in the candidates, particularly the mental toughness required. Owen flashes back to his childhood in Alaska to discuss his upbringing around

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<sup>84</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 421-422.

<sup>85</sup> "Mark Owen" is a pseudonym for Matt Bissonnette who was still on active duty when he wrote and published the book. I will refer to the author using his pen name.



firearms.<sup>86</sup> He also takes some time to discuss the types of weapons and gear he liked to use and how well-supplied DEVGRU is, even compared to other SEAL teams.<sup>87</sup>

On his deployments with DEVGRU, he narrates several missions to highlight certain aspects of his experience. For example, the mission when Owen makes his first kill.<sup>88</sup> Later, on another deployment, he narrates a mission to assault a village housing several key al Qaeda-Iraq leaders in the western Iraqi desert. The weather is bitterly cold, which Owen uses to go back to his childhoods hunting and fishing in remote Alaska. He claims that these skills learned at a young age in an incredibly harsh environment made him superb at land warfare in BUD/S and was why he was often the “point man”<sup>89</sup> on missions with DEVGRU. Moving back to narrating the mission, Owen describes some frustration that one of the insurgents they found “knew the rules we [US military] had to follow and he was using them against us. We couldn’t shoot him unless he posed a threat.”<sup>90</sup>

In April 2009, Owen and his team participate in the rescue mission to save Richard Phillips, the captain of the US-flagged cargo ship *Maersk Alabama*. While he only had a small role in the mission, it is important to his story because it establishes a frustration with “Washington,” meaning the civilian leadership of the military, and that because of the rescue DEVGRU was “now on Washington’s radar for other high-profile missions.”<sup>91</sup>

Several months later Owen and his team are in the mountains of Afghanistan running down a group of insurgents. He narrates the action as the team coolly and methodically hunt

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<sup>86</sup> Mark Owen, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy SEAL: The Firsthand Account of the Mission That Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 29-31.

<sup>87</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 42-46.

<sup>88</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 61-62.

<sup>89</sup> The person out in front of the formation.

<sup>90</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 76.

<sup>91</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 98.

down and kill each of the fighters with the help of a drone observing the chase and providing detailed information in real-time on the activities of the insurgents, an AC-130 gunship providing close-air support with its 20mm machine guns, and a combat assault dog to sniff out a fighter that was preparing an ambush. Owen chalks up their success to “a combination of skill and luck,” ignoring their superior firepower and technology.<sup>92</sup> He makes a brief aside to talk about the difficulties of family life in DEVGRU, but ends it by saying that he, and the rest of the men there, love the fast-paced life even if it means sacrificing their family lives.<sup>93</sup>

The second half of the book discusses the preparation, training, and assault on bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan. Owen and the hand-selected team leave the US for Afghanistan, where they would wait for the go-ahead from the White House. There they spend a couple days acclimating to the altitude before the mission. After a visit from Admiral McRaven, commander of Joint Special Operations Command and a SEAL, the teams loaded on to the helicopters and flew towards the target. As they approach bin Laden’s compound Owen notices that the pilots are having problems, and he is not able to deploy the fast rope for their insertions. The helicopter Owen is on crashes, but no one is seriously hurt.

Owen walks the reader through the assault on the compound. Beginning with the helicopter crash that put him and his team off the plan, they recovered and continued with the mission. After clearing several buildings and killing several men, including bin Laden, Owen and another SEAL take photos and DNA samples from the body and prepare to move it. After recovering papers and computers from the house and destroying the crashed helicopter, the assault team board the remaining helicopters to make the journey back to Afghanistan.

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<sup>92</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 103.

<sup>93</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 104-106.

After returning to Afghanistan, the SEALs are greeted by Adm. McRaven and then hand over bin Laden's body and all the computers and papers to analysts from the CIA and FBI. While waiting to head home they learn that someone had leaked the SEALs involvement in the operation. Upon arriving home they were still bothered by the increasing media coverage, especially because DEVGRU had been named as the unit responsible, which raised concerns for their personal safety. Several days after arriving home they meet with President Obama and then go back to their normal deployment rotations. In the Epilogue, Owen discusses leaving the Navy.

*No Easy Day* was also the subject of some controversy. Matt Bissonnette (Owen's real name) was reported to have left DEVGRU and the Navy on somewhat hostile terms although he does not mention that in the book. His former teammates, while not happy with his publicity and his refusal to follow proper procedures, did not criticize his service or the book and even describe it as accurate.<sup>94</sup> The Navy and DoD sued Bissonnette for violating his Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), allegedly revealing classified information in the book, and not following the pre-publication clearance review.<sup>95</sup> In a settlement, Bissonnette admitted to violating the NDA and not following the pre-publication review. He had to forfeit all proceeds from the book, about \$6.6 million. In return, the DoD released him from further liability.

### **Discussion of Themes**

In this section I engage some of the major themes in these three books that can elucidate the ideology of VetBros and how they understand the military, war, and their place in US society. These texts cover a variety of material related to my key concerns in this dissertation,

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<sup>94</sup> Husna Haq, "Navy SEAL Wrote 'No Easy Day' after Being Pushed out of SEAL Team 6," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 4, 2012, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2012/0904/Navy-SEAL-wrote-No-Easy-Day-after-being-pushed-out-of-SEAL-Team-6>.

<sup>95</sup> Baldor, "Matt Bissonnette Settles 'No Easy Day' Case for \$6.6M."

namely masculinity, patriotism, and violence. Sometimes these appear to be fairly benign such as descriptions of training, and others are more problematic such as how they attempt to leverage their tactical prowess to claim expertise in strategic policy. The themes I will discuss are mostly interconnected as the ideologies of patriotism and masculinity are pervasive, but I attempt to break them into constituent parts.

1. Credibility. Through training (the entry point for all service members and veterans) and personal experience in combat, these men establish their credentials and use it to prevent critique. SEAL training and selection is considered the hardest and most intense military training in the world. These authors try to demonstrate this to their readers and show the elite nature of their organization and their high degree of combat skill.
2. Masculinity and “warriors.” These authors not only believe in their own military prowess but also their own “manliness.” In many ways, these are inseparable. For them, masculinity is displayed through overt aggression combined with tactical skill and knowledge. Equally important is their connections to “the brotherhood” of other SEALs.
3. Patriotism. For these authors, patriotism is integral to their identities. So is the military and their belief that the answer to many problems in the world is military force.
4. Combat and the enemy. The “thrill” of combat is something that each of these authors discuss. They all seem to get some sort of enjoyment out of the danger, but also some sense of enjoyment with dehumanizing and killing the enemy.
5. The critiques these men have over the Rules of Engagement and related codes and conventions of armed conflict demonstrate their belief in the supremacy of their own knowledge and in swift, violent action. Further, they argue these rules hinder

performance in combat, potentially setting up the conditions for a contemporary “stabbed-in-the-back” myth.

As few will ever meet a Navy SEAL, these stories give civilians a glimpse into their lives and their views of the military and combat. They are influential for service members and civilians alike due to the privileged position afforded to SEALs. Politicians and media personalities, especially on the political right, also absorb the language of these books and this is reflected in their rhetoric on war and the military. The critiques these SEALs make about the US government and the military command structure are similar to, and perhaps inform, the complaints that many conservative commentators and politicians have about US foreign policy and military affairs.

### Credibility

The authors here, and VetBros more broadly, use two key, inter-related aspects of military experience to argue for their trustworthiness: training and combat experience. For SEALs, their training is widely regarded as the toughest and most demanding. The fact that they were able to get through it, they argue, is a testament to their toughness and their competence. Tales of combat follows an old tradition in war memoirs discussing it as a transformational experience. As members of a “warrior class” they demand that readers trust their honor and their lived experience from having “been there and done that.”

Training is a critical part of the experience of every recruit into every military. Like other war memoirists before them, training is when they adopt their new identities as members of their national militaries.<sup>96</sup> Each of these authors has sections of their respective books on training. Luttrell goes in to far more detail than the others, with more than a third of his book dedicated to

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<sup>96</sup> Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 214-215.

it. Owen's stories about training focus on the training specific to DEVGRU. And while Kyle's training stories never receive the type of attention that Luttrell and Owen give them, he still makes some mention of them. The stories specifically about training all emphasize the extreme physical and mental difficulty of the training, and by extension, the extreme physical and mental strength and toughness of the author and other SEALs. Even if they are not mentioning BUD/S specifically or training more generally, these three all emphasize the elite nature of the SEALs and how they are the best and most skilled fighters in the world—a result of the rigorous training and selection processes.

While Owen does try to present himself as being humble, he does not shy away from emphasizing the superiority of the abilities and training of him and his teammates. He only briefly mentions BUD/S to remind his readers of the difficulty of SEAL training and selection and to emphasize the difficulty of "Green Team," the nickname for DEVGRU's training and selection unit. "It was no longer good enough for me to be a SEAL. During Green Team, just passing was failing and second place was the first loser. The point was not to meet the minimums, but crush them. Success in Green Team was about managing stress and performing at your peak level—all the time."<sup>97</sup> To focus this point, he mentions a minor error he made while at Green Team. He stresses that this mistake, even in the eyes of the instructors, was small, but even that minor error could have been the end of his training there although he was otherwise flawless. For DEVGRU, Owen states that there can be "no mistakes" in anything they do.<sup>98</sup>

Each of these authors discuss the high degree of skill and ability required of all SEALs. The idea they present is that the training they had previously endured is good at selecting men

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<sup>97</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 12-13.

<sup>98</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 25-26.

with the appropriate traits for their job. Luttrell is the most direct in making these connections. Early in the book he describes how both the terrain and the population of the eastern Afghanistan mountains aid the Taliban forces, “protecting them and providing refuge in places that would appear almost inaccessible to the Western eye. That, by the way, does not include U.S. Navy SEALs, who do have Western eyes but who don’t do inaccessible. We can get in anywhere.”<sup>99</sup> He is never shy when talking about his and his fellow SEAL’s skills. Even when narrating the firefight that killed his teammates and hiding from the Taliban fighters, he makes connections to BUD/S, Hell Week, and to Instructor Reno.<sup>100</sup>

Kyle is far more focused on himself and his own abilities. While he mentions the prowess of his fellow SEALs, and even conventional soldiers and Marines, he saves the nicest words for himself. In one instance, he praises the toughness and eagerness of the Marines he is assigned to provide sniper cover for. But he leaves his sniper rifle aside to lead them in room-clearing operations because he can do it better. He justifies what he does because SEALs are specifically trained on room-clearing operations which Marines (at the time) were not.<sup>101</sup> Of course, Kyle’s skills as a sniper, and his confidence in those skills, are a frequent topic throughout his book. He mentions his “confirmed kill count” several times as a metric to show his proficiency, but at times he presents it as a game.<sup>102</sup>

In a couple passages, Owen emphasizes the importance of training in accomplishing their missions. As his team prepared to raid an insurgent safe-house he points to the tactical prowess of his teammates: “There was no talking. Everyone knew his job.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, the team

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<sup>99</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 70.

<sup>100</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 306.

<sup>101</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 182-184, 193-194.

<sup>102</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 301-302.

<sup>103</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 75.

leader did not have to tell any of the men what to do, they all knew their roles so well because they spend so much time training and preparing. As the first half of his book is setting up the training and execution of the mission to kill Osama bin Laden, his frequent mentions of the time the DEVGRU members spend training foreshadows what he and his team will go through as they prepare for the raid.

While training for the raid on bin Laden's compound, the team practiced the assault in a full-scale mock-up. During one of these training runs, Owen remarks "All around me, my teammates were racing to their objectives. The roar of the [helicopter] engines above us made it hard to talk, but after three days of practice we didn't need to talk. The whole mission had become muscle memory. Besides some time hacks that were called out over the radio, the net was silent. Everyone knew their individual jobs. We had years and years of experience among the groups, so everything moved smoothly."<sup>104</sup> Later, during the actual raid, Owen remarks that even with the confusion caused by the helicopter crashing, everyone knew their roles and followed the contingency plans just like in training. "While I was standing there I began to think about how surreal it all was. It felt like waiting to start a CQB run during Green Team."<sup>105</sup> Even during the most consequential mission of his career, he experiences it the same as training.

Even though Owen is proud to have been selected for the mission, he states that really any SEAL in DEVGRU could have done it. After arriving in Afghanistan before the mission he mentions that it felt "odd" to be arriving for this operation when there was already a team in country that could have done it. "The only reason we were tasked with this mission was because we were available to conduct the needed rehearsals to sell the option to the decision makers at

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<sup>104</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 173.

<sup>105</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 228.



the White House. Every squadron at the command was interchangeable. It came down to being at the right place at the right time.”<sup>106</sup> Later, upon their return to the DEVGRU headquarters they are greeted by almost the entire command. Owen states, “It struck me that anybody standing in that line shaking our hands could have been in our shoes. We just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I felt really lucky.”<sup>107</sup> Membership in the unit means one has the skills needed to accomplish a mission like that.

These war memoirists take the position of a “flesh-witness” as a way to draw their authority, “not on the observation of facts but own having undergone personal experience.”<sup>108</sup> They demand that readers accept their accounts because they “were there.” At times, this privileging of bodily experience expresses itself as hand-waving away things the author does not want to discuss. Luttrell and Kyle both say things to the effect of “you had to be there to understand” or that you had to be part of the group to get it. They are literally telling their readers that only those like us really get it—you will never understand so just trust me and don’t ever question my motives. Owen, as is typical for his more subtle style typically refrains from explicitly stating anything similar still uses his “expert” status as his credibility to opine on all matters he sees fit. Luttrell, early on in his book, when explaining his perceptions of hostility overseas states, “You had to serve out here in the Middle East to understand.”<sup>109</sup> A clear example of this is before Kyle tells a story about saluting the flag after a firefight in order to emphasize the patriotism of his fellow SEALs. He states, “It’s the sort of thing that if it has to be explained, you’re not going to understand. But maybe this will help.”<sup>110</sup> He then proceeds with his story.

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<sup>106</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 187-188.

<sup>107</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 283.

<sup>108</sup> Harari, “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War,” 217.

<sup>109</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 95-96.

This sentiment comes up for even inconsequential matters. Beginning with Kyle's discussion on BUD/S he states, "I guess it's hard to explain if you haven't lived through it."<sup>111</sup> And when he meets first meets Luttrell he says they quickly bond due to their shared Texas roots. Kyle states "I don't suppose you'll understand that if you're not from Texas."<sup>112</sup> The idea is clear: experience and identity matter far more than rational analysis. Rhetorically, it effectively shuts down criticism and allows one to dodge difficult questions.

### Masculinity and "Warriors"

Masculinity is inextricably linked to how these authors understand themselves and the SEALs more broadly. Sometimes the connections to gender and masculinity are not explicit. Rather, they identify traits typically associated with military masculinity such as aggression, high degrees of competence, and risk-taking. And other times they directly link the importance of being men to their conception of being warriors. SEALs and other Special Operations Forces (SOF) represent the ideal of military masculinity, that of the "operator." One's status in the hierarchy of military masculinity is generally based on one's proximity to combat action and threats combined with technical expertise and skill.<sup>113</sup> These measures of masculinity keep SOF units and their members as the ideal of what American service members should aspire to and how the concept of the "warrior" is understood in the US military. Somewhat paradoxically, even as SEALs and other SOF units are looked up to as exemplars in the US military, they are also recognized for their willingness and ability to operate outside of the rules that typically constrain the actions of conventional forces.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 32.

<sup>112</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 43.

<sup>113</sup> Ramon Hinojosa, "Doing Hegemony: Military, Men, and Constructing a Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Men's Studies* 18, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>114</sup> Warren, "US Special Forces."

Here I look at two particular ways these war memoirists discuss their relationships with their sense of masculinity: being a “tough guy” and being part of “the brotherhood.” For their understanding of manliness, they must be able to endure any hardships that get thrown at them, primarily physical but this includes mental challenges as well. This “toughness” is displayed through battle wounds and any other injuries that they had to fight through. Their commitment to each other in the form of their “brotherhood” is also how they define their masculinity as a way of recognizing the shared struggles and also their interdependence on their team. Even as they believe in their individual skills, important to military masculinity is working as a member of a team.

### **Tough Guys**

Being “tough,” physically and mentally, is an important part of how these men present their masculinity. Military culture more broadly places a high degree of respect on being able to withstand harsh environments and physically demanding conditions.<sup>115</sup> Part of the mythology of SEALs more broadly concerns how physically and mentally demanding the training and selection process are. Presumably, this is why Luttrell took so much space in his book to discuss it and even references it in his account of the battle. The importance of toughness is more apparent in his descriptions of his injuries suffered during the battle, including bullet wounds and broken vertebrae. The mere fact that he survived is a testament to this toughness. And to drive this point home, after he is rescued and evacuated to the US base in Bagram, Luttrell insists on walking off the plane regardless of his injuries (and with the help of some morphine).<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Jarrod Pendlebury, “‘This Is a Man’s Job’: Challenging the Masculine ‘Warrior Culture’ at the U.S. Air Force Academy,” *Armed Forces & Society* 46, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>116</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 357.

Kyle brags about all his various injuries over the years. Prior to enlisting in the Navy he worked as a ranch hand and also competed in bronco riding in rodeos. And injuries he received from getting thrown off horses or kicked by them almost kept him out of the Navy. Towards the end of his book he lists off all the physical problems he deals with while ignoring his possible psychological injuries. Perhaps this is him not wanting to admit to a type of injury that is typically coded as feminine. Owen's occasional recollections of his boyhood in Alaska emphasize the extreme conditions he had to endure as a boy hunting by himself in below-zero weather. As Mauren P. Hogan and Timothy Pursell argue, central to the image of masculinity in Alaska involves men able to withstand extreme and dangerous weather conditions. So rather than stories of how he kept fighting through injuries to prove his toughness like the other two, Owen displays his masculine toughness in ways legible to other "Real Alaskans."<sup>117</sup>

Throughout his book, Kyle tells stories that do not particularly advance any narrative but add details to how the reader should understand him, SEALs, and their missions in Iraq. Many of these take the form of "cool guy" stories that highlight how his actions or feelings are in-line with hegemonic masculinity. After finishing selection and being assigned to a SEAL Team, Kyle jokes through stories of how the more senior members of the team hazed him and then later in the book he mentions being a senior member hazing the new guys.<sup>118</sup> He also likes to talk about getting into fights while drinking at bars, even finding humor at getting in trouble from his higher command.<sup>119</sup> This type of "bro talk" is common to homosocial environments such as military units and serves several communicative functions. These types of stories show that the

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<sup>117</sup> Maureen P. Hogan and Timothy Pursell, "The 'Real Alaskan': Nostalgia and Rural Masculinity in the 'Last Frontier,'" *Men and Masculinities* 11, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>118</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 61; 244-246.

<sup>119</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 248-249.

teller can be trusted as “one of the guys.” Additionally, they work to establish authority and status in the group.

Kyle argues that those who do not fit with his conceptions of what a SEAL and a man should be are not real men. And this even extends to fellow SEALs. He dismisses some SEAL commanders as being “weak” for not taking enough risks.<sup>120</sup> One particular SEAL Kyle nicknames “Runaway” because he did not stand and fight. Kyle gives him a second chance, and he again fails which causes Kyle to dismiss him as “a pussy.”<sup>121</sup> So, even though he was referring to another SEAL, apparently the pinnacle of military masculinity, actions in combat are what really demonstrate one’s masculinity whereas perceived failure in combat earns one misogynistic name-calling.<sup>122</sup>

As military masculinities draw greatly from rural and working-class notions of masculinity, values typical for rural or working-class men seep into how military men understand their own masculinity. This includes toughness, a work ethic that values not complaining about difficult labor, being able to make the best out of a difficult situation, and respecting hierarchy and traditions.<sup>123</sup> Also important in rural and working-class masculinities is male solidarity.<sup>124</sup> This can mean different things based on the community. In the case of these SEALs, and military masculinity more broadly, this male solidarity is displayed through their commitment to their team and teammates in both training and battle, as well as by not speaking ill of each other. It

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<sup>120</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 97.

<sup>121</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 172-174; 198-199.

<sup>122</sup> Steven L. Gardiner, “The Warrior Ethos: Discourse and Gender in the United States Army Since 9/11,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 5, no. 3 (2012): 378–380.

<sup>123</sup> Mary Grigsby, “Masculine Identity Work among Missouri Noodlers: Community Providers, Pleasure Seeking Comrades, Family Men, and Tough Courageous Men,” *Journal of Rural Social Sciences* 24, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>124</sup> Mary Grigsby, “Subcultural Masculine Moral Identity Work among Rural Missouri Noodlers: ‘A Special Breed of Men,’” *Anthropologica* 53, no. 1 (2011).

often includes more light-hearted displays such as pranks and practical jokes, but pranks can easily turn into hazing.

### **The “Brotherhood”**

Part of the warrior ethos and masculinity is the importance of what SEALs often refer to simply as “the brotherhood.” The SEAL community is small and insular. The camaraderie of being in an elite unit taking part in dangerous and difficult missions causes them to develop a strong loyalty to each other. Further, their training teaches them to rely on each other. While the narration in *Lone Survivor* is mostly about Luttrell’s experiences first in training and then on the run from the Taliban, his relationships with the men he served with are at the heart of his story. While introducing the readers to his teammates he emphasizes the closeness of their relationships. He says, “that’s the way of our brotherhood. It’s a strictly American brotherhood, mostly forged in blood. Hard-won, unbreakable. Built on a shared patriotism, shared courage, and shared trust in one another.”<sup>125</sup> This brotherhood shows their devotion to Luttrell, and in turn, he does the same.

Interspersed in the action of Luttrell’s escape from the Taliban, he tells how during the time he was missing a number of current and former SEALs held vigil at his parents’ ranch. (Presumably, something similar happened at the homes of Luttrell’s teammates.) After Luttrell returned home and had some time to recover, the Navy paid for him and a couple other SEALs to visit the families of his teammates and the SEALs who died during the ill-fated rescue attempt. He even notes that the trip was long, expensive, and paid for by the “organization he works for,” i.e. the US Navy (but no mention of the US taxpayers).<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 12.

<sup>126</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 6.

For Kyle and Owen, “the brotherhood” plays an important role as a motivating factor for their continued service. Kyle says multiple times how much being a SEAL and being on teams defines him as a person. Owen expresses this part of the warrior ethos more subtly: he just wants to be with “the boys” and he wants to have a role in the fight. When first seeing the news about Captain Phillips, Owen is waiting for a flight back to Virginia Beach (where DEVGRU is headquartered) after leave. On the flight Owen confesses to being worried that he would arrive late, and his team will already be gone.<sup>127</sup>

Similar to the hazing that the men endure and dish out to show that they are part of the team, regular pranks and practical joking are also a common part of male bonding. Owen infrequently discusses the prevalence of pranks in DEVGRU, and notes that his team leader, Phil, was well-regarded for his ability and cunning at them. The homophobic/homoerotic aspects of these pranks are left unsaid in Owen’s account even though he spends several paragraphs at various points outlining Phil’s fondness of hiding a large, black sex toy and the teammates reacting in amused disgust upon finding it.<sup>128</sup>

Harari notes that in most war memoirs one of the few “wholly positive” parts of war is that of comradeship, “Just as military authors present war as a sublime event...they also presented the comradeship that springs up between soldiers as something that incorporated and surpassed the civilian love between men and women.”<sup>129</sup> So while they may use the familiar terms of “friendship” or “brotherhood,” the connection is, according to the war memoirists, closer and more intense than civilian understandings of the terms. Similarly, early, and mid-20th century social science researchers identified the importance of what they called “primary groups”

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<sup>127</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 87-89.

<sup>128</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 79-83.

<sup>129</sup> Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 230.

in military motivation. During World War II, surveys and interviews of service members and German prisoners of war showed that small unit cohesion was the best predictor of morale.<sup>130</sup> The results of these studies influenced militaries to change their training and indoctrination of recruits to focus on small unit cohesion and commitment.

But this commitment to the group is not as “wholly positive” as Harari describes.<sup>131</sup> Unit cohesion and dedication to fellow soldiers is also at fault for many of the worst atrocities committed against enemy units and civilians. Dedication to each other may actually prevent soldiers from preventing or reporting atrocities because doing so would be an act of betrayal. The SEAL’s dedication to the “brotherhood” is also partly responsible for the misconduct and even war crimes committed by some of their members. As seen in the case of Eddie Gallagher, documented by journalist David Philipps, his teammates excused and covered up his misconduct for years. Sometimes they brought matters up with the SEAL chain of command, but nothing beyond that. It was only after a clear act of murder that any of them went to legal authorities.<sup>132</sup> In his reporting of the Gallagher case, Philipps also notes many of the recorded war crimes committed by SEALs in the past that have never even been prosecuted.<sup>133</sup>

### Patriotism

These authors describe themselves as American patriots and they all believe in the power of the US military, especially the special warfare community. For them, there seems to be no difference between being a patriot and supporting the military. In fact, they seem to argue that

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<sup>130</sup> Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer 1948.

<sup>131</sup> Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 230.

<sup>132</sup> David Philipps, *Alpha: Eddie Gallagher and the War for the Soul of the Navy SEALs* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021).

<sup>133</sup> Philipps, *Alpha*.



you cannot have one without the other. The common antiwar sentiment of “support the troops, oppose the war” would be hypocritical for them (as it is for some antiwar writers).<sup>134</sup> In a sense, patriotism is almost assumed for them. Their patriotic impulses come through in many ways discussed in other parts of this section such as Kyle’s insistence that American lives are more valuable than the lives of others.<sup>135</sup>

Towards the end of his book, Kyle tells a story about his friend Ryan who lost both of his eyes in a firefight. As Ryan is recovering in the hospital after being medically evacuated, Kyle reflects on the meaning of patriotism:

When I think about the patriotism that drives SEALs, I am reminded of Ryan recovering in a hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. There he was, freshly wounded, almost fatally, and blind for life. Many reconstructive surgeries to his face loomed ahead. You know what he asked for? He asked for someone to wheel him to a flag and give him some time. He sat in his wheelchair for close to a half-hour saluting as the American flag whipped in the wind.

That’s Ryan: a true patriot.<sup>136</sup>

Kyle goes on to state that he and their other friends “all gave him shit and told him somebody probably wheeled him in front of a Dumpster (sic) and just told him it was a flag.”<sup>137</sup> Regardless of the jokes at the expense of his friend, Kyle still wants to impress on his readers how he and his fellow SEALs understand patriotism as being distinctly linked to fighting.

This somewhat irreverent attitude to something as serious as their blinded comrade’s expression of patriotic devotion is a common feature in the VetBro communications. It is not a sign that they do not take patriotism or its public display as unimportant, rather they are permitted to do so because they are his friend and they believe no one can question their own

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<sup>134</sup> Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 49-50.

<sup>135</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 4.

<sup>136</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 413.

<sup>137</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 413.

patriotic commitment. This type joking, like the hazing and pranks, is also a signal of in-group connections as well. Even though certain activities are respected, they can be mocked but only by the right people. Kyle and his fellow SEALs have “proven themselves” in battle and are therefore allowed to take jabs at their comrade. They have demonstrated their commitment to the patriotic cause so when they make light of it no one can doubt their true devotion.

Several times in Kyle’s account he mentions the importance of being a patriot and his devotion to the flag of the United States. He connects being a patriot to an overall desire to fight. As his team is participating in the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003 he criticizes his command structure for not allowing his team to get in the fight. Before the capture of Baghdad, he and his team are performing scouting operations for the Marines moving towards the Iraqi capital. But his team is called off the mission, according to Kyle, to prevent any casualties. He tries to explain to his readers that even though no SEAL wants to die, they all want to fight. And the reason they all want to fight is patriotism.<sup>138</sup>

Kyle then narrates a story that after a 48-hour engagement with the enemy, his team is being relieved by some Marines. One of the Marines raises the American flag, and someone played the national anthem: “Every battle-weary man rose, went to the window, and saluted. The words of the music echoed in each of us as we watched the Stars and Stripes wave literally in dawn’s early light. The reminder of what we were fighting for caused tears as well as blood and sweat to run freely from all of us...For myself and the SEALs I was with, patriotism and getting into the heat of the battle were deeply connected.”<sup>139</sup> Kyle and the others see the way that they can express patriotism is through violence.

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<sup>138</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 95.

<sup>139</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 96-97.

Luttrell makes the connections between masculinity, patriotism, and war-fighting most explicit. Early in his book when discussing his childhood he states that he believed that his father may have always wanted him and his twin brother Morgan to be Navy SEALs: “[Dad] was forever telling us about those elite warriors, the stuff they did and what they stood for. In his opinion they were all that is best in the American male — courage, patriotism, strength, determination, refusal to accept defeat, brains, expertise in all that they did.”<sup>140</sup> So, to be an “American male” one must be a patriot and a warrior. He then describes some of the special operations veterans he knew growing up and describes them as having “granite souls” but then are still sentimental for the symbols of the country.<sup>141</sup> These men Luttrell describes are supremely tough but are also soft when it comes to patriotism. Describing the special operations veterans he knew, “they took the hardest path, that narrow causeway that is not for the sunshine patriots. They took the one for the supreme patriot.”<sup>142</sup> He emphasizes that patriotism is expressed in this commitment.

For Luttrell, patriotism is sets him and his fellow SEALs (and other special operations members) apart from others. And he insists that his positions on military affairs, national security, and use of force all stem from his intense patriotism and not from any political belief.<sup>143</sup> In a sense, his deeply conservative political positions and hatred of liberals is not even “political” by his understanding but simply a reflection of his patriotism and commitment to the Navy. Luttrell’s insistence that he is not “political” and just a patriot is common and appears in different forms among the VetBros featured throughout this dissertation. Political views are

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<sup>140</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 53.

<sup>141</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 54.

<sup>142</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 54.

<sup>143</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 38-39.

disavowed as such and argued as being something akin to “common sense.” In this line of reasoning, only if one had the experience of being in the military and in war they would understand the “plain truth” of these positions. For the VetBro war memoirs, patriotism is “mythical and proper, insulated from questions that might come from killing innocent people or the decisions to go into Iraq [or Afghanistan] in the first place.”<sup>144</sup> Because their patriotism is not political by their understanding, the politics of war are not considered.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the threads of violence and patriotism for these men, similar to the threads of violence and masculinity. Is their violence justified because of their patriotism, or are they rationalizing their violence and using patriotism as an excuse? Having to explain something like this would be seen as ridiculous for these authors. They see their understanding of patriotism as the only proper understanding, so why explain something that is natural and obvious to any patriot? Much like their invocations to bodily experience (their status as “flesh-witnesses”), they will reply “you have to be a patriot to understand patriotism.”

### Combat and the Enemy

Indispensable from any war memoir are stories of facing the enemy and action in combat. Similar to the stories on training, these often focus on the author’s determination, skill, and willingness to face danger. They also show the author’s opinions about the enemy they were facing. In these books, this often takes the form of intense objectification and dehumanization. So, while their own actions are described as being the pinnacle of military prowess, the enemy is described as anything from “savages” and “evil” to “peasants” and “illiterate.”

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<sup>144</sup> John Bodnar, *Divided by Terror: American Patriotism after 9/11* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 151.

## Combat and Killing

Combat is central to war memoirs, but how combat has been described has changed. Harari notes that early war memoirs only describe combat that was important to the conclusion of a war or campaign, while other battles are only mentioned in passing, if at all. But beginning in the Renaissance era, war memoirists began discussing battles based on personal importance rather than relevance to broader campaigns.<sup>145</sup> Combat, for war memoirists, became an event to test and prove one's courage and tactical skills.<sup>146</sup> The authors featured here possess a similar attitude: combat for them is how they test themselves and how they prove their commitment to the SEALs and the country.

More than the others, Kyle stresses his love for combat. In preparing for the invasion of Iraq he exclaims "I wanted to fight...I wanted to defend my country, do my duty, and do my job. I wanted, more than anything, to experience the thrill of battle."<sup>147</sup> And then once in combat he exclaims *I fucking love this. It's nerve-wracking and exciting and I fucking love it.*<sup>148</sup> Luttrell and Owen also enjoy the challenge and stress of combat. For them, they are doing a difficult job that is dangerous and they want to do the job well. Luttrell is eager to test himself in a hostile terrain of the Afghan mountains: "Gone were the treacherous, dusty backstreets of Baghdad, where even children of three or four were taught to hate us. Dead ahead, in Afghanistan, awaited an ancient battleground where we could match our enemy, strength for strength, stealth for stealth, steel for steel."<sup>149</sup> These authors all stress the danger they are facing, but then always claim their desire to face that danger.

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<sup>145</sup> Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 215

<sup>146</sup> Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 216-218.

<sup>147</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 81-82.

<sup>148</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 88, emphasis in original.

<sup>149</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 15.

The moment of the “first kill,” or the first time one kills an enemy soldier in combat is another key moment is a soldier’s combat experience, and also reflected in war memoirs. It represents the moment that a soldier separates himself from the rules of peaceful society and fully adopts the rule of the battlefield: kill or be killed.<sup>150</sup> For Owen, it was simply fulfilling his specified role in a particular mission: “Suddenly, I saw a man’s head and torso emerge from a window. Without thinking, I put my laser on his chest and opened fire. I could see the bullets hit him and he flopped back into the room, disappearing into the smoke.”<sup>151</sup> Owen presents the event as just doing his job, doing what he trained for. And this did not bother him at all: “I didn’t have time to dwell on it nor did I have any feelings about it. This was the first person I’d ever shot and with all the time I’d spent thinking about how it would make me feel, it really didn’t make me feel anything. I knew that these guys in the house had already tried to kill my friends on the first floor and they wouldn’t hesitate to do the same to me.”<sup>152</sup> The message is a version of “I’m just doing my job.” The language is dispassionate and combined with an attempt at moral justification.

### **The Enemy**

Dehumanizing the enemy has long been a technique taught in militaries to make killing easier. The idea is simple: if a soldier does not view the enemy as human (or at the very least not an equal) then the soldier will have less hesitation in killing the enemy. Kyle even states it outright: “People say you have to distance yourself from your enemy to kill him.”<sup>153</sup> The authors of these books have completely internalized this lesson and typically use dehumanizing language

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<sup>150</sup> Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 221.

<sup>151</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 61.

<sup>152</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 62.

<sup>153</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 98.

to describe the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. They also project their own patriotic fervor onto their enemies, accusing them of being “fanatics.”

Kyle wastes no time demonizing and dehumanizing the enemy in his account—his book’s prologue is titled “Evil in the Crosshairs” and in it he describes his first kill as a sniper. The victim, an Iraqi woman, is preparing to throw a grenade at a group of US Marines. He says he hesitated at first because it was a woman, but he needed to save the lives of the Americans whom he states are more valuable than the life of any Iraqi. “She was too blinded by evil to consider [others]. She just wanted Americans dead no matter what. My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman’s twisted soul.”<sup>154</sup> Beyond valuing American lives over Iraqis, Kyle continues saying the enemy is evil: “I truly, deeply hated the evil that woman possessed. I hate it to this day. Savage, despicable evil. That’s what we were fighting in Iraq. That’s why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy ‘savages.’”<sup>155</sup> Not only does Kyle justify killing, but he hates his victims and blames them for their own deaths.

In several places he describes the “fun” of his job. Part of this “fun” is the challenge of taking shots in difficult conditions such as wind, or low visibility, or his longest sniper kill at over 2,100 yards.<sup>156</sup> But most of his “fun” seems to come from the killing itself.<sup>157</sup> In one case, he and his team leader are trying to challenge themselves and each other with the more exotic weapons they can use to kill. Although Kyle seems to see the Iraqis he kills as more of a challenge to prove his skills, he does not dispense with the more common dehumanizing

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<sup>154</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 4.

<sup>155</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 4.

<sup>156</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 396-397.

<sup>157</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 202.

comments. To him the enemy is “evil” or “savages” or “cowards.” The last chapter of his book is a reflection on his time as a SEAL. In it he imagines facing judgment after death but being certain in his conviction that “everyone I shot was evil...They all deserved to die”<sup>158</sup> His only regret is that he was not able to kill more.

While all of these authors use some sort of racist language to describe their enemies, Luttrell is the most extreme. Like Kyle, he accuses the Afghans, Iraqis, and other Arab civilians as being “evil” or being fueled by “hatred.” Like the others he sets himself (and other Americans) as victims of this perceived hate. Early in the book while briefly mentioning leaving an earlier deployment in Iraq he states that “children of three or four were taught to hate us.”<sup>159</sup> And then as traveling through Bahrain (where the US Navy’s Central Command headquarters is located) he describes the locals as having

a kind of sullen look to them, as if they were sick to death of having the American military around them. In fact, there were districts in Manama known as black flag areas, where tradesmen, shopkeepers, and private citizens hung black flags outside their properties to signify *Americans are not welcome*.

I guess it wasn’t quite as vicious as *Juden Verboten* was in Hitler’s Germany. But there are undercurrents of hatred all over the Arab world, and we knew there were many sympathizers with the Muslim extremist fanatics of the Taliban and al Qaeda.<sup>160</sup>

Luttrell identifies himself and other Americans as victims of the locals’ hatred, almost as if to justify his own.

Islamophobia is present throughout these accounts. Kyle describes the enemy: “The people we were fighting in Iraq...were fanatics. They hated us because we weren’t Muslim. They wanted to kill us, even though we’d just booted out their dictator, because we practiced a

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<sup>158</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 430.

<sup>159</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 15.

<sup>160</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 10-11, italics in original.



different religion than they did. Isn't religion supposed to teach tolerance?"<sup>161</sup> And at several points Luttrell mentions "Muslim extremists" or "Islamic fanatics." Beyond accusing Afghans as being evil or hate-filled, Luttrell also describes them as "hook-nosed," and mocks their clothing, especially turbans.<sup>162</sup> He frequently conflates the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Conflating different enemies into one may be explained as just another example of Luttrell's (and his co-author's) sloppiness.<sup>163</sup> But it is also a frequent racist and dehumanizing tactic of making all the enemies the same.<sup>164</sup>

Another form of dehumanizing the enemy comes in the form of describing how they fight. These authors often describe their enemies as "cowards." After seeing that Osama bin Laden did not even try to fight back, Owen says "He asked his followers for decades to wear suicide vests or fly planes into buildings, but didn't even pick up his weapon. In all of my deployments, we routinely saw this phenomenon. The higher up the food chain the targeted individual was, the bigger a pussy he was. The leaders were less willing to fight."<sup>165</sup> Kyle claims they are often on drugs: "[The fighters in Fallujah] were fanatical, but it wasn't just religion that was driving them. A good many were pretty doped up."<sup>166</sup> To be sure, they do make some concessions to the enemy at times. Luttrell notes that the Taliban forces are quite skilled at mountain warfare—using the terrain to their advantage. But as military anthropologist Anna Simmons notes, dehumanization of the enemy can include apparent lionization of that enemy's skills.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 98.

<sup>162</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 212

<sup>163</sup> Darack, "Operation Red Wings Misinformation."

<sup>164</sup> Anna Simmons, "War: Back to the Future," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 88.

<sup>165</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 249

<sup>166</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 168

<sup>167</sup> Simmons, "War: Back to the Future," 88.

## Rules of Engagement

All of these various threads can be seen in play around the issue of Rules of Engagement (ROE). This is somewhat worrisome because these veterans use their identity, their experience, and their claims to moral authority to state their displeasures with the legal and ethical codes that govern war and conflict. Complaints about the ROEs are based on their credibility, the sense that they know better; masculine posturing, they are tough and unafraid to battle the enemy; dehumanization of the enemy, those “fanatics” do not deserve humane treatment; their war-based patriotism, the sense that they are fighting for everyone back home, and an insistence that their actions should not be questioned or criticized by anyone who was not in their boots.

ROEs are the guidelines a military commander places on their subordinates on how and under what circumstances they may engage the enemy with lethal force. The ROEs may constrain the types of actions that a unit may take such as listing the requirements that must be met before authorizing a drone strike or artillery fire. ROEs for the US military use the rules laid out in the Geneva and Hague Conventions as their basis. While the specific details of the ROEs will differ based on the unit and the mission, they will always emphasize basic aspects such as distinguishing between belligerents and civilians, offering aid and protection to wounded and captured enemy combatants, and no reprisals against civilian populations. Further prohibitions may include that the enemy must fire the first shot, the types of weapons which may be employed in a particular situation, and more.

The complaints against the ROEs in these books comes in several different forms. Sometimes they directly attack the premise of ROEs or just the details of the rules. Other times they say things to the effect of that they “want to fight” or that they enjoy fighting, that they accept the risk of the mission, or they insult people who feel otherwise. As Stephen Warren

notes, special operations forces (SOF) in the US have historically operated in a manner that is both outside of typical military structures and rules, but simultaneously seen as the very best of the military.<sup>168</sup> There are rules that must be followed but SOF, due to their intense commitment to the security of the US, will often “do whatever it takes” to “protect” the homeland.<sup>169</sup> And this includes operating outside of what is considered acceptable, legal, and even moral.

Owen’s frustrations with ROEs are voiced somewhat indirectly. In one assault, they capture an Iraqi insurgent who hid his rifle and chest rig (i.e., carrier for extra magazines). But according to the ROE, Owen and his team are not allowed to kill him. Owen defines this by claiming that the enemy was using their own rules against them. His problem is that under the rules this man would have to be released because he was not carrying any weapons and therefore not a combatant. Owen continues to say that killing them was the only way to get them “off the streets”.<sup>170</sup> He repeats this complaint later, even saying the job was no longer any “fun.”<sup>171</sup> This is part of a larger critique against the “policymakers” in Washington trying to dictate what he and his teammates could do or should do.

Kyle’s frustrations with ROEs are similar to Owen’s. Assisting a team who discovered a shallow grave where American soldiers and Marines had been buried he states that “The insurgents didn’t worry about ROEs or court-martials. If they had the advantage, they would kill any Westerner they could find, whether they were soldiers or not.”<sup>172</sup> Rather than directly state that ROEs get in the way of the US forces, he implies that their enemy gets a free hand by not following any. Many of Kyle’s mentions of ROEs are in reference to the people he killed, stating

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<sup>168</sup> Warren, “US Special Forces,” 45-47.

<sup>169</sup> Warren, “US Special Forces,” 49.

<sup>170</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 124.

<sup>171</sup> Owen, *No Easy Day*, 139-145.

<sup>172</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 99.

that every sniper shot he took was documented by a teammate and compliant with the ROEs.<sup>173</sup>

To this end he says that the “shots he didn’t take” are the ones that bother him the most. He claims to have restrained himself at times because he was worried that he could not fully justify the shot if questioned by lawyers even though he believed it was a justified shot.<sup>174</sup>

Luttrell has the most to say about ROEs and the Geneva Conventions. He is clear from the first mention that he believes that the ROEs were responsible for the deaths of his teammates. Like the others, Luttrell describes ROEs as being crafted by politicians and lawyers (which is partly true), and that they interfere with the proper military operations. As is typical in his narration, he uses colorful language to demonstrate his displeasure:

Faced with the murderous cutthroats of the Taliban, we are not fighting under the rules of Geneva IV Article 4. We are fighting under the rules of Article 223.556mm [sic] — that’s the caliber and bullet gauge of our M4 rifle. And if those numbers don’t look good, try Article .762mm [sic], that’s what the stolen Russian Kalashnikovs fire at us, usually in deadly, heavy volleys.

In the global war on terror, we have rules, and our opponents use them against us. We try to be reasonable; they will stop at nothing. They will stoop to any form of base warfare: torture, beheading, mutilation. Attacks on innocent civilians, women and children, car bombs, suicide bombers, anything the hell they can think of. They’re right up there with the monsters of history.

And I ask myself, Who’s prepared to go furthest to win this war? Answer: they are. They’ll willingly die to get their enemy. They will take it to the limit, any time, any place, whatever it takes. And they don’t have rules of engagement.<sup>175</sup>

Through the bluster, Luttrell does convey a shared feeling among these authors and across much of the military. The rules get in the way winning, and since the enemy does not have any rules constraining their actions, why should we. He also sees the ROEs as being made by and for specific groups of people. At various times it is “liberals,” or “lawyers,” and at others it is “politicians” and “bureaucrats.”

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<sup>173</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 340.

<sup>174</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 171-172.

<sup>175</sup> Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*, 170.

Each of these men note that there are certain rules that must be followed in war, but they make exceptions for the enemies they are fighting. They argue the existence of their superior moral position by having rules limiting their actions and simultaneously excuse not abiding by these rules for the enemies they face because those enemies would never limit their own actions. Although they are probably not aware of the historical continuity, this is quite in-line with how the US military treated ROE in past colonial engagements. Joseph Darda notes that during the so-called “Indian Wars” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that pitted the US Army against Native Americans, officers were told to not worry about the “laws of warfare.”<sup>176</sup> Official training manuals from the US Military Academy instructed that the laws of war were reserved for “civilized” armies and not those of “savages” who have no such laws. These principles for counterinsurgency in the continental US transferred easily to overseas counterinsurgency work in the Philippines.<sup>177</sup> And it is still common in the military to use the phrase “Indian Country” to refer to areas in Afghanistan or Iraq outside of direct US control.

The complaints against ROE demonstrate several of the themes present in these war memoirs. These complaints show the authors’ commitment to aggressive action and willingness (or even desire) to fight and kill an enemy they see as fundamentally evil. But this desire to kill is done out of a commitment to the US and its civilians, even while sneering at the ones who do not fully support the military. These complaints also show their belief in their superiority over others and that they should not be questioned by people who are not “on the ground” and do not know what combat is like. Finally, their belief that the ROEs get in the way of the military shows how they understand the military as being the solution to many of the world’s problems.

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<sup>176</sup> Joseph Darda, *Empire of Defense: Race and the Cultural Politics of Permanent War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 160.

<sup>177</sup> Darda, *Empire of Defense*, 159-161.

Due to their experiences and their claimed positions of authority they also claim to “know better” than anyone else, including those in official positions of power. They argue that the rules should not apply to them and that these rules may have even prevented them from attaining complete victory (although they offer little evidence on how). And even if the rules did not prevent an outright victory, these memoirists claim they endangered the lives of American service members and even caused the deaths of their comrades. In this way these war memoirists set up a potential “stab-in-the-back” narrative claiming that the wars were not lost on the battlefield but due to the interferences of politicians and liberal activists at home.<sup>178</sup> Just as the “stab” explanation that followed the Vietnam War was set up by conservative political and cultural elites, the narratives in these SEAL memoirs provide the framework and potential evidence to explain away the results of the Post-9/11 Wars.<sup>179</sup>

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The stories of SEALs go beyond VetBros. These memoirs show the foundational attitudes about war and the military experience for many who never went to war. They also serve as accounts by which other veterans and service members measure their own military and combat experience. Even while the experiences of the three authors featured in this chapter are wholly unique and not at all representative of the average combat veteran, their beliefs and attitudes about the country and the meanings of patriotism, the military and its uses, combat and the enemy, the warrior ideal and “being a man” are all quite common among service members and veterans. Obviously, the military as an organization benefits greatly from the spread of these

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<sup>178</sup> Jeffrey P. Kimball, “The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War,” *Armed Forces & Society* 14, no. 3 (1988).

<sup>179</sup> Jeffrey P. Kimball, “Out of Primordial Cultural Ooze: Inventing Political and Policy Legacies about the U.S. Exit from Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (2010).

attitudes and beliefs not only among its members but also among the civilian population. Civilians who believe in the goodness of the military, its mission, and its members will likely take at face value its requests for more money and rationale for why it should not be held to certain legal standards.

War memoirs hold an important place in American military culture. They also inform civilians about the military and war and are influential in shaping popular representations of the war particularly in the form of film adaptations. The war memoirs presented in this chapter are important to understanding VetBros because of their popularity and being published in the first part of the Post-9/11 Wars. They helped set ideas about combat action, the enemy, and patriotism. Through these war memoirs we can better understand how members of the military (especially in elite units) understand their own identities as “warriors,” as men, and as patriots. Importantly, these identities are intertwined to the point that they are inseparable. Only a “real” man who is tough enough can truly be a warrior, and the duty of a warrior is to fight for his country. And these war memoirs also show how “the enemy” is understood. Some enemies are pre-modern “savages” whose only motivation is hatred and evil. But other enemies wear suits—they are lawyers, politicians, and sometimes even senior military officers who attempt to constrain the actions of these warriors. These internal enemies are particularly dangerous because they prevent the warriors from doing their jobs and defending the US against evil.

Unlike the flesh-witnesses Harari notes in his examples, the authors featured in this chapter are adamant in their support for war. Kyle goes so far as to say that he loves war.<sup>180</sup> Rather than using their flesh-witness stays to argue for the end to war they go as far as to argue for more war. Historian David Kieran also noted this in his comparisons of memoirs from the

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<sup>180</sup> Kyle, *American Sniper*, 369.

war in Vietnam to the memoirs of the Post-9/11 Wars.<sup>181</sup> Even as the Post-9/11 war memoirists repeated the Vietnam era trope of feeling like outsiders not understood by civilians, they express their difference through their support for the wars and the violence required. These SEAL memoirists tell their readers that, based on their superior knowledge (from their experience), they know the best way to prosecute a war and that is through sheer violence.

For these war memoirists, indeed most VetBros, experience is the key to understanding these points. If one does not understand, perhaps they never will and should just accept the superior authority of these authors. They are insistent that their beliefs are natural for anyone who has been in their boots, not based on a political ideology. Of course, this is a common feature of any conflict: all sides wish to imagine themselves as being without ideology.<sup>182</sup> The same can be said for gender and race politics as well. These war memoirists do not see themselves as being engaged in a political project to advance any particular views about war and the military, masculinity, or patriotism. But they do set forward prescriptive and normative understandings of these contested issues and concepts, and these understandings are quite reflective of how they are understood in the larger military culture.

For all of the serious nature of these texts, there are points that indicate a certain dark sense of humor. Perhaps editors or co-writers wanted this included to better humanize the authors. Myra Mendible notes that dark humor is a feature in almost all war memoirs. She argues that it is likely that humor is being used to avoid discussions of trauma.<sup>183</sup> It may be more valuable to look at their humor as being a part of their overall arguments about who they are and

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<sup>181</sup> David Kieran, *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 219-234.

<sup>182</sup> Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 62.

<sup>183</sup> Mendible, *American War Stories*, 22.



what they think about the people around them. This is especially important to understand how they dehumanize their enemies and make jokes about brutalizing and killing. Mendible's explanation that this is a way to avoid trauma is perhaps giving them too much credit. It may be more productive to treat this humor seriously.

### 3. “Offensive, Disrespectful, Irreverent, and Humorous:” Military Comedy

Soldiers making jokes about military life is probably as old as organized military units.<sup>1</sup> Roman armies left graffiti wherever they went, complete with lines griping about army life (along with drawings of male body parts).<sup>2</sup> And for all of their commitments to the United States and the military, even the memoirists featured in the previous chapter wrote some jokes or funny stories about military life in their books. Many of the themes that influenced military humor in the past (e.g., pointless tasks, bad food and living conditions, stupid officers) still influence military humor today. This chapter looks at military humor created by veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars: the web-comic Terminal Lance, the satirical news site Duffel Blog, and the web-based video streaming network Veterans Television. Through an examination of these I show important aspects about the VetBro rhetorical style, how they understand themselves, and also how veterans more broadly interact with the military. Military-based humor can show how service members and veterans define their community and what they value.

The websites featured here take older forms of military humor and adapt them to fit new media and to follow the conventions of their respective genres (i.e., webcomic, satirical news, sitcoms, and sketch comedy). Online media offer greater accessibility to the generations of “millennial” and “Gen-Z” veterans. These online media are also easy to share and, as their creators suggest, can help to maintain bonds with friends and perhaps even create new connections with other veterans. Online media also lack the barriers of entry of traditional media

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<sup>1</sup> John Parkin, “Humouring a Lost Cause,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 2, no. 3 (2009): 275-276.

<sup>2</sup> Meilan Solly, “Graffiti Left by Soldiers Repairing Hadrian’s Wall Will Be Immortalized in 3-D,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/graffiti-left-roman-soldiers-repairing-hadrians-wall-will-be-immortalized-3-d-180971596/>.

which allows these veteran creators access to large audiences without needing to go through traditional media gatekeepers.

Humor can be used to build community and to define community. A joke can use insider knowledge to such a degree that an outsider will have no point of reference. Also, the object or “butt” of a joke can indicate to an audience who is included in the levity of the joke and who is to be ridiculed. In a similar function, humor can be useful to establish and reinforce the norms of a community through the mockery of transgressions. The objects of military humor can show outsiders the experiences and frustrations about the military, what military members value, and how they understand their own culture. It can therefore be valuable for civilian audiences to learn more about military life, especially if those civilians have little contact with the military and veterans and only know of them based on mainstream (i.e., civilian-made) representations.

The military humorists featured here claim to use humor as a means of helping veterans work through issues related to PTSD by both providing some joy and (re)establishing bonds between veterans. Both Maximillian Uriarte, the creator of Terminal Lance, and Paul Szoldra, the creator of Duffel Blog, claim to have received messages from viewers reporting that their products have helped them re-connect with old friends from their time in service. Vet TV creator Donny O’Malley claims that this is the very purpose of the network. This is despite the fact that much of Vet TV’s humor is crass, at best, and arguably misogynistic, racist, and transphobic. O’Malley purports that Vet TV works to alleviate the problems of social isolation, but the method is through reinforcing negative stereotypes and supporting hegemonic masculinity.

VetBro humor has developed in the wider media ecosphere of right-wing comedy. The types of comedy frequently used by the political right are often dismissed by cultural critics as being simply unfunny. But a serious examination of the humor and its messages can help

illuminate the political projects of its creators. Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx argue that “ignoring the prevalence of right-wing comedy means more than missing the conservative joke. It also means overlooking the tools that conservatives use to reshape the cultural and political landscape in America.”<sup>3</sup> Simply pointing at the jokes common in rightwing humor, including many of the offerings of Vet TV, and saying they are mean-spirited and offensive misses the fact that many people enjoy this humor. If we are to fully understand these communities and their political commitments, we should treat seriously what brings them together in shared enjoyment.<sup>4</sup> This is not a defense of anything they create, rather that if we are to critique it in ways legible to the intended audience we need to understand the humor more fully.

Humor gives us insight into the wider VetBro rhetorical style, especially that which is quite off-putting to non-VetBros. Much of their communication online and in retail spaces (which I address in the next chapter on the lifestyle brands of VetBros) uses humor as a tool to both communicate their messages and to deflect criticism about content that anyone finds offensive. In fact, they are often quite proud of being offensive. This is a rhetorical style similar to one used in other online spaces that uses “trolling behavior.”<sup>5</sup> And like other (especially right wing) trolls, this behavior always has the potential to spill over into “offline” spaces by provoking outrage.<sup>6</sup> These jokes are meant to antagonize, but they are also used to identify fellow travelers and potential allies.

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<sup>3</sup> Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, *That’s Not Funny: How the Right Makes Comedy Work for Them*, EPUB, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> AJ Bauer, “Why so Serious? Studying Humor on the Right,” *Media, Culture & Society* 45, no. 5 (2023): 1068-1069.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Nycyk, “Trolls and Trolling History: From Subculture to Mainstream Practices,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, ed. Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan (UK: SAGE, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Hedwig Lieback, “Truth-Telling and Trolls: Trolling, Political Rhetoric in the Twenty-First Century, and the Objectivity Norm,” *Aspeers* 12 (2019): 15-18.

For all the mockery of the military found in these sites, they are not necessarily subversive or work to undermine the authority of the military's hierarchy or culture. Of course, they possess this potential, and in certain specific cases, they have demonstrated it. For example, prior to the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the military's ban on homosexuals serving in any of the branches, both Duffel Blog and Terminal Lance openly mocked the culture of homophobia in the military. Michael Billig argues jokes that on the surface appear to mock an organization may actually work to maintain the social order of the organization by allowing members to "blow off steam" but not actually subvert the hierarchy of the organization.<sup>7</sup> So, while these comics may make fun of bigoted cultures in the military, they do not actually attempt to undermine the services and may even be viewed as wanting to expand the ranks of the military. But in the case of Vet TV, it actively supports the cultures of bigotry in the military even when it is poking fun at the military as a bureaucratic institution. Its satire is working as a reactionary device for maintaining social order even while mocking other traditions of the organization.

### **How Can War Be Funny?**

The Post-9/11 period has seen few military comedies written for large audiences, unlike during previous conflicts.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this are many: it is possible that civilian audience will not find these funny due to a sense of respect for military service; it is also possible that they do not understand enough about military life to enjoy humor about it. The military humor featured here is created by and for veterans and service members. Before looking at the military humor of VetBros, and Post-9/11 veterans more broadly, I survey some of the research literature on humor

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London: Sage, 2005, 211-214.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew C Sparks, "Poking Fun at Heroes: American War and the Death of the Military Comedy," *Media, War & Conflict* 15, no. 1 (2022).

in order to show some of the ways scholars have tried to understand humor, its functions, and what it is capable of accomplishing.

## Humor Theory

### **The “Origins” of Comedy**

Understanding why people laugh and what makes some things funny and not others has long been a topic of inquiry in fields as diverse as linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience. The three main theories of the “origin” of humor really do not function as analytic tools that can be used to reliably predict if something is funny. Rather these theories are post hoc explanations for why some things may be funny to some people and not others. None of these theories are mutually exclusive of the others and often overlap.

Superiority theory states that people laugh at things in order to feel superior to them and even assert dominance. Sometimes this can be fairly innocent such as laughing at the social missteps and naiveté of children or the playful clumsiness of a kitten. But it can also be quite malicious such as laughing at an outsider for their ignorance of some social convention. Regardless of the intent, the superiority of one person or group is asserted over another person or group. Certain traits are elevated over others, social norms are enforced, and violations are punished through mockery. The relief theory of humor is most interested in the physiological responses to humor and stress. Depending on the situation, humor can be a useful tool to decrease tension or increase arousal. It can be caused from a sudden reduction in danger, and it can be used to cope with a stressful situation. The third theory of humor deals with incongruity: people laugh at things they did not expect or that they find odd but not threatening. Surprise is key for the incongruity theory. The object of the humor is something that does not make sense given the situation and context.

All of the theories on why people laugh overlap. A social faux pas can become funny because some feel superior (to the one making the mistake), but also because of the incongruity of the situation (it is something that should not happen), and the sense of relief to break the tension of the awkward moment (gratitude someone else noticed the social violation). It is difficult to point to any one “origin” of humor. What all humor does share is that it reflects social relationships (good and bad) and how these relationships can be intensified (for better or worse) through the use of humor. Communications scholar John C. Meyer proposes a “functional” approach to looking at humorous communication by focusing on the relationship between speaker and audience and the effects of the humorous communication.<sup>9</sup> This understanding of humor and its role in intensifying relationships is more useful here because it can help show how some of the humor, including the most noxious, works to show how VetBros understand who is in the veteran community and who needs to be excluded.

### **The Rhetorical Functions of Humor**

Meyer sees all humor as being used to unify groups or set them apart from others. Important to his model is that “the audience or receiver of the message determines how it is interpreted and what actual function the humor serves.”<sup>10</sup> This is why the same joke can be deeply funny to some audiences and deeply hurtful to others. Humor is dependent on the rhetorical context. He proposes four “theories of use” of humor that all sit on the spectrum of unification and division: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation.

“Identification” humor demonstrates to the audience that the speaker is one of them and it can also help bring the group together in stressful situations. Self-deprecating humor often falls

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<sup>9</sup> John C. Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication,” *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (2000).

<sup>10</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword,” 311.

into this category by demonstrating that the speaker is willing to be vulnerable and let the audience laugh at them. It displays trust and vulnerability. Other identification humor includes “inside jokes,” that is jokes that can only be known by a member of the joke such that being able to laugh at it shows membership in the group.<sup>11</sup> Most of the more benign humor featured in this chapter takes on this function: if you are part of the in-group, you will get the joke.

Humor that serves the “clarification” function can be used to help solidify a point and make it more memorable. This is why it is often employed by politicians against their opponents. But it can also be used to point out a flaw in such a way that does not risk confrontation because the party with the flaw is not present or is a fabrication. By singling out and mocking a particular flaw, the speaker reminds or sometimes teaches the audience appropriate behavior or attitudes; it clarifies social norms.<sup>12</sup> A joke that uses the clarification function when the butt of the joke is not present takes on a different function when the butt is in the audience. In this case the joke takes on the “enforcement” function. It is attempting to enforce social norms by mocking the violation and the violator. This is the less negative form of division comedy. It corrects the violation through mockery and enforces proper behavior and attitudes and warns others not to make the same mistakes or risk mockery.<sup>13</sup>

The “differentiation” function is used to show the differences between the speaker and group they represent from others. The speaker then is able to show the audience who is different by showing contempt for the subject of the humor. A more basic division also takes places with this type of humor between those who find the joke funny and those who do not. An audience that either identifies with or is at least sympathetic to the butt of the joke will not find this type of

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<sup>11</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword,” 318-319.

<sup>12</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword,” 319-320.

<sup>13</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword,” 320-321.



humor funny and perhaps even offensive.<sup>14</sup> The more problematic humor presented in this chapter takes this function. Users of this type of humor are making an agreement with their audience about showing contempt for the joke's target. They have made decisions about who or what is the subject (butt) of the joke and that they deserve to be mocked; members of the audience who laugh at the joke agree with the humorist's decision.

This focus on the rhetorical functions of humor rather than a theory of comedy's source makes Meyer's formulation more useful for looking at how VetBro comedy is both a product of military and veteran culture as well as being a gatekeeping tool. The military and veteran humor presented in this chapter works to bring veterans together and to show outsiders that they are different. It also attempts to define the appropriate behavior and attitudes for the group and even shun members who do not act appropriately. And any malice is concealed under the premise of "it's just a joke."<sup>15</sup>

### The Everyday

Military humor often requires intimate knowledge of military life for one to understand it, this is why it can function as a gatekeeping tool. Part of the pleasure of "getting the joke" is that the audience can feel like they have insider knowledge that many others do not possess. And because military humor relies so much on this intimate knowledge, it can be useful to gain a broader understanding of military life. Even if one does not "get" the joke, they can still learn about military life and the people in it. Due to the respect and esteem often displayed to the military, there is a perception that the military may be above such lightheartedness.<sup>16</sup> But just like other work environments, much of the banal parts of military life seem like a joke.

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<sup>14</sup> Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword," 321-323.

<sup>15</sup> Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword," 317.

<sup>16</sup> Parkin, "Humouring a Lost Cause," 275.

The success of the sites featured in this chapter among younger service-members and Post-9/11 veterans is how they address the frustrations and stress of everyday military life in a humorous manner. Typical stories about war and the military that are produced for mass audiences (i.e., civilians) generally leave out the drudgery of standing watch at a combat outpost for 12 hours, or sitting through a 90-slide PowerPoint briefing, or spending 6 hours cleaning weapons—all of which have been subjects of jokes on these sites. The mundane tends to get written out of popular stories. But it is things like these monotonous tasks that take up most of a service-member's time even when deployed in a combat zone. And it is things like this they complain about the most.<sup>17</sup>

This particular aspect of military humor, the focus on the ordinary and even banal parts of military life, is only knowable to “insiders.” Of course, this is not new, for example Bill Mauldin's *Willie and Joe* comics in *Stars and Stripes* during World War II.<sup>18</sup> Like the Post-9/11 veterans featured here, Mauldin was also a service member, spent time with troops on the front lines, and used those experiences of the everyday to inform his comics. Other types of situational comedy, such as office or workplace comedies, also rely on the ordinary and everyday as sources of their humor and they similarly offer important insights as to the culture of their settings.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Marvin R. Koller, *Humor and Society: Explorations in the Sociology of Humor* (Houston: Cap and Gown Press, 1988), 233.

<sup>18</sup> *Stars and Stripes* is the official newspaper of the US military.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Bramlett, “The Role of Culture in Comics of the Quotidian,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6, no. 3 (2015).



*"Joe, yestiddy ya saved my life an' I swore I'd pay ya back.  
Here's my last pair of dry socks."*

Image 1 "Socks" by Bill Mauldin

Sociologist Marvin Koller sees making fun of the ordinary aspects of military life as a general trend with all military humor: "Routine and standard operating procedures mark the military life in times of peace and become the source of much military humor in order to survive the boredom or tedium. Even in wartime, military humor will focus on the larger periods of inaction, the wasted hours, days and years of performing duties that are unchallenging and seemingly unproductive."<sup>20</sup> Just as the routine and ordinary make up most of military life, they also make up most military humor. And since these aspects of military life are really only known to insiders, that is the references to the jokes, the jokes themselves will only be funny to them.

This focus on the specific knowledge internal to a community can create a particular "translation resistance."<sup>21</sup> This "resistance" is due to high degrees of specificity, references to

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<sup>20</sup> Koller, *Humor and Society*, 233.

<sup>21</sup> Limor Shifman, Hadar Levy, and Mike Thelwall, "Internet Jokes: The Secret Agents of Globalization?," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19 (2014).

places and politics, and stereotypes, to name a few.<sup>22</sup> All of these represent shorthand to aid in the telling of a joke, and they generally are deep with semiotic meaning. Examples of these can be stereotypes of the services, the various occupational specialties, and the types of people in different roles. For example, “boots” and Second Lieutenants (junior enlisted straight out of training and the most junior rank of officers) are seen as being prone to making mistakes even though they are highly motivated and eager to be in the service. On the other extreme, senior NCOs who have a great deal of experience are seen as having no personal life outside of the military. In the case of occupational specialties, “grunts,” members of the infantry, are stereotypically viewed as not very intelligent, whereas “POGs,” Person Other than Grunt” are viewed as weak or lazy. These stereotypes are widely known in military and among veterans and make for easy sources of humor and they serve as reliable shorthand to help advance a joke. This becomes particularly important for the examples shown in this chapter due to their short-form formats and chosen media.

In ways appropriate to their own particular forms, each of these examples takes experiences common to junior soldiers and officers and exaggerates them in ways that fit the medium. The limited space of a satirical news article, or a 3-panel comic, or a 4-minute comedy sketch, forces writers to be highly focused on a subject, which also allow for a level of detail that may not be possible with other media. Many of the elements of the humor are exaggerated to extreme measures in order to enhance the comedic element. Not being subject to the demands of a larger narrative and story arc also allow for this ability to tightly focus on whatever the writers have in mind. Not being tied to a narrative also allows the writers to revisit and expand upon

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<sup>22</sup> Shifman, Levy, and Thelwall, “Internet Jokes: The Secret Agents of Globalization?,” 736.

older ideas because they do not need any sort of timeline. But in a very real sense, the larger narrative is the exigencies of military life.

The web-based medium also enables easy and reliable sharing through social media, email, and even text messages. This sharing capability then serves as a way for veterans to connect with the people they served long after they have left the military. As social media sites become more common tools for communication for service members, even veterans can feel some connection after leaving.<sup>23</sup> Because they are easy to share through social media, service members and veterans are able to use sites as a way of staying in contact with former comrades, a point Vet TV emphasizes at the end of every episode for every show.

#### Building Community, Preventing Suicide

One of the stated goals of Vet TV is that by bringing veterans together it can help prevent veteran suicide. Military veterans in the US have consistently higher rates of suicide than their non-veteran peers since at least the early 2000s. In 2019, non-veterans died by suicide at a rate of 16.8 per 100,000 while veterans died by suicide at a rate of 31.6 per 100,000.<sup>24</sup> This was especially true among younger veterans aged 18-34 in the early 2010s.<sup>25</sup> It remains so but at a slightly lower rate.<sup>26</sup> Veterans transitioning from the military to civilian life are most at risk for suicide in the first 12 months after their separation from service.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Adey et al., “Blurred Lines: Intimacy, Mobility, and the Social Military,” *Critical Military Studies* 2, no. 1–2 (2016).

<sup>24</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, “2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report,” September 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Gibbons, C. Hendricks Brown, and Kwan Hur, “Is the Rate of Suicide Among Veterans Elevated?,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. S1 (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, “2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report.”

<sup>27</sup> Yosef Sokol et al., “The Deadly Gap: Understanding Suicide among Veterans Transitioning out of the Military,” *Psychiatry Research* 300 (2021).

In the early 2010s a common headline statistic claimed that about 22 veterans per day took their own lives. Several organizations and movements developed in the wake of these findings. Some were developed around social media campaigns and hashtags, one of the more popular ones being #22pushups or #Mission22. Using these hashtags on social media sites, participants would post videos of themselves performing 22 pushups everyday as a way to “promote awareness” of the problem of veteran suicide.<sup>28</sup> The “22” was used to represent the reported average number of veterans who die by suicide daily, and the pushups were used as they are a common physical training exercise in the military.

Activities and social media campaigns like these are performed under the premise of “raising awareness.” Supporters claim that through the “awareness raising” a community of supporters can gather and show veterans who may be dealing with suicide ideation that they are not alone and have people who care about them. However, critics claim that these types of online “awareness raising” efforts are a form of moral grandstanding and do little to help correct the problems being addressed.<sup>29</sup>

Veterans have higher rates than their civilian peers of the some of the most prevalent factors for suicide, namely depression, substance use disorders, and the “signature wounds” of the Post-9/11 Wars, Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>30</sup> But as important as these are in contributing to suicide, one of the largest drivers of

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Hookway and Tim Graham, “‘22 Push-Ups for a Cause’: Depicting the Moral Self via Social Media Campaign #Mission22,” *M/C Journal* 20, no. 4 (2017).

<sup>29</sup> Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, “Moral Grandstanding,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>30</sup> Terri L. Tanielian and Lisa Jaycox, eds., *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).

suicide, not just for veterans, is social isolation.<sup>31</sup> And it appears that veterans have higher rates of social isolation as well.<sup>32</sup> This is especially true for veterans in rural areas.<sup>33</sup> There are few agreed upon reasons for why veterans seem to be more isolated than their civilian peers, but feeling that they are not understood by others is one of the more common themes.<sup>34</sup> Because of this, most prevention programs for suicide developed by governmental and non-governmental organizations have been focused on developing community bonds and bringing veterans out of their (sometimes) self-imposed isolation.<sup>35</sup>

Some non-profit, veterans service organizations such as Team Rubicon and Team Red, White & Blue were developed to aid veterans by helping them form social bonds with other veterans through disaster assistance volunteer work and athletic activities, respectively. Prior to beginning Vet TV, O'Malley founded Irreverent Warriors, a non-profit that organizes ruck marches (i.e., hikes while carrying a "rucksack" or heavy military backpack) to raise money to help support other groups who serve veterans facing isolation and other suicide risks. Beyond raising funds for other groups, these ruck marches aim to bring veterans together for a shared social experience.

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<sup>31</sup> Anatol-Fiete Näher, Christine Rummel-Kluge, and Ulrich Hegerl, "Associations of Suicide Rates With Socioeconomic Status and Social Isolation: Findings From Longitudinal Register and Census Data," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2020).

<sup>32</sup> Gemma Wilson, M Hill, and M. D. Kiernan, "Loneliness and Social Isolation of Military Veterans: Systematic Narrative Review," *Occupational Medicine* 68, no. 9 (2018): 606.

<sup>33</sup> John F. McCarthy et al., "Suicide Among Patients in the Veterans Affairs Health System: Rural–Urban Differences in Rates, Risks, and Methods," *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. S1 (2012).

<sup>34</sup> Sokol et al., "The Deadly Gap."

<sup>35</sup> Brian Goldfarb and John E. Armenta, "Articulating Vulnerability and Interdependence in Networked Social Space," in *Social Media and Disability*, ed. Katie Ellis and Mike Kent (New York: Routledge, 2017), 169-171.

Even if the communities formed around the sites featured in this chapter remain solely in online spaces, they may still be valuable for military members and veterans to connect with others. Because the population of veterans is so small and dispersed, many may feel isolated being surrounded by civilians with whom it may be difficult to communicate wartime experiences.<sup>36</sup> Comments sections on these websites allow viewers to see others with similar views, and experiences. This may serve as the basis to form connections with others. And it may simply allow the viewer to not feel as if they are alone in how these views and experiences.<sup>37</sup>

Humor is sometimes a response to stressful situations and can act as way to relieve stress and to share camaraderie for people in high-stress and dangerous occupations such as military units or hospital emergency departments.<sup>38</sup> So even in combat, humor plays a vital role in team cohesion and effectiveness. The humor used in organizations such as the military becomes a means of creating and maintaining group bonds and cohesion because it also functions as a way to separate insiders from outsiders, old-timers from newcomers.<sup>39</sup> Being able to understand a joke demonstrates a degree of specialist knowledge, and not being able to understand the joke identifies one as not (or not yet) being a member of the community. That is, the unification or division functions of humor.<sup>40</sup> And long after separation from the military, humor can still identify one as a member of the community. Even though many of the details may have changed, much of military life is still recognizable.

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<sup>36</sup> McCarthy et al., "Suicide Among Patients in the Veterans Affairs Health System."

<sup>37</sup> P. A. Thoits, "Mechanisms Linking Social Ties and Support to Physical and Mental Health," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 52, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>38</sup> Katherine van Wormer and Mary Boes, "Humor in the Emergency Room: A Social Work Perspective," *Health & Social Work* 22, no. 2 (1997).

<sup>39</sup> Sophia F. Dziegielewski et al., "Humor: An Essential Communication Tool in Therapy," *International Journal of Mental Health* 32, no. 3 (2003): 85.

<sup>40</sup> Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword."



Beyond community-building, humor also operates on a very personal plane for veterans. Humor can help in healing after traumatic events, and it is even employed (albeit very carefully) by psychotherapists when treating trauma victims.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes laughing it off does help. In an interview, Duffel Blog founder/editor Paul Szoldra said, “I’ve gotten messages from guys saying ‘I have PTSD and your website is the only thing that’s able to make me laugh.’”<sup>42</sup> Humor about war or the military allows one with PTSD to assist with coping because this humor is making fun of the military itself and the situations being in the military creates.<sup>43</sup>

Vet TV creator O’Malley states this goal directly in promotional material and in short clips or text at the end of each episode for every show. Some of these clips feature O’Malley or other actors in costume encouraging viewers to contact and connect with those with whom they served. Other episodes will end with a written message “TEXT SOMEONE YOU SERVED WITH AND SHARE THIS EPISODE WITH THEM. THEY MIGHT NEED A LAUGH RIGHT NOW. SOCIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN VETS SAVE LIVES.” This text is sometimes followed with the phone number for the suicide prevention hotline. Later in this chapter I will return to and more closely examine these claims of creating community through comedy and comedy’s potential to help with trauma.

### **Examples of Post-9/11 Military Humor**

In this section I will look at each of the examples in turn. Even though the web-based video network Vet TV will be the focus, I will first discuss the webcomic Terminal Lance and

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<sup>41</sup> Jacqueline Garrick, “The Humor of Trauma Survivors: Its Application in the Therapeutic Milieu,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, Vol. 12, No. 1-2, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Dion Nissenbaum, “Prank and File: These Military Reports Are Out of Line,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2013,

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324345804578426881030734960.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Garrick, “The Humor of Trauma Survivors,” 177-178.

the satirical news website Duffel Blog. These two sites have a longer history than Vet TV and have been important in establishing the subjects of military humor in the Post-9/11 era with their focuses on the quotidian elements of military life in addition to dispelling many of the heroic myths around service members, and war. Even though they remain popular among service members and veterans, recent changes to Duffel Blog's mode of delivery and Terminal Lance creator Uriarte's desire to begin new projects may signal a decline in their relevance to military and veteran culture. Vet TV better exemplifies the VetBro rhetorical style than its predecessors and is more relevant to service members and veterans in the later years of the Post-9/11 Wars.

### Terminal Lance

Terminal Lance is the creation of Maximilian Uriarte, a former Marine Corps infantryman who served two tours in Iraq. It began in 2010 as a regular feature in *The Marine Corps Times*, while Uriarte was still enlisted, and later became a web comic after his separation. After leaving the Marine Corps, Uriarte used his GI Bill benefits to study animation and then received a BFA from the California College of the Arts. While still drawing up to two new Terminal Lance comics a week, Uriarte wrote and published a full-length graphic novel in 2016 about two junior infantry Marines in Iraq and how one confronts survivor's guilt and PTSD.

The name "Terminal Lance" refers to Marines who never advance beyond the junior enlisted rank of Lance Corporal, either due to the complicated promotion system or personal failings (both of which Uriarte makes fun of in his comics). Service-members in these positions are generally very experienced, often with multiple combat deployments, and have a great many responsibilities, just none of the authority or pay of a non-commissioned officer (Corporal and above). Many Marines, especially those in the infantry, meet this profile as do many junior enlisted in other branches but with their own specific characteristics.



Image 2 Terminal Lance “The Suck Sucks,” published Aug. 17, 2018

Terminal Lance began as a standard three-panel, black-and-white comic, although more recently Uriarte uses color and deviates from the 3-panel design. The comic mainly focuses on the lives of Abe and Garcia, two Marine infantry Lance Corporals in their early to mid-twenties who have served overseas in combat and who will most likely never be promoted again. Uriarte describes the comic as being for “grunts” like these two. Typical comics show the unglamorous and ordinary life and work of a Marine that makes up a majority of a grunt’s life, e.g., cleaning barracks, being “on duty,” avoiding senior non-commissioned officers, drinking, getting in trouble, complaining about the Marine Corps. These are all aspects of military life common to junior enlisted Marines (as well as service-members from other branches), but rarely depicted in representations of the military made for broader audiences. Uriarte only rarely creates comics that depict his characters engaging in combat with an enemy, and those are generally to make fun of some other aspect of military life. Also common are comics depicting Abe’s life as a young veteran and interactions with civilians and other veterans, usually emphasizing the disconnect between Abe and civilians, and with older (pre-9/11) veterans.

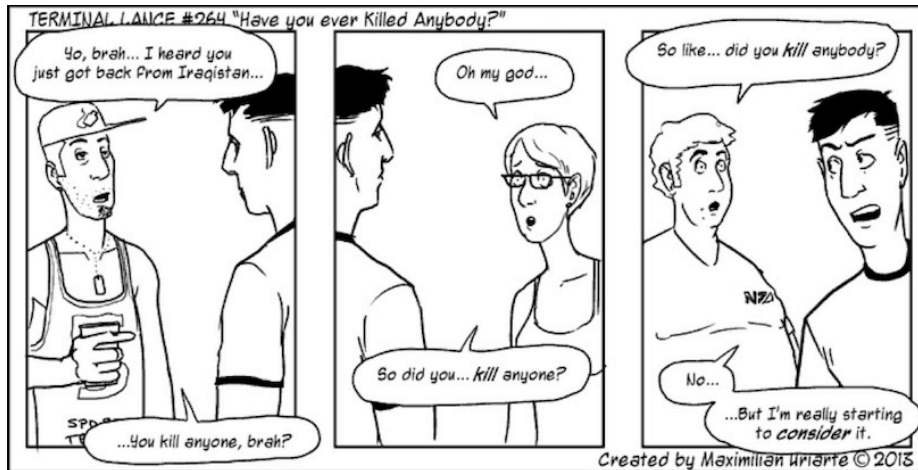


Image 3 Terminal Lance “Have You Ever Killed Anybody?” published Apr 26, 2013

For example, this comic shows Abe in civilian clothes (it is unclear if he is still in the Marine Corps or not, but that is not important in this example) interacting with three different civilians, one in each panel. Each one asks Abe if he had killed anyone. In the first two panels he does not reply. Finally, in the third panel he replies to the question “No... ..But I’m really starting to **consider** it.” The joke here is intended to poke fun at the lack of connection between civilians and those in the military by emphasizing what is an almost universally hated question about war and military life: “Did you ever kill anyone?” The question is problematic because some (non-VetBro) service-members and veterans do not like to understand their service solely through killing, especially if one is dealing with survivor’s guilt or perpetrator-induced PTSD.

This is also a major theme in Uriarte’s non-humorous work. In *The White Donkey*, the question “have you killed anyone?” is posed to the main character multiple times upon his return from Iraq. As he feels responsible for his best friend’s death, this question haunts the main character and feeds in to his alcohol abuse and suicidal thoughts. This is strikingly different than the real pleasure claimed by many other VetBros. Chris Kyle goes so far to say that all of the killing he did was good. And for Vet TV, killing becomes a punch line.

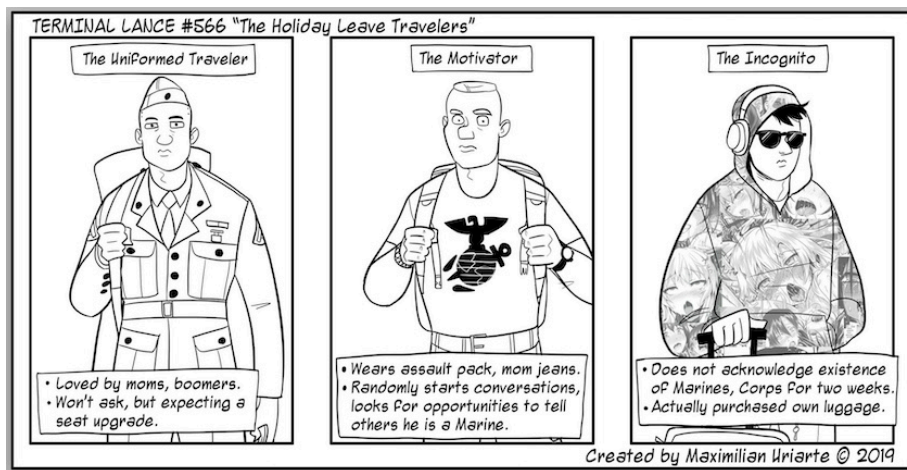


Image 4 Terminal Lance “The Holiday Leave Travelers,” published Dec. 20, 2019

Much of the humor in Uriarte’s comics is directed at his fellow Marines. In this example he shows three different types of Marines one may see at an airport around the time of Christmas holiday leave. In the first panel he shows a “boot” Marine, that is a Marine who is a recent graduate from basic training and has not yet deployed, wearing the “Alpha” service uniform. His status as a boot is evident from the fact that he has only two ribbons on his uniform. He is called “The Uniformed Traveler,” who is “Loved by moms, boomers.” The middle panel shows “The Motivator” who is wearing a Marine Corps t-shirt, an assault pack, sporting a “high-and-tight” haircut, and is looking for “opportunities to tell others he is a Marine.” The third panel shows the “Incognito” Marine who is doing everything he can to not be associated with the Marine Corps, including buying his own luggage instead of using issued gear. These archetypes are of Marines either seeking attention and recognition for being in the Marine Corps or wanting to not be associated with it, and these archetypes appear in different ways throughout Uriarte’s comics.

Uriarte sometimes pokes fun at other veterans who take themselves too seriously, something VetBros can be accused of. One of his recurring characters, Angry Facebook Veteran, is featured getting mad at some perceived slight to veterans. In this example, he is upset that, after widespread complaints online, the company Under Armor removed a design that riffed on

the design of the Iwo Jima Memorial. Now that the company had responded to the manufactured outrage, Angry Facebook Veteran no longer has anything to be mad at.



Image 5 Terminal Lance “Offended,” published May 19, 2015

There are few women characters in TL comics since junior enlisted Marines in the infantry have few interactions with women during the normal course of a work week. The women Marines who appear in TL comics generally take the role of “straight man” characters or foils to set up Abe or another character as the butt of a joke. The same is generally true of women civilians who appear with one important exception: spouses. The wives of junior Marines are depicted as overweight and lazy moochers living off the salary and additional housing allowance of their Marine husband. Since spouses and children are referred to as dependents, in military slang a free-loading wife is referred to as a “dependa.” Sometimes these jokes are centered on the junior Marine she is married to, but regardless it is the derogatory stereotype of the Marine wife that is the source of the humor.

### Duffel Blog

Duffel Blog uses the genre of satirical news to discuss issues affecting service-members and veterans, and more broadly to make fun of the military. The site was started by another

enlisted Marine Corps infantry veteran, Paul Szoldra, who continues to act as the site’s editor. Szoldra also works as a contributor and editor for *Business Insider* and is currently the editor-in-chief for Task and Purpose, a military and veteran-focused news website. All of the contributors for Duffel Blog are also US military veterans or currently serving service members. Except for Szoldra, all contributors publish under pseudonyms. Duffel Blog is often referred to as “the military version of *The Onion*.” Like other satirical news websites, the stories in the Duffel Blog often resemble news stories in form and usually in tone as well. So much so that in 2012, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell sent a query to Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki citing a Duffel Blog article as evidence.<sup>44</sup>

Headlines and body text are often outlandish but stated in a tone that is (generally) standard professional journalism, except for the occasional expletive. For example, “Typo Leads to Creation of \$179 Million Gorilla Warfare Program.”<sup>45</sup>



### Typo Leads To Creation Of \$179 Million Gorilla Warfare Program

Image 6 Screenshot from Duffel Blog, “Gorilla Warfare,” Feb. 25, 2013

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<sup>44</sup> Spencer Ackerman, “Senate Minority Leader Fooled by Report in Military Version of The Onion,” *Wired*, February 19, 2013, <https://www.wired.com/2013/02/mcconnell-duffel-blog/>.

<sup>45</sup> “Typo Leads To Creation Of \$179 Million Gorilla Warfare Program,” Duffel Blog, February 25, 2013, <https://www.duffelblog.com/p/typo-causes-creation-of-179m-gorilla-warfare-program>.

The text of the article uses the dispassionate tone common in professional journalism, complete with “quotes” (of course, fabricated) from officials in the Department of Defense. It even features a photo-shopped image of a large gorilla “reading” Army Field Manual *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. While the article is about a fictional typo that led to the creation of a bogus program, the actual butt of the humor is senior military and civilian staff in the Department of Defense. The article pokes fun at the problems of groupthink and inter-service rivalries at the Pentagon that lead to mismanagement and waste and that also prevent others from speaking up and asking questions.

Other articles take a personal and on-the ground approach, but still point to more general themes, such as “Study: Random, Pointless Formations Tied To Increase In Combat Performance, Morale.”<sup>46</sup> Articles like this use the language of “breaking news” to tell stories of rather typical and even mundane aspects to military and veteran life. In this example, “formations” refers to a unit (generally about 100-200 soldiers) lining up to receive orders from their commander at the beginning and end of the workday. For junior enlisted soldiers this often involves a lot of standing in rank-and-file waiting for the officer in charge and wondering what the point is.

From the point of view of junior officers, the article “Outgoing Company Commander: ‘I Hate You All’” takes the form of the speech transcript of an Army Captain giving his final speech to his company before handing over responsibility.<sup>47</sup> Rather than being filled with anodyne statements about the honor of leading soldiers, the “Captain” openly mocks these

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<sup>46</sup> “Study: Random, Pointless Formations Tied To Increase In Combat Performance, Morale,” November 2, 2012, <https://www.duffelblog.com/p/study-random-pointless-formations-tied-to-increase-in-combat-performance-morale>.

<sup>47</sup> “Outgoing Company Commander: ‘I Hate You All,’” Duffel Blog, November 28, 2013, <https://www.duffelblog.com/p/outgoing-company-commander-hate>.



traditions: “I should probably thank my battalion commander for the opportunity to command this company...but I think I’d rather go out into the parking lot and key his car for saddling me with the greatest collection of idiots, malingerers, and criminals that have ever walked the face of this earth.” He lists off some of the problems created by the soldiers under his command and the dissolution of his marriage. He ends with “advice” to the incoming commander, “There’s a bottle of scotch in the third drawer of my desk. You’re going to need it.”

Duffel Blog writers have also noted the quantity and poor quality of memoirs written by Navy SEALs. “Navy officials announced the extension of Navy SEAL training by one week, adding a grueling 40 hours of creative writing classes to the already intense selection program, Duffel Blog has learned.”<sup>48</sup> The article then discusses the classes the SEALs will take including “proper use of tense and first vs. third person narrative,” how to look cool on TV, and training on how to “glorify themselves as much as possible without looking like self-centered assholes.”<sup>49</sup>

In fall of 2020 Duffel Blog moved from being a regular “news” website to a bi-weekly newsletter using the Substack platform. In an email to subscribers, Szoldra explained that the chief reason for the change in format was financial.<sup>50</sup> Like many media properties, Duffel Blog made its money selling advertisements and was operating on thin margins. They had relied greatly on the social networking site Facebook for both original views of stories and for sharing. But after Facebook changed the ways it promoted and featured news articles, Duffel Blog lost viewers and therefore revenue. By moving to the subscribers-only newsletter, Szoldra claims that the change will enable him and his freelance writers to still produce new content. Unfortunately,

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<sup>48</sup> “US Navy Adds Intense Creative Writing Course To SEAL Training,” Duffel Blog, May 27, 2014, <https://www.duffelblog.com/p/us-navy-seal-training-writing-course>.

<sup>49</sup> “US Navy Adds Intense Creative Writing Course To SEAL Training.”

<sup>50</sup> Paul Szoldra, “Why Duffel Blog Moved to an Email Newsletter,” November 24, 2020.

during the change in platforms and web-hosting services, some of Duffel Blog's earlier pieces were lost.

Terminal Lance and Duffel Blog have been influential in informing the Post-9/11 veteran's sense of humor and have been novel in certain regards even though they both follow many conventions in the long tradition of military humor. They were first military veteran humorists of the Post-9/11 Wars to be widely disseminated due to their creators' clear understanding of how to use web-based media and social networking platforms. But as Szoldra and Uriarte seem to be shifting their creative and professional interests their creations risk losing influence and purchase among Post-9/11 veterans, especially those who have joined more recently. While Terminal Lance and Duffel Blog may better represent the military and veterans from the first half of the Post-9/11 Wars, Vet TV is trying to be the voice of veterans, in particular VetBros, from the second half of the Wars.

#### Vet TV

"Veterans Television" or Vet TV is a Streaming-Video-On-Demand network founded in 2016 by former Marine infantry Captain Danny Maher, who uses the stage name Donny O'Malley.<sup>51</sup> The network features all original content of military humor in the form of sketch comedy and situational comedy. The situational comedies are thematically based and focused on different military branches, occupational specialties, and duty locations representing various aspects of military life. The sketch comedies feature a recurring cast of characters in various military settings with each "sketch" typically lasting about five-minutes. The characters take on different archetypes of military personnel and attempt to use humor to tell stories about military

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<sup>51</sup> To avoid confusion I will refer to him using his stage name.

life. O'Malley argues that, through comedy, veterans and service members can connect and strengthen bonds, and even relieve mental health problems.<sup>52</sup>

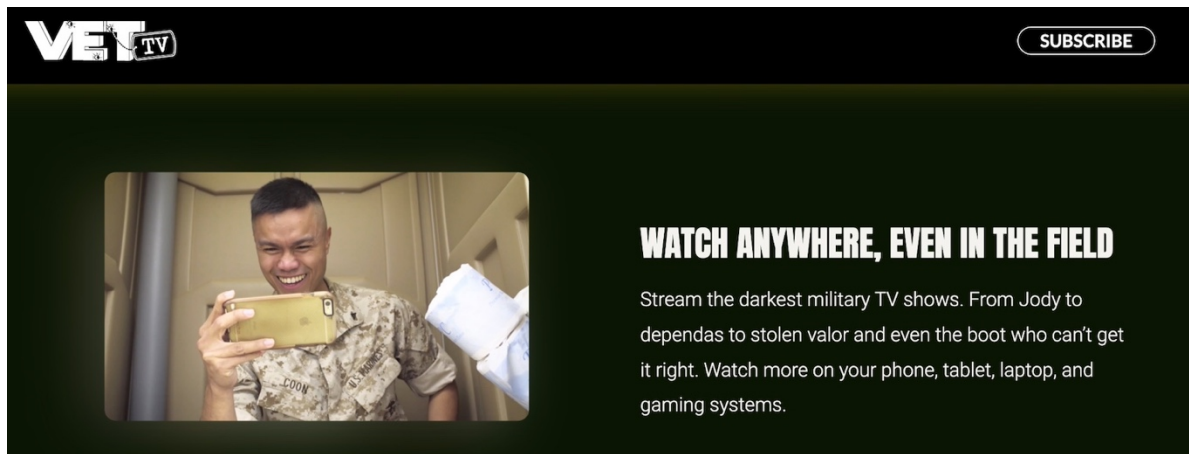


Image 7 Screenshot www.veterantv.com, “Watch Anywhere, Even in the Field”

Vet TV is the newest entry in the military/veteran comedy world and the one most fully embodying the VetBro style: irreverent and unrepentantly arrogant, believing in their own self-worth and even superiority over civilians. The stated goal of the network is to show service members in the worst light possible, which O'Malley argues is more realistic than mainstream representations. More than depicting negative images of the military and its members, they promote an ideology fitting in the VetBro image. It depicts service members as boisterous and aggressive, sex-starved and sexist, arrogant and alcoholic. O'Malley and the writers of Vet TV want their audience to identify with these more negative portrayals in order to unite them—they also hope to offend anyone who does not share their sensibilities and separate them from membership in their community.

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<sup>52</sup> Diane Bell, “VET Tv Strives to Turn Mental Hell into Mental Health,” San Diego Union-Tribune, November 10, 2020, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/columnists/story/2020-11-09/bell-column-for-tuesday-nov-10>.

## History and Background

Vet TV founder O'Malley was medically discharged in 2015 after six years in the Marines, including a combat tour in Iraq.<sup>53</sup> O'Malley is the face of Vet TV. Not only is the network his idea and creation, he takes part in the writing process and production for many of the shows. Additionally, he stars or plays a supporting role in several of the shows. The first iteration of Vet TV formed in 2015 when O'Malley began a YouTube channel with the show "Kill, Die, Laugh." He then promoted a Kickstarter campaign to raise the funds to launch the current stand-alone network.

In June of 2016, in a meandering, almost 5,000-word blog post on his personal website to promote the Kickstarter campaign, O'Malley lays out the "Mission Statement" as well as the "Aims and Objectives" of Vet TV which he was calling "Veteran Entertainment Television" or "VETv" at the time.<sup>54</sup> He also explains the target audience, rationale, and plan of action. This blog post, which I will describe in some depth, is a rich source of material because it lays out what will become the ideological foundation of Vet TV, how O'Malley understands his peer group of veterans (i.e., his target audience), and therefore how he and his writers design their programming.

The major themes O'Malley emphasizes are that the Post-9/11 generation of service members and veterans are different than previous generations, this difference is defined by cocky arrogance, and that most media products about war and the military are actually geared towards civilians. His understanding of these issues is ahistorical and presented with no evidence but highlights the major themes Vet TV's sense of humor is intended to address. He posits that the

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<sup>53</sup> "About," Donny O'Malley, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://donnyomalley.com/>.

<sup>54</sup> Donny O'Malley, "VETv, Veteran Entertainment Television," *Donny O'Malley* (blog), June 18, 2016, <https://donnyomalley.com/vetv-veteran-entertainment-television/>.

Post-9/11 veterans are different and should be marketed to differently, especially when it comes to humor. Specifically, they are more aggressive, more arrogant than previous generations. They want the respect they think they deserve and feel as if they owe no one any respect, including the military itself.

The mission of the then yet to be formed network was to “provide high-quality, entertaining programming dedicated to post 9/11 veterans in the United States. Veteran Entertainment Television will become the nations [sic] most well-known and trusted source of entertaining, irreverent, and nostalgic content for post 9/11 veterans.”<sup>55</sup> This goal of creating “entertaining, irreverent, and nostalgic content” is something that O’Malley and team will repeat in other marketing material. He defines the network’s target audience, purpose, and the “underlying problem” this new network is intended to address. O’Malley’s focus on Post-9/11 veterans throughout this text demonstrates how VetBros see themselves as distinct as veterans and among veterans.

“There is no single hub of entertainment...that is made specifically for post 9/11 veteran. There is a complete disconnect between what producers think veterans want to see, and what veterans actually want to see.” This issue is the core of O’Malley’s belief in the necessity of his product: Post-9/11 veterans are different than previous generations of veterans and therefore represent a distinct target audience whose potential has not been fully exploited in the entertainment industry. The “disconnect,” as O’Malley sees it, is that when networks produce material they “CLAIM to be created for veterans,” they are actually creating material that “is professional, appropriate, honorable, and geared towards civilians. They create content that the DoD would approve.” He continues to state that this is not what Post-9/11 veterans want: “We

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<sup>55</sup> O’Malley, “VETv, Veteran Entertainment Television.”

want offensive, disrespectful, irreverent, and humorous.” Military culture has changed, according to O’Malley, and current media networks still cater to older ideas of military culture.

The Post-9/11 veterans in this vision are “different from our grandfathers [sic] generation of warriors...our worldview and our sense of humor is dark and irreverent, unprofessional, and cocky.” He argues that entertainment about war and the military seems to appease the DoD and presents an “image the US military wants to portray to the public.” This means that civilians, not veterans, are the intended target audience. O’Malley concedes that war movies may often depict the horror and pain of war accurately, but this is not what a veteran wants to see because it essentially forces them to re-live the trauma. Rather, his generation of veterans wants to laugh about war and the military. But even though there have been attempts at military comedy in recent years (e.g., the television shows *Enlisted* [2014], *68 Whiskey* [2020]), these still do not fit the needs of the Post 9/11 veterans because they are made for mass audiences.

The stated reasons for the differences between Post-9/11 veterans and earlier generations are similarly ahistorical and self-aggrandizing. According to O’Malley, the reason why Post-9/11 veterans are different is “because we spent 15 years dominating our enemies with superior weaponry, strategy, tactics, and ethos...while we kicked the enemies [sic] asses, we were careful not to hurt civilians, and even helped civilians along the way.” Therefore, the most recent generation are “beyond proud of this, we are cocky and arrogant.” He argues that because of this arrogance, his generation of veterans would rather laugh about their experiences in war instead of focusing on the tragedy and pain.

As a result, O’Malley argues (without presenting any market research to support his claims) that what Post-9/11 veterans really want is “entertainment that is dark, vulgar, offensive, inappropriate, irreverent, childish, and just plain wrong.” He believes that because service

members and veterans revel in “inappropriate” humor, the proposed network should cater to that. In fact, “the more serious the issue, the more intense the laughter.” This preference for “gallows humor” stems from the fact that being in the military is somewhat miserable and the only way to get through it is to make fun of it. But more so, he argues that veterans want what “civilians find highly offensive and refuse to be associated with.” Specifically, he states “We prefer entertainment that ruins the civilian image of the honorable, respectable, professional- United States Veteran.”<sup>56</sup> Even though Post-9/11 veterans are the intended target audience, he wants all pretense of honor and respect to be stripped from how they are depicted.

Because of the distinct differences O’Malley argues exist, any influence from “ANYONE outside the war-mongering-post 9/11 target-audience” will dilute the mission of his proposed network. He argues that anything not focused on his generation of veterans will “water down the raw, gritty, irreverent nature...on serious issues, which is what post 9/11 vets want.” While older generations of veterans “prefer a more honorable and professional representation of their service” this will lead to more “politically correct and inclusive artwork attempts [at military programming] that have failed to gain traction.” The plain goal is to create content that may be deemed as “offensive” to anyone outside the target audience.

Even as he argues for a preference for humor that pokes fun at the serious and that ruins the “respectable” image of the veteran, O’Malley’s still states his belief that the Post-9/11 veterans are “legends” who deserve to be recognized. So, while he claims to not care about civilians’ images of veterans, he wants to reinforce the brashness and arrogance that he believes veterans deserve to possess. He wants to take apart the civilian representations of the military

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<sup>56</sup> Underline in original.

and war for ones he argues are more accurate. In doing so this will paradoxically lower the esteem that civilians hold for the military and veterans and raise the self-esteem of veterans.

The final half of the post lays out a sketch of O'Malley's business plan and potential show ideas, some of which have been realized. He lists off some milestones the fledgling network has already made such as finding a professional production company to produce the network's first mainstay show "Kill, Die, Laugh." He also includes the immediate goals for fundraising and production, such as seeking and securing advertising relationships. The proposed pricing schedule for advertisers includes separate lists for veteran-owned and civilian-owned companies. His long-term goals include purchasing land and building a studio lot complete with squad bays to house veterans who need work and even housing. In turn, these veterans would be hired to work on the production sets.

This blog post presents no evidence to support O'Malley's assertions about the Post-9/11 generation of veterans and their attitudes and desires. While O'Malley is certainly correct about his depictions of productions made for larger civilian audiences, his network does not offer much that is really that new. There is a long history of US military comedy that explicitly skewers the cultures and institutions of the US military. Much of Vet TV's humor is contemporary versions of older military humor adapted for the particular medium and mode of transmission. He is, however, correct in his descriptions of the broader VetBro attitude that I have described in this dissertation. Post-9/11 veterans, in O'Malley's understanding, are self-assured and arrogant to the point of cockiness, but they believe this is a well-deserved stance which should never be questioned by others.



## The Shows

Vet TV is a streaming video service that creates, produces, and disseminates original programming directly to subscribers through an internet connection and without the intervention of any broadcast, cable, or satellite platform. Customers pay a small fee to subscribe and gain access to all of the various programming.<sup>57</sup> The content can then be viewed on a web browser, using the Vet TV mobile app, or using one of several digital media players such as Roku. While almost all of the content is behind the subscription paywall, Vet TV does allow non-subscribers to view some shows for free. These include “teaser” episodes to help convince someone to make a purchase as well as some non-fiction programming that touches on issues of PTSD and veteran suicide. The latter is more serious (compared to the standard fare for the network) and part of O’Malley’s stated goal of using the network to help build community.

As of January 2022, there are 26 original shows on Vet TV, some with as few as six episodes and others with several dozen spanning two or three seasons. All of the actors and writers are military veterans as is much of the production and post-production crew. The scripted shows include both situational comedies with story lines and character arcs, and sketch comedies with short (about 5-minute), discrete sketches but often involving the same characters. There are also unscripted shows that include veterans telling war stories, reacting to combat videos sent in by their viewers, and a show dedicated to highlighting stand-up comedy by veterans. Every episode begins with a disclaimer text which reads “Everything you’re about to see is completely fictional unless specified otherwise. VET Tv is in no way affiliated with or sponsored by the Department of Defense or the United States Government. Thank God.” Here is a selection of some of the shows and brief descriptions.

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<sup>57</sup> The current (2023) pricing schedule is \$5 per month or \$55 per year.

*Meanwhile in the Field* is written and directed by Matiyes Kinker, who also stars in it as Sergeant Hall. Each episode has several sketches that shows Hall as an Army junior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) conducting field training exercises (FTX). Plots generally revolve around SGT Hall being frustrated with the incompetence of his junior soldiers and also making fun of them. Their squad leader, Staff Sergeant Mitchell, played by O'Malley, appears to either encourage or reprimand Hall for his mistreatment of junior soldiers. Many of the jokes are premised on typical problems soldiers have while conducting field training (e.g., soldiers losing sensitive items such as weapons) or hazing rituals and pranks performed on "cherry" soldiers in the unit (e.g., sending them on fool's errands for non-existent equipment).

*Meanwhile in the Barracks* is a sketch comedy show about barracks life. Like *Meanwhile in the Field*, each episode has two or three separate short sketches meant to show life in the barracks for junior soldiers and Marines while in garrison. The plots of each sketch generally involve a lot of drinking, breaking rules, trying to stay out of trouble, getting in trouble, and violently hazing the new members of the unit.

*Devil Docs* is a sitcom about a female Navy Hospital Corpsman (medic) played by Jessica Mandala, who is also the lead writer. The series begins after she has been assigned to the Marine Battalion Aid Station (BAS) at Camp Pendleton, CA. This is referred to in the Navy as working "greenside" as opposed to "blueside," working on a Navy base or on a ship. (The Navy provides all medical services for the Marine Corps.) As an attractive, female junior petty officer she is constantly the target of sexual advances from her male (and sometimes female) colleagues and patients. She addresses the stress of her job and the constant harassment with large amounts of wine, ice cream, and masturbation, basically showing a female version of a VetBro.

*Mission First* is another sitcom, this one based on Marine recruiters trying to meet their recruitment quotas. The lead character is a strait-laced, combat veteran Staff Sergeant who is assigned to be the senior NCO at a recruiting sub-station in El Cajon, CA, a suburb of San Diego. Due to pressure from his superiors and the general requirements of the job, he has to choose between his strict moral code and meeting their quotas of signing up civilians into the Marine Corps. Recruiting, he learns, means having a loose relationship with the truth.

*Kill, Die, Laugh* is the network's flagship show and the first one produced even before O'Malley got the network up and running. He describes it as the "Chappelle Show (sic) of the military."<sup>58</sup> Like *Chappelle's Show*, each episode begins with O'Malley as the host introducing the theme for the episode. A series of sketches based on the theme follows, often starring O'Malley. Between sketches O'Malley returns to his host role and to transition to the next set of sketches.

One of the more resourced shows (based on production values) is *A Grunt's Life*. This show is focused on a Marine infantry platoon at a remote patrol base in Afghanistan's Helmand Province led by Lieutenant Murphy (played by O'Malley). Murphy is both eager to kill but also cares about the well-being of his Marines. Some of the humor comes from the situation of a small group of men living in austere conditions to include homoerotic behavior (combined with homophobic slurs) and pranks. The Afghans they interact with are also frequent targets of the humor and violence. The men seem to get a great deal of enjoyment harassing and brutalizing the civilians, and they even claim to get sexually aroused when they kill insurgents. Other humor develops from Murphy's interactions with his higher command who are portrayed as cowardly, clueless, and in the safety of a much larger base miles away. One trope that is employed is the

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<sup>58</sup> O'Malley, "VETv, Veteran Entertainment Television."

company commander giving seemingly contradictory orders to “eliminate a threat” while at the same time “win the hearts and minds” of the civilian population. To compensate for this Murphy bends the truth when communicating with his higher-ups to downplay the amount of death and destruction caused by his men.

Vet TV has also produced a documentary series called *Let's Talk About the War*. It discusses issues such as veterans living with PTSD and the problem of veteran suicide. This series is a strikingly different approach to the other content on the network. While there are still jokes and laughs, they are interspersed in between far more earnest conversations between O'Malley and other combat veterans about the long-term effects of the war on their physical and psychological health.

Viewership numbers for the network or any of the individual shows are not publicly available, neither is any information on how shows are viewed (i.e., viewed on a web browser or using a mobile device), or how often the episodes are shared using social media. The network claims over 90,000 subscribers, but there is no way to discern if these are active subscribers or cumulative. Each episode contains a comments section and typically these range from 200-400 comments each, most of which are only about a sentence in length and these comments are generally positive.

### **Discussion of Themes**

There are several ideas that form the basis of Vet TV: first, Post-9/11 veterans want “offensive” comedy; second, comedy creates community; third, community prevents suicide. The first point seemingly sits in tension with the other two. But understanding Meyer’s rhetorical functions of humor can explain how they are not in tension at all. In fact, what this shows is how VetBros understand their own veteran community, the military and their lives in it, and how they

imagine the role of military and veterans in the larger society. More to the point, VetBro humor shows how they imagine themselves, both in the service and as veterans, and how they understand “outsiders.” The offensive humor itself works to build what they see as their particular community.

### Comedy as Therapy/Community Building

Current research shows that comedy has the potential to build community and to prevent suicide. Comedy can play a role in establishing and maintaining group dynamics in close-knit, highly structured organizations such as military units to delineate insider/outsider boundaries because the sources of humor are only known to the insiders. Similarly, organizations with strict hierarchies also use humor to signal one’s position in the organization such as through some hazing rituals for new members. High-stress occupations with little to no control over the sources of stress (e.g., emergency department staff in a hospital, firefighters, military units) will use humor to break tension and form bonds over the stress itself.<sup>59</sup> For example, in a survey of hospital emergency physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic, humor had strong negative correlations with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms.<sup>60</sup> Humor is also a way for people to cope with highly traumatic situations in the immediate aftermath or much later as part of therapy.<sup>61</sup>

In clinical settings, therapists often use humor to assist patients who are reluctant to open up about past trauma.<sup>62</sup> This can be particularly powerful in group therapy sessions. But

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<sup>59</sup> van Wormer and Boes, “Humor in the Emergency Room: A Social Work Perspective.”

<sup>60</sup> Erin Dehon et al., “Sources of Distress and Coping Strategies Among Emergency Physicians During COVID-19,” *The Western Journal of Emergency Medicine* 22, no. 6 (2021).

<sup>61</sup> Avi Besser et al., “Humor and Trauma-Related Psychopathology Among Survivors of Terror Attacks and Their Spouses,” *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes* 78, no. 4 (2015).

<sup>62</sup> Dziegielewski et al., “Humor: An Essential Communication Tool in Therapy.”

clinicians who use trauma as part of a therapy practice do so in a controlled setting—carefully guiding a patient through the experiences and showing them how to “laugh it off” without minimizing the severity or importance of the situation. Uriarte of Terminal Lance and Szoldra of Duffel Blog have both written or said in interviews that they receive emails from veterans and service members alike who tell them about the healing power of their comedic products. The feeling of finally being understood combined with the known benefits of laughing work to assist those dealing with untreated trauma and depression. The popularity of their sites was on the rise at the same time when the problems of veteran PTSD and suicide were becoming more widely discussed in the early 2010s.

Through these comedies, veterans are able to see that there are others out there who are laughing at the same things, and as a result feel less isolated than before. Laughing at these serious issues may make one feel that there is something wrong with them but seeing that others are doing it as well may create a sense of belonging, no matter how fleeting. Vet TV’s *Let’s Talk About the War*, is a documentary series on the effects of war on veterans, particularly PTSD and moral injury. While definitely not comedy (regardless of the random joke here and there), O’Malley and his team take advantage of the fact that their audience has been drawn to the site because of the comedy and then, ideally, are able to view and process the more difficult conversations brought up in the documentary.

On the surface this does seem positive and in-step with some clinical research on comedy’s efficacy in trauma therapy, but it cannot be viewed as a replacement and may even have unanticipated problems. When a therapist uses humor to ease tension and help a patient open up about their experiences, the humor is used by a trained professional. More importantly, this use of humor is part of a larger therapeutic practice and not a stand-alone product; it is not

simply a matter of “laughing it off.” Humor is used to help generate trust with the clinician, help create emotional catharsis, and break a patient’s resistance to the therapist’s interventions.<sup>63</sup> It is unclear what humor in lieu of therapy may do for a person having difficulty processing trauma.

Humor can also work as a method of distracting oneself from difficult memories and deflect attempts at having the more difficult conversations about the traumatic experiences. For example, Myra Mendible states that the frequent use of gallows humor in war memoirs serves as a “shield to vulnerability.”<sup>64</sup> That is, they make jokes about trauma to avoid writing about it in their memoirs. This has also been studied in the narratives of others working in other high-stress professions exposed to violence such as hospital emergency departments.<sup>65</sup> “Laughing it off” may just become another coping mechanism that may feel good for a moment but produces no long-term positive results. Joking about serious issues is one of the many of behaviors that Vet TV seems to valorize. But like the other behaviors featured in Vet TV’s comedy, such as heavy drinking, it carries a great deal of potential harm.

Humor can be traumatizing for victims of traumatic events. For them, the joke told by potential or former perpetrators is at their expense and effectively makes fun of their trauma. When this “gallows humor” has therapeutic value the source of the comedy and the audience are all victims using humor to cope with their shared trauma.<sup>66</sup> But when the victim is the butt of the joke, that joke will only serve to mock their trauma. For example, sexual assault and domestic violence have been the subject of jokes on several of Vet TV’s programs. But the jokes are constructed to make light of acts from the point of view of perpetrators. A staple source of

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<sup>63</sup> Dziegielewski et al., “Humor: An Essential Communication Tool in Therapy,” 78-83.

<sup>64</sup> Myra Mendible, *American War Stories: Veteran-Writers and the Politics of Memoir* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 22.

<sup>65</sup> van Wormer and Boes, “Humor in the Emergency Room: A Social Work Perspective.”

<sup>66</sup> Garrick, “The Humor of Trauma Survivors.”

humor, especially in *A Grunt's Life*, is that killing is fun and funny. But for many, the act of killing itself is the proximate cause of their trauma.<sup>67</sup> Comedy centered on and making fun of killing and death is just making fun of the actual source of trauma for many. In these cases, VetBros are being defined as seeing violence against others as funny.

Humor about war also works to depoliticize war even (perhaps, especially) if it is being used as a potential treatment for PTSD. As a psychiatric diagnosis, PTSD has been uniquely political even as many have attempted to find biological or neurological markers for it.<sup>68</sup> Comedy, through its focus on the particular details of the moment, ignores the politics of the situation. This is similar to how certain forms of narrative therapy, in particular Prolonged Exposure Therapy, will have the patient focus on the details of the traumatic event in order to desensitize them to its memory. The politics that led to the production of the traumatic event are therefore not considered to be important to the overall treatment for the patient.<sup>69</sup> Comedy works in a similar fashion: it focuses on the details of the event and ignores the larger political context. Of course, this does not mean that military comedy is without politics, as evidenced from many of Vet TV's offerings. Only that the politics of the war itself are purposefully ignored.

While the use of humor and comedy in medicine and psychotherapy has long been discussed and theorized, much of the clinical and experimental research on it is lacking.<sup>70</sup> Its therapeutic benefits are promising but its application is difficult to operationalize and isolate.

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<sup>67</sup> Rachel MacNair, *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing*, Psychological Dimensions to War and Peace (London ; Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002).

<sup>68</sup> Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>69</sup> Marisa Renee Brandt, "Simulated War: Remediating Trauma Narratives in Military Psychotherapy," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>70</sup> Marc Gelkopf, "The Use of Humor in Serious Mental Illness: A Review," *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (2011).



Humor's rhetorical functions, however, are easier to study and identify. Humor can either unify communities or divide them; it can either show that a person is a member of a group or that they are an outsider. Satire in particular shows this "double-edged" quality of humor, to use Meyer's phrasing.<sup>71</sup> The satirist can attack the ruling order and mock existing norms, or they can mock those who transgress the existing norms and therefore support the current order.

Importantly, this can happen simultaneously. Jokes that do actual good for some can also be damaging for others. A differentiation joke told to insiders can be a source of hostility to the subject of that joke; a clarification joke for insiders is an enforcement joke for the subject.<sup>72</sup> As in all other communicative activities, audience matters and a speaker cannot always limit who that audience is, and this is especially true for online media.<sup>73</sup> The subject of the joke matters too. It requires a decision by the speaker as to who or what is deserving of mockery.<sup>74</sup> This is why comedy can be effective in establishing in/out-group boundaries. Outsiders are the subject of mockery, and insiders will be in the more superior position. Also, insiders will readily "get" a joke, while outsiders will not because the joke itself is made to show the difference.

O'Malley claims that the purpose of Vet TV is to use comedy to create a community of Post-9/11 veterans and then this community can help support veteran facing social isolation and are at risk for suicide. And based on previous research on suicide and social isolation, and the role humor can play in therapy, O'Malley's assertions do seem to have merit. But even though humor has many positive benefits for building community and preventing suicide it is not

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<sup>71</sup> Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword."

<sup>72</sup> Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword," 323-328.

<sup>73</sup> Anshuman A. Mondal, "Taking Liberties? Free Speech, Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Satire," in *Comedy and the Politics of Representation: Mocking the Weak*, ed. Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott, Palgrave Studies in Comedy (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), 36-37.

<sup>74</sup> Mondal, "Taking Liberties?" 36-39.

without its pitfalls. These are most evident when considering how offensive comedy functions in these realms of suicide prevention and community building.

### “Offensive” Comedy

In his blog post outlining the mission and goals of Vet TV, O’Malley clearly states that it is not just comedy that he wants to produce for veterans: he wants “offensive” comedy. He argues that when mainstream networks create content about the military or veterans it is often respectful of the military branches and their members. “Their “respectful” content is the opposite of what a post 9/11 veteran wants to see. We want offensive, disrespectful, irreverent, and humorous.”<sup>75</sup> But what counts as “offensive” is not really clear. It seems that O’Malley conflates different types of jokes that could be considered to offend. He lumps together dark humor about death and dying, juvenile scatological jokes, and jokes directed at particular groups. While any of these can be “offensive” depending on the audience, there is a great deal of difference between offending someone’s sense of manners and respectability and offending a person based on their membership in a particular group. Considering Vet TV’s “offensive” content in terms of communicative functions as discussed above is a productive way to show what this type of comedy is doing.<sup>76</sup>

Just as important as what is being made fun of is what is not—both of these show understandings of the social order and their audience. There are always limits to what is acceptable to make jokes about, even for humorists who describe themselves as purposefully “offensive.” The limits of comedy show that, even for a humorist, there are some things beyond the realm of humor and must be treated seriously. More cynically, it can be a sign that there are

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<sup>75</sup> O’Malley, “VETv, Veteran Entertainment Television.”

<sup>76</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword.”

some audiences the humorist does not want to upset. In the case of Vet TV, the aggressively masculine characters are never the butts of the jokes. Patriotic commitment is not questioned, and neither is war itself. By looking at the relationships between speaker-audience-subject of jokes we can better see the rhetorical functions of offensive comedy, especially when it is created with the expressed goal of creating community. We also have insight into the speaker's understanding of their topics, their audience, and even their political vision.

### **“Politically Incorrect”**

Vet TV's advertising often describes the network's "offensive comedy" in connection with "political correctness." The description of something being politically correct or PC or any of its derivatives and opposites (e.g., politically incorrect) is so widely used without explanation that its meaning is often assumed to be widely known.<sup>77</sup> One of the most common ways in which PC discourse is used is around whether language, especially humor, can be deemed as "offensive." This is generally with regard to negative stereotypes of how women and minority groups are represented in media.

A common critique of "politically correct" standards is that they are akin to censorship. Typical reactions to this perceived censorship has been striving to be politically incorrect or offensive.<sup>78</sup> But importantly, the claims of censorship or even victimization by "PC enforcers" is premised on a belief that they should be allowed to offend whomever they want and that they are being denied their rights; their claims to political agency are based upon their claims to

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<sup>77</sup> Clare Fearon, "Disputes of Offence: Making Sense of the Discursive Construction of Political Correctness" (PhD Dissertation, Newcastle University, 2015), 11-12.

<sup>78</sup> Fearon, "Disputes of Offence."

victimhood.<sup>79</sup> By claiming that they are “offensive” or “politically incorrect” they also claim to be speaking their own truth and are not bound by anyone who would censor them.<sup>80</sup>

Viewers and fans of Vet TV seem to have internalized the rhetoric of PC and offensive speech. On the home page there are several purported reviews from veterans. One named “AndrewMaine” says “Good job! Glad you have not gone ‘PC’. Glad some people still have some sense.”<sup>81</sup> This apparent review connects the content of Vet TV to things that are not “PC” and people who are PC lacking (common) sense. Each episode has its own comments section with many of the same sentiments. For example, one user was widely mocked when they claimed “This made me lose my appetite” in reference to an episode that involved O’Malley’s character SSG Mitchell ordering a junior soldier to insert a habanero Slim Jim in his own rectum.<sup>82</sup> This commenter was told to unsubscribe, that they were a “POG,” and that they should “join the 22 club,” an apparent reference to the reported 22 veterans who die by suicide per day. These fans and commenters similarly defend the network’s stated mission of offending the institution of the military such as when commenters claim that the shenanigans played out on Vet TV would never happen in the military “back in the Old Army (or Old Corps).”

Vet TV’s “offensive” humor developed within a particular history of reactions to claims of censorship and speech codes. These claims of censorship have been largely overblown, but that does not make the representations any less powerful. By claiming to be defending humor and comedy from the PC respectability censors, O’Malley and Vet TV attempt to shield

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<sup>79</sup> Robert B. Horwitz, “Politics as Victimhood, Victimhood as Politics,” *Journal of Policy History* 30, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>80</sup> Fearon, “Disputes of Offence.”

<sup>81</sup> “Home,” VET Tv, August 2, 2021, <https://www.veterantv.com/>.

<sup>82</sup> Mاتيyes Kinker, “Hide and Sleep,” *Meanwhile in the Field* (Vet TV), <https://www.veterantv.tv/meanwhile-in-the-field/season:1/videos/hide-and-sleep-ep02>.

themselves from criticism by preemptively labeling their critics as humorless killjoys. This history of reactions to perceived PC restrictions informs how O'Malley and his writers create their jokes and programs more broadly. It is not just a way of being a jerk (although sometimes that may be the case), but a statement to particular political and social ideas that O'Malley wants to claim in the name of all veterans. He claims that they are trying to subvert traditional norms and values around the military, but in fact this humor is socially and culturally reactionary.

As distasteful as this humor and even the purposeful antagonism may be, it is perhaps too limiting to view this as juvenile attempts to get a rise out of particular groups, a common tactic among online trolls.<sup>83</sup> The point remains that the intended audience (VetBros) do actually enjoy these jokes. This humor is a source of pleasure. Of course, that pleasure may be derived from offending and antagonizing, but that is perhaps best seen as a secondary goal. The humor presented in Vet TV reinforces the social order that VetBros imagine the military to have (or should have) through the mockery of gender and racial outsiders. The “winners” in all of their jokes conform to the idealized image of white military masculinity, in appearance and behavior. As Meyer shows, the rhetorical functions of these jokes are to bring together the in-group and make clear who the out-group is.<sup>84</sup>

Understanding these jokes on their own terms, as nasty as they may be, is essential to any critique that may be legible to the intended audience.<sup>85</sup> It is quite pointless to tell O'Malley or any VetBro this or that joke is racist, misogynist, transphobic, etc. Focusing the critique on how these types of jokes uphold a conservative or reactionary social order is perhaps more

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<sup>83</sup> Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>84</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword.”

<sup>85</sup> Bauer, “Why so Serious?” 1073.

productive. Showing how this humor works to exclude other veterans is a better condemnation. O'Malley's stated purpose is to undermine and offend the existing social order, but actually his network supports and reinforces it.

### **Satire and the Social Order**

Humor has long held a subversive role in society through seemingly offensive attacks on institutions and social norms. In an unfree political system or social order where direct challenges to authority are not permitted, comedians sometimes find themselves at risk of their freedom, livelihoods, and even their lives for making fun of the ruling institutions and elites. But this humor is sometimes tolerated or even encouraged (to a limit) as a way to reduce tension without upsetting the social order. This is the function of the court jester. But for the most part humor directed at institutions and social norms connected to the ruling order is censored, either officially by the state or unofficially by civilians who (for whatever reason) feel compelled to defend the traditional authorities.

Comedians who are "offensive" can fit the mold of attacking oppressive social institutions or discredited value systems. For example, the stand-up comedian George Carlin was criticized for being vulgar and offensive, but his comedy often displayed his progressive, even feminist, politics.<sup>86</sup> He used obscene language to show the obscenity and hypocrisy of conservative political and social values. Mockery and satire, Anshuman Mondal argues, are social performances, not just genres.<sup>87</sup> They exist in specific power relationships between speaker, audiences, and the mocked. For Carlin, the role of the comic is to side with the

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<sup>86</sup> Cori Healy, "Reexamining Political Correctness through Feminist Rhetoric in the Stand up of George Carlin," *Comedy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>87</sup> Mondal, "Taking Liberties?" 26.

underdog and to attack bullies; comics who attack the underdogs are just bullies themselves.<sup>88</sup> He mocks those who would oppress others and attempts to get his audience to do the same.

Mondal also reminds us that satire and mockery as social performances can just as easily reinforce oppressive social institutions and value systems. They can be used by oppressors to keep their victims in a lower status.<sup>89</sup> In these cases, the target of the satire or mockery is in some way transgressing the social order and the mockery is used both to shame the transgressor and to remind others to stay in their places. This is consistent with Meyer's concepts of the "clarification" and "enforcement" functions of humor.<sup>90</sup> Clarification humor mocks people who transgress social norms, but who are not present in the audience, as a way to show the bounds of acceptable behavior. This takes on the enforcement function when the butt of the joke is present in the audience and is insulted directly. With digital material it is close to impossible for a speaker to limit or even know who their audiences are, but the speaker is still responsible for their message. The claim "it's just a joke intended for someone else" indirectly admits that they were trying to exclude anyone who does not find it funny.

Satire and mockery can be used by the oppressed or the oppressors. Mondal emphasizes this point: "satire is above all a moral performance, one based on the distance between things as they are and as the *should be*."<sup>91</sup> Obviously, how things "should be" is a matter of perspective. It requires making decisions about who or what is a deserving target of mockery. Satire that strikes at social conventions and people in power comes from the perspective of Carlin's "underdog."

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<sup>88</sup> *How George Carlin Became George Carlin*, Larry King Live (CNN, 1990), <https://www.cnn.com/videos/entertainment/2017/01/09/george-carlin-1990-larry-king-live-interview.cnn>.

<sup>89</sup> Mondal, "Taking Liberties?" 29-30.

<sup>90</sup> Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword," 320-321.

<sup>91</sup> Mondal, "Taking Liberties?" 33, emphasis in original.

Satire that claims to attack the excesses of “PC culture” or “wokeness” is satire from the point of view of the ruling social order as the butt of the joke are affronts to the ruling order.

Vet TV walks an interesting line here. On the one hand the network’s content is often satirizing military traditions, endless bureaucracy, and egotistical officers. So it would seem that the comedic voice is one of the “underdog” mocking the ridiculousness of the US military and its institutions from the perspective of junior soldiers. On the other hand, the network also mocks women, transgender people, victims of sexual assault, and Afghan and Iraqi civilians caught in the war zones. This is far from the “underdog” mocking a traditional, conservative culture and structure. Looking closer at some of the particulars of what Vet TV mocks about the military offers some clarity about what exactly the network is satirizing.

The show *A Grunt’s Life*, set in a remote patrol base in Afghanistan, attempts to show the life of the infantry in combat. Some of the humor stems from the small group (about two dozen) young men forced to live in close proximity to each other in austere conditions and how they act. This includes pranks, homoerotic behavior combined with homophobic slurs, conflicts between the men, and talking about sex. This part of the comedy certainly fits with mocking the respectability of the military and its members—it is *Animal House*-style frat boys set in a war zone. This does not fit with the image of clean-cut, morally upright soldiers and Marines they are generally believed to be.<sup>92</sup> It is taking the side of the junior enlisted against the senior leadership who would want better behavior, similar to the humor of *Terminal Lance* or *Duffel Blog*.

More problematic is the comedy that involves killing and death of Afghans. In fact, all of their interactions with the Afghan population typically include violence and mockery. The

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<sup>92</sup> Scott Parrott et al., “Mental Representations of Military Veterans: The Pictures (and Words) In Our Heads,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6, no. 3.



Marines shown here not only enjoy killing, they claim to be sexually aroused by it. They love killing so much that they are disappointed when no one shoots at them. And when shooting does start they shout jokes at each other, celebrate each other's kills, and brag about their own. The bodies of their enemies are then desecrated, and any civilians caught in the crossfire are brutalized. The victims are always labeled as terrorists, and the civilians are always somehow complicit. And this is all performed with a slapstick sensibility that indicates it should not be taken seriously. Humor and the overall narrative serve as justifications for targeting these characters with violence. But the point remains that the ones who are mocked and degraded are labeled as "enemy," and indeed all Afghans are deserving of this status.

When O'Malley claims that he is mocking and disrespecting the military, he is only disrespecting it as a bureaucratic institution. Senior officers are sometimes mocked, but only the ones seen to be incompetent and endangering the men, or who are strait-laced and preventing the men from having fun. His mockery is of the idea that members of the military are moral, upstanding citizens fighting for their country. As O'Malley states in his "Mission Statement" for Vet TV, "We prefer entertainment that ruins the civilian image of the honorable, respectable, professional- United States Veteran."<sup>93</sup> This respectable image is also, according to him, "politically correct." The network's ideal audience is "arrogant" and "war-mongering" and that is what he wants to portray. Vet TV mocks those who do not view violence against civilians, dick jokes, and sexist behavior as funny.

O'Malley may be correct when he claims that only veterans and service members will understand the jokes and humor. Again returning to Meyer's functions of humor, an "identification" joke told to show the group that one is a member also signals that if someone

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<sup>93</sup> O'Malley, "VETv, Veteran Entertainment Television." Underline in original.

does not find it funny they are not a member of the group.<sup>94</sup> These can be “inside jokes,” where the humor is only known to members of the community. But what he does not admit is that he is also making claims as to what veterans *should* find funny. A “differentiation” joke also brings people together through the mockery of the joke’s target even though it is primarily about defining the difference.<sup>95</sup>

The fact that so much of Vet TV’s humor is built around offending certain people shows that those people as not being members of the community (and therefore worthy of being mocked). But it is more than senior officers and traditionalists who are positioned outside of the community. It frequently includes Afghans or other racialized enemies. It also includes women (in uniform or not), transgender service members, and victims of sexual assault, among others, showing that they are not actually members of the military and veteran community. Even if the creators of this humor understand it as “just a joke,” they are still doing serious work. Jane Littlefield and Michael Pickering make this clear: “The serious purpose in sexist humour, for example, is the definition of patriarchal/masculine otherness in terms of demeaning and insulting stereotypes, the consequence of which is to reduce the claim of ‘the other’ to equal status in our common humanity.”<sup>96</sup> The purpose of the network is to bring together veterans and help prevent suicide, but their offerings show that this does not include all veterans. The humor shows only certain veterans count.

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<sup>94</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword,” 318-319.

<sup>95</sup> Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword,” 321-323.

<sup>96</sup> Jane Littlewood and Michael Pickering, “Heard the One About the White Middle-Class Heterosexual Father-in-Law? Gender, Ethnicity and Political Correctness in Comedy,” in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, ed. Stephen Wagg (London: Routledge, 1998), 301.

## **What's Not Funny**

For all the claimed intentions to be offensive and to insult the image of the military, there are certain things that seem to be off-limits at Vet TV. For example, patriotism or nationalism, however defined, are rarely discussed and never the butt of any jokes. The lack of certain content does not prove a concerted effort to avoid these subjects. But when combined with O'Malley's vision and other marketing material for the network, it is reasonable to infer that there are bounds to what they find funny.

While the military as a bureaucratic institution is the source of much of the comedy, the purpose or function of militaries (i.e., making war) is not questioned. War and combat are celebrated. The butts of jokes are the civilians caught in the crossfire, "cowardly" officers afraid to get in the fight, and inept service members whose mistakes make life difficult for everyone. The reasons for the conflict are not discussed. This unquestioned acceptance of war's inevitability with no discussion of the politics that lead to war is itself a political position. O'Malley even describes his ideal audience as "war-mongering."

The overly aggressive masculinity of the characters is similarly taken for granted. They are never "punished" in the narratives or the humor in the form of facing consequences for their actions or being the butt of a joke. And characters who do not typically fit the VetBro mold (e.g., women, transgender people) but adopt the behaviors of the VetBro can find themselves in positions of power in the joke structure. But in these cases, other aspects of the character (e.g., femininity, gender identity) become the source of the humor.

Even though the stated purpose of the network is to convince veterans to engage in social behaviors that can prevent suicide, at the same time some of the programming glorifies problematic behaviors that contribute to suicide risk. Part of O'Malley's goal of disrupting the "politically correct" and "respectable" images of the military is accomplished by showing service

members behaving in ways that many outsiders would find objectionable but that are quite common in military units to include excessive drinking and other risk-taking behaviors. The characters who exhibit these behaviors are rarely made to be the butt of the joke—their behaviors are never corrected by being the subject of mockery. Instead they are displayed as being idealized masculine ways of acting.<sup>97</sup> This is very different from Duffel Blog and Terminal Lance who do mock these risk-seeking behaviors.

The fact that both Terminal Lance and Duffel Blog have both made fun of war, aggressive masculinity, and patriotism shows that these issues are well within the bounds of military humor broadly, just not acceptable for the VetBro audience that O'Malley is attempting to reach. The absence of these topics in Vet TV's material is itself telling in how the network and audience are understood by O'Malley and his team.

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The humor discussed here is sometimes hard to understand for outsiders. It can even be made to demonstrate the difference between veterans and service members from civilians. In fact, much of it is specifically made to not be understood by outsiders. But still, this humor can be instructive for those civilians who may not understand the jokes. Because so much of the humor featured focuses on the quotidian aspects of military life, an outsider can get a glimpse of life in the military and in combat even if they do not laugh at the jokes. Even though the target audience is the male veteran, civilians can get “an insider’s look at what O’Malley calls... ‘the gritty and often hilarious realities’ of military culture.”<sup>98</sup> So, by seeing what service members and veterans find funny, one can better discern the experiences, the values, and the culture of

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<sup>97</sup> Christopher J. Gilbert, “Bawdy Blows: VET Tv and the Comedy of Combat Masculinity,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 42, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Gilbert, “Bawdy Blows,” 185.

certain parts of the military and veteran communities. Since humor can serve to help strengthen the emotional health of its audience and create interpersonal bonds, military comedy can help veterans learn to process trauma, form and strengthen communities. It is therefore an important part of the military veteran's experience as it is part of the emotional experience of processing difficult and traumatic memories.

While comedy can create community and can be useful to heal trauma and alleviate emotional and psychological pain, offensive comedy targeted at specific groups separates certain people out. When women, transgender people, victims of sexual assault are used as the butts of jokes it signals them as not part of the community. And when audience members signal their distaste for the comedy, they are ostracized for "getting offended." Vet TV's creators and many of their viewers would respond by saying everyone needs to be able to laugh at themselves, but they do not seem to let people from vulnerable communities write material. And for a network that claims to want to offend, there do seem to be lines they will not cross. War itself is never the object of their humor, neither is the aggressive masculinity of many of the network's characters. While older forms of military motivation are made fun of, patriotism and nationalism are never questioned even though they are sometimes presented without sentimentality. Comedy works to critique attitudes and behaviors through mockery. Again, satire is both a social and a moral performance.<sup>99</sup> What one jokes about and what is off-limits are both indicative of the humorist's political beliefs and the goals of their comedy.

While comedy always has the potential to be subversive this potential is never guaranteed. In fact, comedy can serve states or organizations even when it seemingly insults them. Allowing members of organizations such as military units freedom to "blow off steam"

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<sup>99</sup> Mondal, "Taking Liberties?" 26-33.

and crack jokes can be a way to maintain order and cohesion and prevent direct attacks to good order and discipline.<sup>100</sup> Terminal Lance and Duffel Blog openly mock the cultures of (some types of) sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the military. Instead of being viewed as attacking the military this can be seen as supporting the US military's stated goals of eliminating (or at least quieting) these issues in its ranks.

Even as Vet TV mocks the military as a bureaucratic institution, it supports and affirms many of the bigoted cultures inside the military around a particular form of military masculinity. Vet TV's comedy is conservative, even reactionary, regardless of its purported mission of insulting the military and stripping away some of the respect or honor for the military. The purpose of the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq (or war itself) is never questioned. In fact, war and combat are celebrated. O'Malley even refers to his idealized content creators and target audience as "war-mongering."<sup>101</sup> Many of their criticisms of the military that form the basis of jokes are that the senior leadership prevented them from fighting. This is quite similar to the criticisms of Marcus Luttrell, Chris Kyle, and Mark Owen, the Navy SEAL authors discussed in the previous chapter.

Humor can also shield ideology from view because the comedian and audience are often just trying to have fun. But that just separates the intention of "making someone laugh" from its rhetorical function as Meyer presents. The different rhetorical functions of humor show how it is used to establish or reinforce a particular way of thinking by enforcing/correcting behaviors and attitudes through mockery. So, as O'Malley is trying to create identification humor that defines the veteran experience and attitudes he is also making claims about veteran identity. In other

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<sup>100</sup> Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 211-214.

<sup>101</sup> O'Malley, "VETv, Veteran Entertainment Television."

words, he is not just saying “this is what veterans laugh at,” but he is also claiming “veterans are the type of people who would laugh at this.” The comedy claims identification with all other veterans, it makes assumptions about veterans. When they alienate some they question that person’s membership in the group.

The belief that Post-9/11 veterans represent a distinct class of veterans is also plainly seen in how both Uriarte of Terminal Lance and Szoldra and the team of writers at Duffel Blog craft their humor when discussing Post-9/11 veterans issues with veterans of previous generations. Daniel Alarik of Grunt Style and Evan Hafer of Black Rifle Coffee Company (both discussed in the follow chapter) similarly argue, albeit far more subtly than O’Malley, that this distinctiveness creates opportunities for marketing and sales. The brashness and self-assured arrogance is also present in the memoirs of Marcus Luttrell and Chris Kyle.

The three humorists featured here have created products that attempt to show how veterans are different than others. O’Malley and Vet TV in particular have built a business out of this with a wider range of offerings. Other VetBros have shown the potential of the VetBro as a target demographic for commercial products. The next step in understanding how VetBros understand their identity is through “lifestyle brand” entrepreneurs. As VetBros are crafting an identity that places them outside both civilian culture and more traditional veteran culture, business-minded veterans have attempted to craft brands that meet the appeal of this market segment. The study of consumer consumption as a signifier of group membership has been a staple of subculture studies since the inception of the field. Humor is also important for how both of these companies communicate to their audiences.

#### 4. “We provide more than apparel, we bolster a lifestyle:” VetBro Brands

Brands are more than symbols and trademarks of a company. Brands tell stories about companies and their consumers. And like the war memoirs and comedy featured in the previous two chapters, veterans have sought to use brand identity as a way to tell their stories. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, “brands are about *culture* as much as they are about economics...brands are actually a story told to the consumer.”<sup>1</sup> VetBro brands are trying to tell stories about being a veteran in the Post-9/11 era and being a veteran for them requires aggressive, patriotic masculinity. Similar to how humor can work to communicate messages about how a community defines itself, VetBro brands also work to set the outward style and fashion. These consumption practices communicate messages about how the consumers understand themselves, their community, and what they value.

In this chapter, I look at the two companies most associated with the VetBro image and style, Black Rifle Coffee Company and Grunt Style. These companies specifically emphasize their connection to veterans through product design, marketing, and their claimed organizational missions. These companies are the largest veteran/military branded companies in each of their markets (coffee and apparel, respectively). While these companies have their own target audiences in mind in terms of their products, their customer bases overlap. In fact, the image of the VetBro is someone wearing a Grunt Style t-shirt while drinking a cup of Black Rifle coffee.<sup>2</sup> Both companies feature advertising that show the typical VetBro: a man with a thick beard and tattoos who typically wears jeans, t-shirts, and ball caps, and likes to carry a firearm. In their

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 4. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Farwell, “We Have Reached Peak VetBro Brand,” *The New Republic*, January 17, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/156236/reached-peak-vetbro-brand>.



products and in their advertising, these companies also display their understanding patriotism, masculinity, along with an affinity for violence shown through some of their attempts at humor.

Like in the example of Vet TV, these companies' understanding of what it means to be a veteran seems to be limited to VetBros. But unlike Vet TV, these companies widely market and sell to non-veterans who accept the messages put forward. The valorization of veteran identity by a large section of the American public means that veteran identity is its own trusted brand.<sup>3</sup> Here, veteran status (the veteran brand) is combined with a kitschy patriotism and conservative politics to create the VetBro style of consumption. The products produced by the companies act as branding devices for the companies using the "lifestyle brand" marketing and organizational model. These lifestyle brands show how political concepts such as patriotism are understood, sloganeered, and commodified.

For the companies I highlight in this chapter, the military/veteran connection or theme *is* the product they are selling. All communications by these companies (e.g., products, marketing, interviews with executives) seek to reinforce their ideals and to emphasize each company's overall connection to patriotism and veteran identity. This chapter shows how VetBros expresses their identity through consumption practices. There is a feedback loop of design/advertisements showing the idealized customer, purchasing, customer engagement which shows the companies' usefulness in standing-in for the larger VetBro identity. In turn, this identity carries the political and cultural views forwarded by the brands themselves. Consumption is more than an economic activity; it is a cultural/political act.

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<sup>3</sup> Myra Mendible, *American War Stories: Veteran-Writers and the Politics of Memoir* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 99.

In a dissertation about VetBros, this discussion and analysis of military veteran-themed companies shows how this particularly visible set of veterans understand their place in society and how they believe other veterans should be portrayed as well. These companies would not exist if there were not a demand for their militaristic/patriotic products, even if this demand is somewhat contrived (as is the case with most fashion). These companies found a ploy that will sell, and people buy their products. And these companies show something about their owners and their customers: some veterans want to express their veteran identity so much so that their own identity relies on their veteran status. Being a VetBro is more than acceptance of the ideas and attitudes presented in the previous chapters. It is also represented in consumer choices which reflect particular taste cultures which themselves reflect a broader engagement with conservative political and cultural attitudes seen in the sartorial choices and the public messaging of the companies.

### **Style and Lifestyle**

Veterans have long used their veteran status to help market their businesses. It is quite common in areas with large military and/or veteran populations to see advertisements that a business is “veteran-owned” or that uses militaristic symbols in logos or advertising. But other than their names and some marketing materials they do not use their military/veteran connection as a broader identity. The companies featured here use their military/veteran branding not as an “added extra” but as the essence of their existence. Additionally, using the “lifestyle brand” business model, these companies’ stated values, external and internal communications, and their product designs emphasize their veteran connection.

The VetBro look has developed within already popular men’s casual fashion and in its subtler forms does not really stand out. The style these companies help supply is distinct but

easily incorporates elements from other trends common for what is often described as working-class tastes. Wearing cargo pants, graphics t-shirts, and ball caps to the gun range is quite typical. Even attaching generalizable patriotic themes or celebrations of the military to fashion is not new and has been dubbed “warcore” by some fashion critics.<sup>4</sup> But these fashion writers conflate the VetBro look with military-themed apparel aimed at civilians (e.g., using camouflage patterns, cuts common to military gear). Communications scholar Paul Achter argues that when fashion companies use military-influenced designs for their civilian consumers they are trying to avoid the associations with violence embedded in military uniforms.<sup>5</sup> But for VetBros, they want to emphasize these associations with the military and violence. Civilian clothing using military themes will be featured on women models as a way to separate the clothing from images of violence.<sup>6</sup> But when the VetBro brands use women models they do so in a way to emphasize violence by connecting them to a broader gun culture.

### Fashion

The VetBro fashion style utilizes consumer fashions and lifestyle tropes that emphasize traditional masculine imagery, such as competence in rugged environments. It is a mix of sartorial choices from previous fashion trends.<sup>7</sup> One of the precursor sources of inspiration is the “lumbersexual” of the early 2000s. This look adopted stereotypical trappings of “mountain men”

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<sup>4</sup> Troy Patterson, “From Grunt Style to ‘Warcore,’ Civilians Are Embracing Military Fashion,” *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-and-off-the-avenue/from-grunt-style-to-warcore-civilians-are-embracing-military-fashion>.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Achter, “‘Military Chic’ and the Rhetorical Production of the Uniformed Body,” *Western Journal of Communication* 83, no. 3 (2019): 271-272.

<sup>6</sup> Achter, “‘Military Chic’ and the Rhetorical Production of the Uniformed Body,” 275-276.

<sup>7</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (London: Methuen, 1979), 26.

but without the commitment to living in the backwoods.<sup>8</sup> It relied on jeans, work boots, flannel, and useful accessories such as multi-tools. The lumbersexual style developed as a reaction men's fashion trends from the same period, specifically the "hipster" and "metrosexual" styles. These were mocked by some for their supposedly feminine or androgynous looks and behaviors, and others considered these trends to be a "crisis" in masculinity.<sup>9</sup>

The lumbersexual style developed as a way to communicate a sense of more "traditional" masculine aesthetics and activities in a way that those who adopted it would describe as "traditional" even though it was completely contrived.<sup>10</sup> This style was meant convey a connection to loggers of the Pacific Northwest, complete with boots, rugged outerwear, and the tools required to live and thrive in wild. Taken together these are various symbols of "rugged individualism."<sup>11</sup> And much like the 19<sup>th</sup> century turns to the frontier to escape the claimed feminizing aspects of city life, this lumbersexual trend similarly spoke to masculine "authenticity" and the value of self-reliance and physicality in an unforgiving world.<sup>12</sup>

This stylistic reaction (in terms of look) was not a complete rejection (with regard to other properties). Even though the lumbersexual style sought to emphasize a supposedly traditional masculinity in the face of the androgynous hipster and ruggedness in the face of the effete metrosexual, the overall style readily borrows certain features from both. The metrosexual and hipster fashion, along with broader associated activities, emphasized a sense of curation and

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<sup>8</sup> Mark A. Rademacher and Casey R. Kelly, "Constructing Lumbersexuality: Marketing an Emergent Masculine Taste Regime," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 26-28.

<sup>9</sup> Helene Shugart, "Managing Masculinities: The Metrosexual Moment," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Rademacher and Kelly, "Constructing Lumbersexuality," 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth C. Hirschman, "Men, Dogs, Guns, and Cars: The Semiotics of Rugged Individualism," *Journal of Advertising* 32, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Rademacher and Kelly, "Constructing Lumbersexuality," 27.

cultural knowledge that was typically regarded as elitist and overly preening.<sup>13</sup> And for the lumbersexual, curation of brands and products known for their “authentic” design or their durable construction pointed to insider knowledge in ways similar to hipster knowledge of niche music trends.<sup>14</sup> And although the style was meant to reflect an image of outdoorsmen, it was not about being dirty. Like the metrosexuals, the lumbersexuals displayed a concern for self-care and cleanliness, especially for their beards. The trend also helped launch an industry for guides on how to grow and care for a beard along with beard-care products.<sup>15</sup>

The lumbersexual style is not all that unique or creative. In fact, many who adopt it would not even say it is a style at all. As one commentator wryly observed, the lumbersexual is “someone who does not try much at all [and] has put great effort into explaining that it is NOT in fact a thing.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, VetBros would respond to be called “VetBro” by saying they just dress and behave however they want and that there is no “style” they are trying to emulate. Unlike hipster fashion, the style does not intend to stand out and instead fits in with and uses taste cultures common to working class and rural masculinity. It is an attempt to present themselves as also adopting the cultural politics and values even if the wearers have no socio-economic ties to working class or rural communities.

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<sup>13</sup> Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson, “Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field- Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 5 (2011): 795-797.

<sup>14</sup> Rademacher and Kelly, “Constructing Lumbersexuality,” 26.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher J. Schneider, “‘I Wish I Could Grow a Full Beard’: The Amateur Pogonotropher on the Beardbrand YouTube Channel,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 20, no. 4 (2020).

<sup>16</sup> Tom Puzak, “Lumbersexuality: An Exploration,” GearJunkie, November 28, 2014, <https://gearjunkie.com/news/lumbersexuality-article>.

These various styles and fashions form what Zeynep Arsel and Jonathon Bean refer to as “taste regime...a discursive system that links aesthetics to practice.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, these styles are bounded and predictable (a system) due to how they are designed, advertised, and talked about by consumers (discursive); they connect ideas about certain performances (in this case masculinity and individuality) to displays of the same. These “taste regimes” easily first into branding and marketing strategies. Here, “taste” is more than a boundary marker for class. Rather it is how these companies use particular taste patterns to create a larger style that is easily reproduced and adaptable.<sup>18</sup>

Fashion is about communication and these companies use their product aesthetics and marketing to convey attitudes about political and social beliefs. What makes the VetBro style, its associated look, and the products these two companies and their peers make is envisioning it as an encompassing “lifestyle” that includes certain activities (e.g., shooting guns) along with a political outlook (e.g., conservative politics, militaristic patriotism). Politics here is less about policy positions and more about a way of life. Important to this lifestyle is an almost aggressive expression of its foundational beliefs: patriotism, masculinity, and using violence to define and defend both. And because the VetBros do not reject consumer capitalism (unlike more typical subcultures), companies marketing to the style can claim to authentically represent them.

### Lifestyle Brands

Consumers often chose brands as a means of differentiating themselves from others. Advertisers have long known this and play up individual identity as a reason for purchasing their particular brands. But identity signaling through consumption of particular brands is more than

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<sup>17</sup> Zeynep Arsel and Jonathan Bean, “Taste Regimes and Market-Mediated Practice,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 39, no. 5 (2013): 899.

<sup>18</sup> Arsel and Bean, “Taste Regimes and Market-Mediated Practice,” 902.

displaying one's uniqueness; it can signal one's identity or membership in a particular group.<sup>19</sup> This is most prevalent in product domains considered to be "symbolic," such as fashion. And sometimes the brand choices are not discernible to people outside the group and may go unnoticed to the uninitiated, as in many high-end luxury brands.<sup>20</sup> Brand choice can also be about a projected or desired association with a particular lifestyle.<sup>21</sup>

Black Rifle Coffee Company and Grunt Style operate as "lifestyle brands," so how they "position" themselves as military or veteran-themed is important to their overall identity especially vis-à-vis their non-veteran competition. Lifestyle brands are "about establishing relationships with a community of like-minded people. Lifestyle branding is more about positioning a brand based on lifestyle variables (interests, passions, or tastes) than on traditional variables like socio-economic position, age, or location."<sup>22</sup> That is, how they imagine their products being used by their customers—their lifestyle—may be more important than the demographic groups the customers fit in. The products made by a lifestyle brand enable the customer to demonstrate to others that they take part of a particular way of living, not simply demonstrating membership in a particular group.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jonah Berger and Chip Heath, "Where Consumers Diverge from Others: Identity Signaling and Product Domains," *Journal of Consumer Research* 34, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Jonah Berger and Morgan Ward, "Subtle Signals of Inconspicuous Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>21</sup> Munteanu Claudiu Cătălin and Pagalea Andreea, "Brands as a Mean of Consumer Self-Expression and Desired Personal Lifestyle," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 109 (2014).

<sup>22</sup> Teresa Pérez del Castillo, Paloma Díaz Soloaga, and Julie McColl, "Lifestyle Branding as a Brand-Oriented Positioning Strategy: Insights from Spanish Fashion Consultants," *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing* 11, no. 4 (2020): 368.

<sup>23</sup> Cătălin and Andreea, "Brands as a Mean of Consumer Self-Expression and Desired Personal Lifestyle."

A common practice among many businesses (and other institutions such as colleges) is to define a “mission” or “vision” for the organization.<sup>24</sup> These statements are meant to shape company policy, business strategy, and how the employees understand their own roles.<sup>25</sup> They describe the purpose of the company and how its leadership differentiate it from the competition.<sup>26</sup> But even if these “mission” or “vision” statements are only advertising and of no relation to business practices more broadly they are still a valuable source for understanding how a company plans and executes its public-facing communications.

Studying a company’s website is useful for studying the company itself because the design of a website is instructive in learning what a company values and how company leadership wishes the company to be seen.<sup>27</sup> Because these companies began their operations without any physical “brick-and-mortar” storefronts, they rely heavily on their websites for all aspects of advertising, sales, and brand identity.<sup>28</sup> Visual sociologist and communications scholar Luc Pauwels argues that websites have become sites of cultural expression for many communities whether they are personal websites or corporate ones.<sup>29</sup> And even as both Grunt Style and Black Rifle are beginning to grow their physical retail footprints, their online presence remains key to their success.

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<sup>24</sup> Linda Stallworth Williams, “The Mission Statement: A Corporate Tool With a Past, Present, and Future,” *Journal of Business Communication* 45, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>25</sup> John M. Swales and Priscilla S. Rogers, “Discourse and the Projection of Corporate Culture: The Mission Statement,” *Discourse & Society* 6, no. 2 (1995).

<sup>26</sup> Christopher C. Morphew and Matthew Hartley, “Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across Institutional Type,” *Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>27</sup> Luc Pauwels, “A Multimodal Model for Exploring the Material Culture of Digital Networked Platforms and Their Practices,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, ed. Luc Pauwels and Dawn Mannay, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Pérez del Castillo, Díaz Soloaga, and McColl, “Lifestyle Branding as a Brand-Oriented Positioning Strategy,” 369-370.

<sup>29</sup> Luc Pauwels, “A Multimodal Framework for Analyzing Websites as Cultural Expressions,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17, no. 3 (2012).



Important for establishing how these companies position themselves in their respective markets can be found in their promotional materials, other ad copy, social media products including interactions with customers, and other communications from the company's key leaders.<sup>30</sup> These are essential for understanding how a company understands itself or, at least, how they want to be seen by potential customers and distributors, and these show how the company wants to demonstrate its relationship with its idealized customer.<sup>31</sup> As the companies featured in this chapter are not alone in their respective product categories, they use military themes to set themselves apart from their competition and attract customers. While it is common for any company to advertise its products “in-use” or show an “ideal user,” what makes a lifestyle brand different is this ideal customer is also the ideal employee. That is, they try to establish that the people who run and are employees by the company are the type who also use its products.

This lifestyle brand model of marketing and organizational culture is important for helping to see the relationships between consumer and company and how these relationships are far more personalized than in other business models. So much so that the customers expect that every part of their favored companies live up to their expressed ideals. And when the company fails to meet these expectations (or is seen to), they quickly tarnish their relationships with their customers. Understanding the lifestyle brand angle is important here for understanding how patriotism and veteran identity are utilized by these companies. The brands bring everything together—image, product, ideals—in a “homology of style.”

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<sup>30</sup> Stefania Saviolo and Antonio Marazza, *Lifestyle Brands: A Guide to Aspirational Marketing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 72-81.

<sup>31</sup> Cătălin and Andreea, “Brands as a Mean of Consumer Self-Expression and Desired Personal Lifestyle.”

## The Companies

### Grunt Style

#### About the Company

Started in 2009 by former Army Drill Sergeant Daniel Alarik, Grunt Style (GS) is one of the first veteran-themed lifestyle brands. GS is not alone in this market and has competition from other veteran-themed apparel companies (e.g., Ranger-Up, Nine-Line Apparel), but they are arguably the company that popularized the “VetBro” style. Initially only selling screen-printed graphics t-shirts, GS has expanded to other apparel and branded products as well. By 2017, the company had sold over \$100 million in products and employs over 400.<sup>32</sup>

The company began near Alarik’s home in Carol Stream, IL. In 2018, GS moved to San Antonio, TX. Due to financial mismanagement, Alarik sold his controlling stake to a private equity firm who then hired as a former executive of the athletic apparel and equipment company Under Armor as CEO.<sup>33</sup> Since then, more information has surfaced about the sloppy business practices and claims of “sweatshop-like” working conditions during Alarik’s tenure.<sup>34</sup> After a series of suits and countersuits, Alarik and GS have recently settled their legal actions against each other.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Mark L. Rockefeller, “America’s Grittiest Entrepreneur: How An Army Sergeant Created A \$100 Million Lifestyle Brand,” *Forbes*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markrockefeller/2017/07/18/americas-grittiest-entrepreneur-how-an-army-sergeant-created-a-100-million-lifestyle-brand/>.

<sup>33</sup> Jeannette E. Garcia, “Grunt Style Taps Specialty Apparel Veteran Glenn Silbert for New CEO,” *San Antonio Business Journal*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.bizjournals.com/sanantonio/news/2020/04/07/grunt-style-taps-specialty-apparel-veteran-for-new.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Brandon Lingle, “A Reckoning, Grunt Style,” *San Antonio Express-News*, October 11, 2020, sec. C, <https://www.expressnews.com/sa-inc/article/A-Reckoning-Grunt-Style-An-inside-look-at-San-15629615.php>.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Danner, “Grunt Style, Ex-CEO Daniel Alarik End Long-Running Legal Battle,” *San Antonio Express-News*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.expressnews.com/business/article/grunt-style-settles-alarik-lawsuit-18078354.php>.

Everything GS produces has military themes, apparently even the management of the company. Alarik claimed that his entire management philosophy was based on lessons he learned in the Army.<sup>36</sup> These military themes are meant to appeal to military members and veterans, along with civilian supporters of the military. The name “Grunt Style” refers to the term “grunt” which is given to members of the infantry. It is simultaneously a derogatory term meant to make fun of infantry members’ harsh lives while in the service, and at the same time a term of pride used by the infantry as a symbol of how hard they have it compared to “POGs,” that is, “person other than grunt.”

GS’s products range from t-shirts and other clothing items to branded coffee mugs and beer glasses. The most ubiquitous features on Grunt Style t-shirts are their logo and various displays of the US flag. The company’s logo is two crossed muskets (seemingly 1795 Springfield Armory, the same used to model the Infantry Branch insignia in the US Army), the name “GRUNT STYLE” above the muskets, the initials “US” to the left of the muskets, the numerals “1776” to the right, the initials “GS” below the muskets, and below that, text reading “THIS WE’LL DEFEND,” the official motto of the US Army.



Image 8 Grunt Style logo

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Alarik, “Heroic Team Builder,” Lady Bird Lake, TX, May 2018, TEDx video, [https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel\\_alarik\\_heroic\\_team\\_builder](https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_alarik_heroic_team_builder).

## The Website

The home page of GS has the functional features of other online apparel companies: there is a selection of images of models wearing their products, drop down menus showing the navigation structure of the site to guide customers to the various sections, and company information at the bottom.<sup>37</sup> The home page features various images of people modeling the company's products generally, but not always, depicted as being involved in some sort of activity that involves guns or being outdoors. The layout of the homepage has changed several times over the years, in keeping with trends in design for consumer websites. Images used are also rotated on a frequent basis to highlight new products and designs.

Interspersed between the images showing the various products is written text that announces the company's mission and values or otherwise showing the company's point of view.

The first large set of text is GS's motto followed by a further explanation:

PRIDE IN SELF, IN MILITARY AND IN COUNTRY WE TAKE PRIDE IN  
EVERYTHING WE DO AND INSTILL THAT PRIDE TO OUR CUSTOMERS  
We have taken the American fighting spirit and instilled it in everything we do.  
You don't have to be a Veteran to wear grunt style [sic], but you do have to love  
**Freedom, Bacon, and Whiskey.**

There is also a "slideshow" of pictures from GS's account on the image-sharing social media platform Instagram that includes photos customers have taken of themselves wearing Grunt Style products. Showing the products being worn by actual customers is a typical device used by lifestyle brands in order to demonstrate the idealized customer and allow potential customers to identify with that ideal.<sup>38</sup>

Even text that is typically generic is given a twist to match the overall communications style of the brand. For example, advertising the company's email newsletter, customers are asked

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<sup>37</sup> [www.gruntstyle.com](http://www.gruntstyle.com), accessed October 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Saviolo and Marazza, *Lifestyle Brands*, 74-76.

to “**SIGN-UP FOR PATRIOTISM AT YOUR FINGERTIPS!**” They have also included a copyright statement which begins fairly boilerplate, followed by “You can try to copy us, but then we’ll waterboard you with freedom.” As discussed in the previous chapter, this type of humor is typical for the VetBro style: violence is a punchline. In this case, they are referencing one of the torture techniques used by the US military and its allies in interrogations.

The “About Us” page further establishes the stylistic connections between the company, its products, and its communication style. The page contains more images of men shooting guns while wearing GS products along with other accessories common to shooting. The GS logos are always clearly visible.

What you wear is more than just a necessity, it’s an attitude! We have taken the fighting American spirit and instilled it in everything we do. You do not have to be a veteran to wear Grunt Style, but you do have to love freedom, bacon and whiskey.

We provide more than just apparel, we bolster a lifestyle.

PRIDE IN SELF, IN MILITARY, AND IN COUNTRY.

With nearly 400 US Veterans and Patriots, our mission is to deliver the highest quality, most patriotic apparel on the planet, straight to your front door. Backed by our unbeatable lifetime guarantee, you will always be blown away by our products, our service, and our ability to ‘Merica!

While there is an emphasis on patriotism and American national identity, it is presented along with seemingly unserious or playful slogans. There is respect, but also a lack of sentimentality.

### **The Clothing**

Although Grunt Style offers a wide range of clothing and other products, I focus on their t-shirts because that was their original business and their other branded merchandise generally contain designs initially used on their t-shirts. For most clothing items, the company logo is usually placed on the left sleeve except for designs which have the logo prominently displayed on the front or back of the item.<sup>39</sup> Right sleeves generally have a “backwards” USA flag, i.e. the

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<sup>39</sup> In the US Army, a soldier’s unit patch is worn on the left sleeve.

flag's blue canton is on the right instead of the left. This is keeping with US flag code (the colors are always moving forward) and has also been a part of the US Army's various utility uniforms for more than 40 years.

The designs on the graphics t-shirts range from displays of official US military logos and insignias to patriotic expressions to "humorous" slogans. Some are fairly uncontroversial, others slightly obscene, but they all fit with the larger "VetBro" aesthetic. I have deliberately chosen items to show the range of the designs used by GS available in their online catalog in October 2020. I purposefully chose designs to show the range of messages, from clear patriotic expressions to irreverent humor to arguably racist coding. While this last group is the smallest of the company's offerings, it is a visible one. There are no publicly available sales data or even a "most popular" section on the website to give any indication as to which designs sell well and which do not. It is reasonable to assume that the discontinued products do not sell well. Many of the models appear in multiple images across the site. They are all employees of the company or otherwise associated with the company.



Image 9 Screenshot "Ammo Flag" shirt from gruntstyle.com. Image shows t-shirt design, model wearing the shirt.

On the front of the shirt covering the top third is a design of the USA flag. The black background of the shirt is used for the dark parts of the flag, i.e. the blue field and the red stripes.

White designs of various caliber bullets are used for the white stripes and grenades are used in place of the stars. An image of a model wearing the shirt shows a muscular man, about waist and up, holding a rifle (seemingly an AR-15) with a 30-round magazine and scope. He has the weapon raised as if to fire, showing the image of the shirt between his arms. He is wearing a ball cap with the Grunt Style logo as well as ear and eye protection.

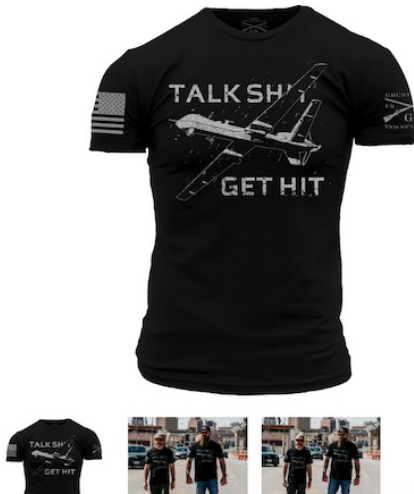


Image 10 Screenshot of “Talk Sh\*\* Get Hit” shirt from gruntstyle.com. Image shows t-shirt design and models wearing the shirt.

A black shirt with white printing designed to look “weathered” (i.e., slightly worn and not new). In the center of the shirt is an image of a MQ-9 “Reaper” Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (commonly referred to as a drone). Above the image is the text “TALK SH\*\*” with the aircraft’s wing obscuring the last two letters. Below the image is the text “GET HIT.” The connotation of this is that people who step out of line or who speak ill of the US run the risk of being attacked by a guided missile. The images of the shirt being modeled are of two men shown from about the knees up in an urban setting. They both have beards and are both wearing ball caps, dark sunglasses, and jeans.

All of the designs GS makes are available in women’s fits and sizes. Some of the designs even focus on women as customers through the particular design choices and marketing.



Image 11 Female model wearing “Messy Buns & Guns” t-shirt.

On the front of the shirt in the top third is the text “MESSY BUNS & GUNS.” It comes in several different prints. In this example, the woman modeling the shirt is seen outdoors, apparently at a shooting range, wearing dark glasses, and ear protection while holding a firearm fitted with a silencer. Here, the model is “just one of the guys.” She is getting dirty and participating in what are typically masculine-coded activities.



Image 12 Screenshots of “Girls Just Wanna Have Guns” shirt from gruntstyle.com. Image shows shirt design and two women modelling shirt, one outdoors and one indoors.

This black shirt fitted for women is advertised using a very different and more objectifying expression of femininity. Most of the design is pink, using a typeface designed to look like a neon sign reading “GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE GUNS.” Below the wording is a



blue outline of an M-4 or similar rifle. It also is made to look like a part of a neon sign with four identical outlines of the rifle appearing much lighter. There are two images of women modelling the shirt. One a Black woman in an outdoor location. The model is also wearing ear and eye protection and is holding a pistol at her hip pointing low and away from the camera. The second image shows another woman wearing the shirt and tight-fitting short shorts holding an AR-15 variant. In these images she is posed next to and on a brass pole similar to one used by pole dancers.



Image 13 Screenshot of “F\*ck Your Feelings” shirt. Image shows shirt design, portions of online store.

A black shirt with bold white text made to appear as if distressed or used. Text reads “YOUR FEELINGS.” A stick figure person is drawn as if mounting the “Y” with movement lines next to the figure’s “hips.”



Image 14 “Never Forget” shirt from gruntstyle.com.

A light gray shirt with mostly blue printing. The GS logo and the USA flag on the sleeves are in blue. The text takes up the top two-thirds of the shirt. It is block print “NEVER FORGET, UNITED WE STAND” and in much smaller print below is “09 - 11 - 01.” Next to the “WE” is an image of a USA flag.



Image 15 “Infidel” shirt from gruntstyle.com.

An all-black shirt with white printing. The design is on the front and takes up slightly more than the top half. It mimics the logo of the Raiders football team. The shape of a shield makes up the outline of the design. In the middle is a drawing of a human skull. Behind the skull are two crossed rifles, seemingly M-16s. Above the skull and rifles, still inside the shield, is bold text: “INFIDEL.”



## AMERICAN INFIDEL

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★★★★★ 62 Reviews

Size



ADD TO CART



Image 16 Screenshot of “American Infidel” shirt from gruntstyle.com. Image of shirt design, part of online store.

A dark blue shirt with gold printing. This shirt is mostly blank except for text that stretches down the left-side of the shirt. The text reads “AMERICAN infidel” starting at the top of the shirt and stretching down. The first word is in a standard sans-serif block typeface. The typeface for the word “infidel” is stylized in such a way as to resemble Arabic script. While it does resemble and even use some Arabic letters, it is intended to spell the word in English, perhaps emphasizing that the self-proclaimed status of “infidel” is only in relation to Arabic-speaking people, mostly Muslim.



Image 17 “Bacon” t-shirt from gruntstyle.com.

A black shirt with red and white printing. The GS logo and USA flag on the sleeves are all printed with red. On the front of the shirt, covering the top third, is a stylized version on the

USA flag. Instead of red stripes, there are seven strips of bacon. Instead of a blue canton with stars is a butcher's chart for a pig (i.e., an outline of a pig with lines identifying where to cut for the main primal cuts).

These are but a small selection of GS's graphics t-shirts. Some of these designs have also appeared on other apparel (e.g., hoodies) and other merchandise (e.g., coffee mugs). The images used on the online store have also sometimes appeared elsewhere on the website and in the company's Instagram page, or both.

### Black Rifle Coffee Company

#### **About the Company**

Started in 2014 by former US Army Special Forces veteran Evan Hafer, Black Rifle Coffee Company (BRCC) is the largest veteran-owned beverage company in the US. Based in Salt Lake City, UT, and San Antonio, TX, BRCC sells roasted coffee, coffee-related accessories (e.g., hand grinders, mugs, French presses) and branded merchandise (mostly apparel for which they do the screen-printing in-house). Initially, the company had no retail locations and augmented their online sales with agreements with outdoor and hunting supply retailers such as Bass Pro Shops to sell their coffee and other merchandise. BRCC is currently expanding the reach of their brand by opening and franchising retail stores and expanding its grocery store presence which now includes Walmart stores.

In 2021, BRCC began a line of Ready-to-Drink (RTD) coffee products: canned iced coffee with milk and sweeteners. The launch of these RTD products has been lucrative and helped BRCC with a successful Initial Public Offering in 2022 which raised almost \$1.7 billion. But their stock lost considerable value since going public which has led some investors to sue the company for mismanagement and securities violations. BRCC is also being sued by the business consulting firm that helped it launch the RTD line for breach of contract and failure to pay

royalties. Several former employees, in different cases, are also suing the company for, among other things, workplace harassment and wrongful dismissal.

### **The Products and the Website**

As with Grunt Style, BRCC’s branding is based off military and gun-related themes. To begin, their logo is designed to look like the view of a rifle scope with the initials BRCC inside of the scope. BRCC’s most popular coffee roasts and products also have military or gun-related names. For example, their espresso is called “AK,” an “extra” dark roast is called “Murdered Out” (MO), a dark roast called “Freedom Fuel” (FF), and two of their light roasts are named “Gunship” (GS) and “Silencer Smooth” (SS).<sup>40</sup> Almost all their coffee products have an image of some sort of firearm on the packaging. They also have products with names related to civilian first responders such as “Five Alarm” (firefighters) and “Thin Blue Line” (police). To further their gun and military-themed branding, their single-serve coffee pods for Keurig and similar makers are referred to as “rounds,” and their larger bundles of multiple different roasts are called “supply drops.”



Image 18 Black Rifle Coffee “Freedom Fuel” coffee bag. Image on bag shows an AR-15 over US flag.

BRCC’s homepage uses the layout and functionality of many online retailers. It contains links to the various parts of the website, banner ads for new releases and special deals, images of

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<sup>40</sup> The obviously problematic nature of the “SS” name has not gone unnoticed by BRCC’s critics.

their products, and people (i.e., idealized customers) enjoying their products. In BRCC’s case, this means coffee and various different outdoor settings of people preparing or drinking coffee. Also included in the imagery are pictures of the coffee roasting facilities and employees, some of whom carrying holstered pistols on their belts.<sup>41</sup>

The first thing a viewer sees when navigating to BRCC’s “About” page is an embedded video that is also hosted on the company’s YouTube channel titled “It’s Who We Are: Evan Hafer.”<sup>42</sup> (I discuss the video later.) Below the video is text that describes the company:

#### WHO WE ARE

Black Rifle Coffee Company is a veteran-owned coffee company serving premium coffee to people who love America. We develop our explosive roast profiles with the same mission focus we learned as military members serving this great country and are committed to supporting veterans, law enforcement, and first responders. With every purchase you make, we give back.

We import our high-quality coffee beans from Colombia and Brazil and roast 5 days a week at our facilities in Manchester, TN and Salt Lake City, UT. The best way to enjoy our freedom-filled coffee is with the Black Rifle Coffee Club...<sup>43</sup>

Next to this description is a box with the company’s mission statement:

#### Our Mission

BLACK RIFLE COFFEE COMPANY  
SERVES COFFEE AND CULTURE  
TO PEOPLE WHO LOVE AMERICA.

And below this is a quote from Hafer: “Black Rifle Coffee Company is quite literally the combination of my two favorite passions. I take pride in the coffee we roast, the veterans we employ, and the causes we support.”

Next are images of the company’s executive team which are a mix of professional pictures/headshots and pictures of them holding some type of firearm, emphasizing that those in

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<sup>41</sup> [www.blackriflecoffee.com](http://www.blackriflecoffee.com), accessed December 2020.

<sup>42</sup> This is part of a series of short videos (approximately 5-minutes each) featuring different employees of BRCC.

<sup>43</sup> Text continues with as an advertisement for their membership coffee club.

charge of the company also live the “lifestyle” they are selling.<sup>44</sup> The images link to biography pages that have a short paragraph each about the person’s background and experience. For some of them, there is also something like a “stats box” showing different “skills.” And these are measured with images of bullets. At the bottom of each biography page is the text: “Black Rifle Coffee Company is a SOF [Special Operations Forces] Veteran-owned coffee company, serving premium coffee and culture to people who love America.”

The rest of the site is a standard online store. Their products are shown as thumbnails in a grid or list organization each with a brief description. Clicking on any product leads the user to a more detailed description of the product. For example, on the product pages for the various coffees are descriptions of the beans’ origins, how they were roasted, and various tasting notes.

### **The Founder as Visionary**

The video of Hafer is part of a series featuring different BRCC employees. I focus on Hafer’s video because as the founder/CEO of BRCC his story is integral to the story of the company and how he and BRCC’s leadership team choose to present the company.<sup>45</sup> And second, his video is the only in the series that is prominently embedded in the BRCC website. According to statistics shown on YouTube, the video was first posted on the video sharing platform in October 2018, and has over one million views as of November, 2021.<sup>46</sup>

In the video, Hafer talks about his career in the US Army Special Forces (SF) and later in the CIA, as well as his appreciation of good coffee. Importantly for the image of the brand, he combines the two:

Every deployment I went on, I was taking small batch roasted coffee with me. I modified our gun trucks on the invasion of Iraq so we could grind coffee and put it through a

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<sup>44</sup> Saviolo and Marazza, *Lifestyle Brands*, 81-85.

<sup>45</sup> Saviolo and Marazza, *Lifestyle Brands*, 78-81.

<sup>46</sup> This includes views from people who watched the video on BRCC’s site and people who viewed it on YouTube. It is not possible to disaggregate the number.

French press. People would wake up in the morning to the sound of my grinder. My team leader and I, every morning we would cheers [moves hand, mimicking the action of clinking glasses] to our coffee. It was a special bond over something as insignificant as brown water. But great coffee was one of those things where, if you started your day with it, it just made your day that much better.<sup>47</sup>

During this moment Hafer is shown being interviewed in front of roasting machines interspersed with still images of Hafer in the Iraqi desert, some by himself, some with other members of his SF or CIA team. The images show Hafer and others in and around military equipment, sometimes wearing combat gear, sometimes just in t-shirts, and mostly they are dirty and dusty. Often the faces of the other individuals are blurred to prevent identification, a fairly common practice among people in special operations forces and the CIA. In some of these still photos we can see Hafer with a cup in his hand or preparing a coffee maker.



Image 19 Evan Hafer from video “It’s Who We Are” by Black Rifle Coffee Company.

Hafer continues his narration saying that, for some time, he had been roasting his own coffee beans for himself and his friends. When others started purchasing his beans he felt a desire to move from being a recreational roaster to making it a full-time job. He also explains his desire to employ fellow military veterans. Early in the video he says “People talk about you

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<sup>47</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, “It’s Who We Are: Evan Hafer,” Video, 2:36-3:09, YouTube, October 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GiAE07z31k>.



know we're dedicated to veterans. But half of that is just trash. It's used as sound bite information for corporations to sell more sh[beep]. I want people to know when they step into the company that this is owned by the veteran community. And I want the veteran community to take pride in that."<sup>48</sup> And towards the end of the video he claims,

I think that [veterans are] under-appreciated; I think they're undervalued. They get forgotten...but I think that that's what Americans want. Because they don't want to be reminded that we're sending 18 and 20 year old men and women into harm's way every day around the world by choice. A lot of these men and women come back and they are physically and psychologically broken. The average American civilian is scared to have a very open and candid conversation with the American service member.<sup>49</sup>

He continues to explain that his goal is to create a "tribe" or a "family" around a shared value system and making good coffee. By including this video "introduction" to Hafer as BRCC's founder, he and the company are able to reinforce the connections between military service and their products.<sup>50</sup> Like Donny O'Malley of Vet TV, Hafer is able to seamlessly switch between veterans as heroes and veterans as broken.

### **Coffee and Conservative Media**

Part of BRCC's advertising and public relations messaging has been the media presence of Hafer and Executive Vice President Mat Best, a veteran of the US Army's 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment. Of all the various VetBro companies, BRCC has been the most prominent in the right-wing media space with many appearances on the Fox News Channel (FNC). They appear as guests on the FNC opinion shows which often features guests who are small business owners to burnish their populist, working-class taste politics.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, "It's Who We Are: Evan Hafer," 0:33-0:46.

<sup>49</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, "It's Who We Are: Evan Hafer," 4:15-4:39.

<sup>50</sup> Pérez del Castillo, Díaz Soloaga, and McColl, "Lifestyle Branding as a Brand-Oriented Positioning Strategy," 365.

<sup>51</sup> Reece Peck, *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).



Image 20 Evan Hafer appearing on “Tucker Carlson Today,” Jul 12, 2022.

Hafer and Best have been very willing to take sides with right-wing and otherwise conservative causes, and by doing so publicly in major conservative opinion spaces they establish their company’s connection to these audiences, typically when there is a coffee angle. While their appearances are purportedly just giving their opinion as military veteran business owners, they are effectively advertising their product as well by promoting their conservative credentials.<sup>52</sup>

When Starbucks in 2017 announced that they would aim to hire 10,000 refugees as a way to help them integrate into American society, they did so during a time of increased anti-immigrant agitation among conservative politicians and media commentators.<sup>53</sup> Hafer responded to Starbucks’s announcement by claiming that companies like Starbucks care more for refugees than veterans and that BRCC was then going to hire 10,000 veterans.<sup>54</sup> Hafer repeated this claim

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<sup>52</sup> Jason Zengerle, “Can the Black Rifle Coffee Company Become the Starbucks of the Right?,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/magazine/black-rifle-coffee-company.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Howard Schultz, “Message from Howard Schultz: Living Our Values,” *Starbucks Stories* (blog), January 29, 2017, <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2017/living-our-values-in-uncertain-times/>.

<sup>54</sup> Jelisa Castrodale, “We Spoke to the Black Rifle Coffee Owner About Guns, Hipsters, and Hiring Veterans,” *Vice*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xymzvkw/we-spoke-to-the-black-rifle-coffee-owner-about-guns-hipsters-and-hiring-veterans>.

in the video of him on the website.<sup>55</sup> Of course, the extreme nature of this statement from the CEO of a company that employs only a couple hundred people did not go unnoticed.<sup>56</sup> But even with this justified push-back, Hafer succeeded in making a name for the company and still uses the line “We aim to hire 10,000 veterans” in various ad copy.<sup>57</sup> Further, they were able to repurpose a hashtag, “#VeteransBeforeRefugees,” that had previously been popular in some conservative social media spaces. In fact, GS had previously used this slogan on one of their (now discontinued) shirts.<sup>58</sup>

While this was the first time Hafer and Best put BRCC in the media spotlight, it would not be the last time they took sides with a conservative cause célèbre. BRCC’s embrace of police officers is clearly evident in their “Thin Blue Line” line of coffee of other products. As stated on the BRCC web page for this particular coffee, “Thin Blue Line is a product created to benefit law enforcement officers and their families.” And on the page for a mesh ball cap with a “Thin Blue Line” patch, the description reads “The team at BRCC has the utmost respect for the Thin Blue Line that stands between chaos and peace in our great nation.” This stated support for police turned much more active after a Starbucks employee in Oklahoma City apparently wrote “PIG” on the drink tag for a uniformed police officer.

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<sup>55</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, “It’s Who We Are: Evan Hafer.”

<sup>56</sup> Adam Linehan, “After Viral Meme, Can Black Rifle Coffee Company Really Hire 10,000 Veterans?,” *Task & Purpose* (blog), February 5, 2017, <https://taskandpurpose.com/community/viral-meme-can-black-rifle-coffee-company-really-hire-10000-veterans/>.

<sup>57</sup> Linehan, “After Viral Meme, Can Black Rifle Coffee Company Really Hire 10,000 Veterans?”

<sup>58</sup> Grunt Style, “We Support Americans and Our Veterans Who Are Willing to Die for Your Freedoms.,” Facebook, August 17, 2016.

On November 29, 2019, after the incident was first reported, the official BRCC Twitter account asked for information about the police officer and where he worked.<sup>59</sup> BRCC then gifted coffee and other products to the officer and his department. More importantly for the image of the company, Hafer and Best made public appearances publicizing what BRCC did in connection to the matter. They appeared on the Fox News Channel morning show “Fox and Friends” to discuss their donation and their support for the police.<sup>60</sup> Hafer told the hosts “I think this is that West Coast elitist, progressive culture that continues to encroach into American corporate values,” referring to the Seattle, WA based Starbucks corporation.

In late 2019, former Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher was accused and then acquitted of murdering a detainee in a highly publicized case. BRCC, along with Nine-Line Apparel, a veteran-owned apparel company similar to Grunt Style but much smaller, teamed up to help Gallagher launch his own line of “patriotic apparel” called Salty Frog Apparel. Nine-Line had previously released a “Free Eddie” design to support Gallagher and his legal defense.<sup>61</sup> The designs for this limited operation resembled shirts made by Grunt Style or Nine-Line, except they all had specifically Navy-centric themes. The logo prominently features a trident, an important part of the US Navy SEAL’s insignia. While many supporters of Gallagher applauded the effort to help him and bought some of the apparel, this effort had its detractors, including

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<sup>59</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company (@blckriflecoffee), “Can someone get us the name and location of the precinct of the officer that had PIG written on his Thanksgiving order for coffee so we can hook them up... #brcc #thinblueline #backtheblue” Twitter, November 30, 2019, <https://twitter.com/blckriflecoffee/status/1200614901980397568>.

<sup>60</sup> Caleb Parke, “Veteran-Owned Coffee Company Donates to Oklahoma Police Bashed by Starbucks Barista,” Fox News, December 2, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/food-drink/veteran-owned-coffee-company-donates-to-oklahoma-police-bashed-by-starbucks-barista>.

<sup>61</sup> Meghann Myers, “Some Veterans Salty over Eddie Gallagher’s New Clothing Line,” Military Times, January 2, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/01/02/some-veterans-salty-over-eddie-gallaghers-new-clothing-line/>.

some prominent ones in the military veteran community such as Terminal Lance creator Max Uriarte. They saw this as cynical opportunism, at best, on the part of BRCC and 9-Line. At worst, they saw this effort as complicity in the crimes that Gallagher had committed.<sup>62</sup>

But this connection with conservative social causes sometimes created friction and demonstrated a potential weakness of using the lifestyle branding model with politics. Kyle Rittenhouse, the 17-year-old accused and later acquitted of murdering two people during a Black Lives Matter protest in Kenosha, WI, was photographed wearing a BRCC shirt after posting bail. Many assumed that the company had gifted the shirt or were otherwise supporting him. BRCC replied to these questions denying their involvement with Rittenhouse. They released a fairly standard press release on their website and Twitter account stating that they did not involve themselves in ongoing criminal matters.<sup>63</sup>

This (justifiable and reasonable) lack of involvement from BRCC angered some of their customer base. After the denial of involvement, many “former BRCC customers” made public their desire to boycott BRCC because the company was not living up to its stated values.<sup>64</sup> Hafer tried to repair the damage at first by posting a short video stating his support for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment but at the same time keeping his distance from an “ongoing criminal matter.” A couple days later he appeared on former National Rifle Association spokesperson Dana Loesch’s

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<sup>62</sup> Myers, “Some Veterans Salty over Eddie Gallagher’s New Clothing Line.”

<sup>63</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company (@blkriflecoffee), “A Message from Our CEO @EvanHafer. #brcc #americascOFFEE <https://t.co/QCAvGQezXo>,” Twitter, November 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/blkriflecoffee/status/1330657893213986816>.

<sup>64</sup> Kelly Weill, “This Gun Coffee Brand Was MAGA Royalty. Then It Turned on Kyle Rittenhouse.” *The Daily Beast*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/black-rifle-coffee-was-maga-royalty-until-it-turned-on-kyle-rittenhouse>.

radio show and expressed his frustration with conservative social media for acting as gatekeepers and demanding an exacting purity to the cause.<sup>65</sup>



Image 21 Screenshot of tweet, Nov. 21, 2020, showing Kyle Rittenhouse wearing a BRCC shirt.

Coffee and apparel, as consumer goods, are both relatively inexpensive and do not require much thought or investment before purchasing. In other words, it is fairly reasonable that one could buy a Grunt Style shirt or bag of Black Rifle coffee on a whim just to try it out or as a gift to someone who is a veteran and then never make a purchase from them again. Although we do not know how many customers of GS and BRCC are repeat customers, it appears that both companies will continue to be fairly profitable. GS has moved past its ownership and management issues with no apparent harms to brand reputation. The damage to BRCC's image among its most steadfast conservative supporters did not hurt the company's Initial Public Offering and the company is now valued at over \$1 billion.

The two companies featured in this chapter offer different products yet have remarkable similarities in how they all position themselves next to their rival, non-veteran/non-military

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<sup>65</sup> Dana Loesch, "RAGE MOB: Tries to Cancel Black Rifle Coffee Company - The Mob Got It Wrong...Again," YouTube, November 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7vPrXzBdB8>.

competitors by using marketing and organizational techniques common to lifestyle branding. While both companies sell very different products, they cater to the same market: military members, veterans, their families, and people who wish to be associated with them. In fact, it is difficult if not impossible to purchase any of their products and not be associated with this market. The use of military/veteran imagery in products and advertising copy described here is sometimes obvious, other times coded in such a way that only one with a connection to the military will understand at first glance.

### **Discussion of Themes**

Several themes are important for discussion here to show how the aesthetic and rhetorical choices of these brands fits in with the larger VetBro style and how that style works to communicate broader attitudes about the themes of patriotism, militarism, and masculinity that ground this dissertation. Patriotism and militarism are envisioned as both consumer products and as lifestyles or identities which must be projected at all times. Patriotism and militarism combine with partisan politics to become slogans while pushing conservative politics along with the brand image begins to look like a marketing strategy. This is displayed using a specific style, legible along certain class tastes, and gendered expressions. Just as patriotic love for country can slide into a nationalistic hate for the country's perceived enemies, nationalism can easily slide into racism. As the enemies in the Post-9/11 Wars have been cast as racial and religious others, animus towards them is combined with other patriotic appeals, but coded in a way that hides the racist motives to outsiders. Finally, building a lifestyle brand around these politics and political expressions carries some risks. As with all lifestyle brands, the brand's image must always be protected. And this can be difficult if the company has different ideas of what their image means than their customers, especially by declaring identity politics as part of its niche market.

## Militarized Masculinity for Sale

The VetBro aesthetic these companies use in their products and public communications displays a type of military masculinity that emphasizes aggressiveness (shown through support for military action), martial competence and skill (shown through the images of shooting and the military backgrounds of some employees), self-confidence bordering on arrogance (shown through some of the humor), and superiority over civilians (shown through the assertions of quality). And while masculinity is not typically tied to patriotism, that link is also present, even if not as strong as for the Navy SEALs.

The imagery and designs used by GS show how men should look and act like, which is invariably connected to their conception of what a veteran should look and act like. Masculine identity and expression and expression of military service are the same. The men (mostly GS employees) that model the t-shirts all have some combination of large muscles, tattoos, beards, and are carrying or using guns. If they are missing any one of those, they compensate with more of another. The t-shirt designs and ad copy make references to things that “real men” should like and appreciate: guns, bacon, and love of country, of course, but also a certain type of humor.

GS also sells women’s versions of their t-shirts and has women modeling the products on their site. Here we can see feminized versions of militarized masculinity, one hyper-sexualized the other almost desexualized. The first shows the women models exhibiting the behaviors of the men, being outside and shooting guns, while also displaying a feminized look. That is, women are shown wearing make-up and tight-fitting clothes while shooting their guns which often have pink hand guards or other accessories. This is most prominently displayed in the “Girls Just Wanna Have Guns” shirt and associated advertising images by showing a scantily clad woman holding an AR-15 while pole dancing. The second version shows women who are “just one of the guys.” They are shown wearing similar clothes as the men featured in the ads and doing the



same activities. An example of this is shown in the “Messy Buns and Guns” shirt and associated imagery. In both versions of femininity in GS’s advertising materials, women are taking on the militarized masculinity of the men in the ads, they are still demonstrating an adherence to particular gender norms and expectations.<sup>66</sup> Women have two options: conform to the masculinist notion to “the warrior” as seen behaving as “one of the guys,” or perform a hyper-feminized style with the trappings of the larger gun culture.

BRCC presents a product that had previously been associated with more elite, upper-class and urban sensibilities. In order to make it marketable to his working class and conservative target audience Hafer, using himself as inspiration, creates an image of an idealized customer that has conservative values and lifestyles. He takes every opportunity to attack “hipsters” as snobbish cultural elites as well as the Starbucks corporation for apparently hating conservative values. He also uses his identity as a Special Forces veteran, outdoors enthusiast, and gun lover to exhibit authentic rural masculine credentials legible to his target audience.

Hafer’s attacks directed against Starbucks and hipsters signals the stereotype of people most associated with premium coffee.<sup>67</sup> By signaling disdain for who he considers cultural elites (e.g., hipsters, progressives) he is also giving consumers a way to do the same by purchasing his products. The pretense of hipsterism is a snobbishness around privileged access to specialized knowledge. In the world of coffee, this would involve things like bean selection and roast. Hafer and BRCC are not making fancy coffee for people who like fancy coffee, they are making fancy coffee for people who want to be seen as possessing a set of conservative values and affinities.

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<sup>66</sup> Kacy Crowley and Michelle Sandhoff, “Just a Girl in the Army: U.S. Iraq War Veterans Negotiating Femininity in a Culture of Masculinity,” *Armed Forces & Society* 43, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>67</sup> Allana Akhtar, “Behind Black Rifle Coffee, the ‘Anti-Hipster’ Answer to Starbucks’ ‘latte Liberals’ Says Sales Are Surging,” *Business Insider*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-black-rifle-coffee-company-2021-7>.

The packaging for BRCC roasts typically involves gun or military-related themes; information about the beans themselves are a secondary concern. Much like the lumbersexuals VetBro style borrows from, Hafer simultaneously borrows aspects of the hipster while attacking them for how they consume it.<sup>68</sup> This disdain for cultural snobs serves as a signal of working-class solidarity.<sup>69</sup>

As hipster culture is seen as effeminate or androgynous, Hafer needs to make sure that men who want to be associated with manly products will not be turned off by fancy coffee. By associating his coffee with his military background, his experiences in combat, and American gun culture more broadly, Hafer makes an effete product accessible to the (aspirational) military masculinity of his target audience. He also uses his civilian interests in outdoor activities like camping to also present a broader working class taste culture. He takes the product and puts it in “masculine situations.”<sup>70</sup> GS does this as well, emphasizing their products being used in settings, mostly involving guns, that show their customers as “rugged individuals.”<sup>71</sup>

#### Militaristic Patriotism as Kitsch

The most prevalent theme for each of these companies is an extreme militarism by relating everything that they do to the military. For VetBro companies one cannot be patriotic if one does not support the military, and supporting the US military means one is a patriotic American. As shown previously, the meaning of patriotism has long been contested. In the American context, supporters of the state and military as well as critics claim that their position derives from patriotism. Anti-war critics as well as supporters of overseas wars argue that they

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<sup>68</sup> Rademacher and Kelly, “Constructing Lumbersexuality,” 29.

<sup>69</sup> Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 107-110.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan E. Schroeder and Detlev Zwick, “Mirrors of Masculinity: Representation and Identity in Advertising Images,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 7, no. 1 (2004): 45-47.

<sup>71</sup> Hirschman, “Men, Dogs, Guns, and Cars.”

are the real patriots and are the ones who actually “support the troops.” And like others who have debated this issue, GS and BRCC seem to argue that their understanding of patriotism as militaristic is the only correct one.

For these companies, the military/veteran support is more than just marketing or even personal belief: it is the brand identity. And like the previous chapters have shown, the companies’ communications assert that this is not in any way a political stance. Of course, it clearly is. Support for the military along with patriotism are defined (and politicized) in particular ways that support a broader militarism. Like many on the right, they argue that these are just “common sense” understandings.

In some ways, these companies’ appeals to patriotism and support for the military are similar to, even if louder than, how other corporations have attempted to demonstrate the same in the Post 9/11 period. But that comparison is too superficial. Many companies wave the flag and talk up their support for the military, veterans, and the police, or make public contributions to the charities that support them. The public patriotism of for example, Walmart, Anheuser-Busch, or Ford Motors is quite apparent, but these companies do not build their brands around it. American patriotism will never be the central identifying factor of the brand identity of these companies regardless of their positions as quintessentially American companies.

Hafer of BRCC even calls out this commercialized patriotism of other companies, connecting it with support for military veterans: “People talk about you know we’re dedicated to veterans. But half of that is just trash. It’s used as sound bite information for corporations to sell more sh[beep].”<sup>72</sup> Although this is entirely self-serving, Hafer is not wrong here. The key difference between his understanding and of corporate patriotism and that of other companies is

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<sup>72</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, “It’s Who We Are: Evan Hafer,” 0:34-0:46.

that they do it to increase sales while he claims to do it for love of country and his fellow veterans. For example, Walmart built its image initially only selling products made in the US. When this seemingly patriotic stance was challenged by promises for higher profit margins by selling cheaper products from overseas, profits carried the day.<sup>73</sup> But for BRCC and GS, their brands do not exist without the pronouncements of American patriotism and militarism. Support for the military and veterans *is* their brand identity, not merely an opportunistic advertising campaign during the Super Bowl or the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

While the patriotism and support for veterans of these two companies are central to their brand identities, they reveal interesting problems and tensions in their understandings of patriotism and support for veterans. The kitschy nature of their slogans and designs reveals not only an absence of careful thought about the nature of patriotism, but easily conflate it with partisan messaging. Further, their attachment to right-wing causes through sloganeering and punchlines forces a particular adherence to a party line and causes them to be punished for not following sufficiently. Kitsch also allows them to create designs that hide racist codings that can be hard to notice for someone lacking the semiotic knowledge.

### **Patriotic Kitsch and Partisan Dog-Whistles**

GS makes certain statements in their “Mission” about the “American fighting spirit” and “loving freedom.” Their motto is “PRIDE IN SELF, IN MILITARY, AND IN COUNTRY” and their range of products that exhibit their nationalistic and militaristic themes. Some of their offerings resemble the “patriotic kitsch” common at political rallies, sporting events, and even memorials to tragic events.<sup>74</sup> While some may view this commercialization of patriotism

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<sup>73</sup> Scanlon, “‘Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore’: U.S. Consumers, Walmart, and the Commodification of Patriotism.”

<sup>74</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

offensive, others may view the same as being in-line with American entrepreneurialism.<sup>75</sup> But whatever one's judgment of profiting off of patriotism, the fact remains that it sells and has had a place in American commerce since the early days of the United States.<sup>76</sup>

This patriotic kitsch, like kitsch more broadly, relies on easy formulas that combine predictable and banal imagery or slogans and encourage sentimental connections. This even includes the triteness of the mottos displayed on GS's website. According to cultural studies scholar Marita Sturken, kitsch plays an important role in how American political culture addresses tragedy and attempts to avoid discussion as it "conveys a kind of deliberate and highly constructed innocence, one that dictates sentimental responses and emotional registers."<sup>77</sup> So a t-shirt that displays American flag motifs along with "1776" and "We the People" are only meant to "produce predetermined and conscribed emotional responses, to encourage pathos and sympathy, not anger and outrage."<sup>78</sup> The wearers of these products are seeking these predictable emotional responses related to patriotism for themselves and like-minded peers. Of course some of GS's products are designed to provoke outrage in others in a "trolling" manner, but that does not undercut Sturken's overall point.<sup>79</sup> The consumers of the more anodyne designs can plausibly separate themselves from the more confrontational slogans. As is common among VetBros, they can shift between being respectful and confrontational with no apparent loss of sincerity.

This sentimentalism and "highly constructed innocence" around patriotism also aligns with a more populist notion of it. It is an "abstract notion of populism" that does not require any

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<sup>75</sup> Molly Hurley and James Trimarco, "Morality and Merchandise: Vendors, Visitors and Police at New York City's Ground Zero," *Critique of Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (2004): 62-66.

<sup>76</sup> O'Leary, *To Die For*, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 21-22.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Nycyk, "Trolls and Trolling History: From Subculture to Mainstream Practices," in *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, ed. Niels Bruggen and Ian Milligan (UK: SAGE, 2019).

specific markers of what counts as “populist,” just the exclamation of it.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, patriotic kitsch requires no theory or doctrine behind it, just its display. To be an American patriot in this sense requires letting everyone know that you are a patriot.<sup>81</sup> For Sturken, “kitsch is the primary aesthetic style of patriotic American culture, indeed that American political culture can be defined by and thrives on a kind of kitsch aesthetic.”<sup>82</sup> And this is the political culture that GS and BRCC feed (and feed off of): purposefully over-simplistic expressions of patriotism that are meant to be displayed and not discussed.

Drawing from Michael Billig’s idea of “banal nationalism” Sturken states “the banality of kitsch is deeply integral to the banal nationalism. In the United States, kitsch is the dominant political style of a nation that is deeply wedded to and abstract notion of populism which is distinct from the people, a sense of populism that is so kitschy that it can be easily inhabited by a president who is a member of the elite.”<sup>83</sup> Using Sturken’s formula here, the “thank you for your service” culture is an abstract notion of militarism that is distinct from providing support to the military, service member or veterans. It relies on kitsch (yellow ribbons, free meals on Veterans Day) that effectively display support without needing to consider the violent effects of militarism.

Patriotic kitsch is also an abstract notion of patriotism as it requires no additional thought or content about deeper meanings. It is an expression of devotion and therefore loyalty. But as has been the case for much of the kitschy patriotic culture after 9/11, this patriotism demands

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<sup>80</sup> Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 25.

<sup>81</sup> Scanlon, “‘Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You Into Heaven Anymore’: U.S. Consumers, Wal-Mart, and the Commodification of Patriotism,” 178-179.

<sup>82</sup> Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 25.

<sup>83</sup> Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 25. Sturken was obviously referring to then-President George W. Bush here, but this easily applies to Donald Trump as well.

explicit support for the military and overseas military operations. As Jennifer Scanlon noted in the period following the 9/11 attacks, it is not enough to be a patriot, one must show their patriotism to everyone else and that being a patriot means supporting war.<sup>84</sup>

Looking again at some of GS's products, they include designs that are intended to simply pair the Grunt Style logo with the logos of the various military services. Some GS t-shirts use the official color schemes of t-shirts worn underneath US military utility uniforms, so it is possible to wear it while in uniform (provided the service-member does not remove their utility blouse). And some of the customer photos GS post on their website and Instagram feed show just this: uniformed service members wearing GS shirts underneath their service blouses while on duty.

These are the least problematic of Grunt Style's merchandise. They are attempting to strike a positive connection between the brand and the US military. Similar to these are shirts with general patriotic expressions. These generally use variations of the US flag, to include the current 50-star flag, the "Old Glory" (i.e., the original 13-star flag), or simply red, white, and blue/stars and stripes motifs. Related to this are the shirts recognizing first responders such as firefighters and police, as well as designs commemorating events such as the attacks against the US on September 11, 2001. These all fit into this broader "patriotism" theme and really do not exhibit any additional nationalistic, militaristic, or partisan political ideas. They are kitschy in that they are both banal and easily recognizable, and neither make a broader political statement.

But other designs signaling patriotism are not so benign, and some signal specific political points of view. Similar in structure to the "Never Forget Sept. 11, 2001" design mentioned above is a "Never Forget Sept. 11, 2012" shirt. This is the date of the attack on the US

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<sup>84</sup> Scanlon, "'Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore': U.S. Consumers, Wal-Mart, and the Commodification of Patriotism," 178-181.

embassy in Benghazi, Libya in which four American foreign service officers were killed. While obviously a tragic event, this attack became a rallying cry within right-wing media and political circles to criticize then Secretary of State and later Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. So, even as it can be taken on face-value to commemorate the loss of four members of the US foreign service, the political connotation is still anti-Hillary Clinton or, at the very least, supportive of Republican lawmakers investigating the attack. This “wink-and-nod” to partisan politics will be quickly noticed by other partisans and maybe even their detractors, while being ignored or found to be incomprehensible to people who do not make the connection. It is a type of identity signaling using methods familiar to online “trolling.”<sup>85</sup>

While their patriotic imagery is most apparent, GS’s militaristic ideals are similarly displayed in many of the graphics t-shirts, including some that are presented in a comical or humorous way. They both promote violence and make fun of it. Designs such as the “Ammo Flag,” “Favorite Things,” and “Messy Buns & Guns” (all described above) do show a particular affinity towards firearms and shooting, but really do not fit into the overall militaristic ideals. But designs such as “Talk Sh\*\* Get Hit” (described above) or “Body-Stackers Union” show an acceptance of or even encouragement for violent overseas military action. Even though GS designers use humor to promote these ideas, this is not satire—it does not diminish the overall support for the ideas. In other words, their humor is not intended to discredit or insult the concepts raised by the designs; humor in these cases shows commitment to the cause by downplaying the seriousness of the consequences.

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<sup>85</sup> Nycyk, “Trolls and Trolling History: From Subculture to Mainstream Practices.”



## Coffee and (Right-Wing) Culture

BRCC explicitly states on its website that its products are for American patriots: “Black Rifle Coffee Company is a veteran-owned coffee company serving premium coffee to people who love America.” In other places they state that they are “serving premium coffee and culture to people who love America.” They also directly connect the company to military service, even emphasizing that the company is “SOF [Special Operations Forces] Veteran-owned,” implicitly connecting the quality of the products to military service. BRCC’s overall militaristic ideals are also displayed through the naming conventions of their coffee roasts by giving them the names of weapons, military vehicles, and other military or first-responder themes. As shown through some of CEO/founder Hafer’s public messaging, these military themes are more than a marketing strategy, but reveal a belief in the utility and value of violence and war.

In the video of Hafer that is prominently part of BRCC’s “About Us” page (discussed above), he explicitly states that war is, or at least can be, a good thing. The very first words Hafer speaks in the video make this clear: “War shows you who you are. You get to see your intellectual capacity, your physical capacity, your emotional capacity. I went to war and war changed me; it changed me for the better.”<sup>86</sup> Here, Hafer presents a direct refutation of a more common narrative of war’s damaging effects to the individual soldier who may have PTSD. Much like the Navy SEALs in Chapter 1, he argues for the desirability of war. War, in this view, can make people better.

In many ways this resembles a pre-modern understanding among elites of war as being essential for testing or proving oneself in combat or that can reveal the true nature of life.<sup>87</sup> Hafer

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<sup>86</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, “It’s Who We Are: Evan Hafer,” 0:10-0:29.

<sup>87</sup> Yuval N. Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4-6.

also uses the narrative that veterans are coming home “physically and psychologically broken” and not being appreciated by the larger civilian society.<sup>88</sup> There is no tension between these two extreme views in Hafer’s telling. War is good and it makes people like him better. It also leaves some “physically and psychologically broken.” But the problem here is not the war, but the civilian society that does not respect war and the people who fought. Civilian society’s lack of respect is the problem.

The Fox News and other conservative media appearances of BRCC’s Hafer and Mat Best are the most obvious expressions of how they conflate militarism, patriotism, and right-wing politics. As seen in their attacks on Starbucks, they use these media appearances to burnish their relevant credentials: support for the military and veterans and police, animosity towards outsiders or those who do not agree, and a particular display of conservative taste politics. Hafer uses Starbucks as a symbol of what he calls “West Coast elitist, progressive culture.”<sup>89</sup> It becomes an easily recognizable foil against which Hafer and BRCC can contrast themselves.

As with the Oklahoma City case, when a uniformed officer had “PIG” written on his drink order, Hafer is able to show that BRCC (unlike “hipster” coffee chains like Starbucks) supports the police. This falls completely in-line with the values of Fox News and their viewers. Starbucks then becomes a symbol of the cultural enemies of Fox News and BRCC shows that their company is part of the fight in these culture wars. The image of the hipster is quite frequent in right-wing social media spaces as an effete, pretentious snob who looks down at the more traditional, working-class culture. (Of course, no self-respecting hipster would drink Starbucks.)

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<sup>88</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, “It’s Who We Are: Evan Hafer,” 4:35.

<sup>89</sup> Parke, “Veteran-Owned Coffee Company Donates to Oklahoma Police Bashed by Starbucks Barista.”

Just like the lumbersexual style that VetBros borrow from, it is a reaction to the image of the hipster.

Placing the company and the brand at the center of prominent culture wars is risky. And the dangers of such a move are clearly evident in the fallout of the Rittenhouse event for BRCC. Because Hafer and BRCC had placed so much stock in promoting their role as conservative culture warriors, their target audience assumed that BRCC would stay true to form by outwardly assisting the new “battle” in the culture wars over Rittenhouse. By simply not taking a stand, BRCC effectively alienated themselves from many regular customers and even more potential customers, even if only for a limited time.<sup>90</sup>

### **Racism and Islamophobia as Militaristic Nationalism**

One theme that is seemingly limited to GS is their use of Islamophobic hints or “dog-whistles” that are apparent to some and seemingly innocuous to others. It functions in similar ways to other conservative and nationalistic rhetoric. To be clear, nothing in these products is explicitly Islamophobic. But I argue that the symbols used can be recognized by some as containing Islamophobic messages, something common during the Post-9/11 Wars.

Afghanistan and Iraq are majority Muslim countries, and the wars fought there mostly against various Islamic extremist groups. Some of these groups were more nationalist in their origins and intentions, but even they tended to use the language of Islam in their public statements. Former prominent leaders of these organizations such as Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahri, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have typically referred to US soldiers as “infidels” who are “desecrating” Islam and Islamic holy sites. Rather than attempting to disabuse Afghan or Iraqi civilians of this, many US service-members (and their civilian supporters) have embraced

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<sup>90</sup> Weill, “This Gun Coffee Brand Was MAGA Royalty. Then It Turned on Kyle Rittenhouse.”

the label. For whatever their motivations, they chose to call themselves “infidels” as a badge of honor.<sup>91</sup> So, using this word on a t-shirt design specifically caters to the particular type of person who would want to align themselves in this way as fighting against Muslims.

There are also several references to bacon on GS’s website and in several of their products. These seem to stem from a belief that because Muslims do not eat pork as a matter of religious dietary restrictions, eating bacon would be seen as offensive to Muslims or otherwise “unclean.” In both the Home page and the “About Us” page there is the line “You don’t have to be a veteran to wear Grunt Style, but you do have to love freedom, bacon, and whiskey.” This connection between conspicuous use of pork and anti-Muslim sentiments has had traction in anti-Muslim spaces for some time. For example, a popular (completely false) story claims that during the Moro Rebellion against the US occupation in the Philippines, General Pershing executed Muslim insurgents then buried their bodies with slaughtered pigs, which would then apparently deny their souls a place in heaven.<sup>92</sup> And, according to this story, this put so much fear in the hearts of the insurgents that Pershing’s tactics helped stop the Moro Rebellion.<sup>93</sup>

Prohibitions against eating pork are also a part of the dietary practices of other religions, but for some reason bacon and other pork products seem to come up in many occasions of documented hate crimes against Muslims. For example, in 2015 in Philadelphia, a caretaker at a local mosque found a severed pig’s head at the entrance of his mosque early in the morning.<sup>94</sup> In 2016 in Bristol, England a group of four individuals tied a St. George flag to the fence of a

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<sup>91</sup> Personally, I recall seeing the word “infidel” written on helmets and vehicles in Iraq in 2003.

<sup>92</sup> Jonathan M. Katz, “What General Pershing Was Really Doing in the Philippines,” *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2017.

<sup>93</sup> President Trump was fond of telling this story to support aggressive military actions overseas.

<sup>94</sup> David Chang and Asher Klein, “Caretaker Finds Severed Pig’s Head Outside Philly Mosque,” *NBC 4 Washington, D.C.*, Dec. 7, 2015.

mosque with the words “NO MOSQUES” written on it, and threw bacon sandwiches at the building and some worshipers entering.<sup>95</sup> And in 2017 in Florida, a man was sentenced to a 15-year prison sentence for vandalizing a mosque. Part of his attack on the building included leaving three pounds of raw bacon on and near the front door.<sup>96</sup> These are just a few of the attacks against mosques and Islamic community centers that involved pork products of some type. In every one of these cases, the attacks and vandalism, not the bacon, were what mattered to the community and caused them to fear for their safety. But the fact that these anti-Muslim attackers purposefully chose to use pork products as part of their racist assaults shows that it has some sort of salience among Islamophobes.<sup>97</sup>

No one at GS or anyone else would ever explicitly connect the references to bacon on their website and their apparel to bias against Muslims. And it is possible that people looking at the website or the shirts themselves miss the references or think nothing of them and then purchase those t-shirts out of a genuine affinity for cured pork products. Journalist and former Navy officer Adam Weinstein observed that “‘guns and bacon’ is like its own VetBro genre.”<sup>98</sup> He made this comment in response to a short video of someone shooting an AK-47 with raw bacon wrapped around the barrel. The heat from shooting the rifle caused the bacon to sizzle. This appearance of harmless fun (and I am certain that is all it is for most) gives cover to those with less benign motives.

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<sup>95</sup> “‘Vile’ Bacon Sandwich attack on Bristol Mosque Condemned,” *BBC News*, Jan. 18, 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Lauren Gill, “A Man Who Left Bacon in a Mosque Will Serve 15 Years in Prison for the Hate Crime,” *Newsweek*, Dec. 7, 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew Sedacca, “The History of Food as a Weapon of Hate,” *Eater*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.eater.com/2016/1/20/10790614/bacon-mosque-hate-crime>.

<sup>98</sup> Adam Weinstein [@AdamWeinstein], “@BlutoTweets @johnarmenta ‘Guns and Bacon’ Is like Its Own Vetbro Genre <https://t.co/le8yBFHpe6>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, September 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AdamWeinstein/status/1308248462903959552>.

These Islamophobic “dog-whistles” fit in with a type of “trolling” behavior that is all too common in online communities and right-wing media. The references of “bacon” and “infidel” used in GS products and advertising copy are designed to be somewhat provocative and purposefully not obvious. Much like the “Benghazi” shirt, few will immediately recognize the reference’s connotations. And this includes people who purchase the items or who have a little chuckle at the advertising copy. If they are accosted for their “Infidel” shirt, they are more likely to reply, “It’s just a t-shirt!” and get angry at the person challenging them. As Hedwig Lieback argues, this is part of the troll’s playbook: attempting to provoke outrage in others in order to demonstrate their own superiority.<sup>99</sup> Lieback argues that trolling is not simply anti-social behavior limited to online spaces as most mainstream media criticism of the behavior suggests. This characterization, she argues, minimizes the very real effects that it can have when employed by deft political actors. In particular, a troll (online or offline) can delegitimize their opponents as “emotional” or “not serious” by provoking outrage.<sup>100</sup>

The humor generally involves a sense of irreverence, especially around social norms but also patriotism and militarism itself. Light-hearted references to killing the enemy demonstrate both aggression but also an idea of defending the country. The rhetoric of both defending the vulnerable and aggression against outsiders are typical, even if sometimes contradictory, elements of militarized masculinity.<sup>101</sup> Some designs, such as the “F Your Feelings” design

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<sup>99</sup> Hedwig Lieback, “Truth-Telling and Trolls: Trolling, Political Rhetoric in the the Twenty-First Century, and the Objectivity Norm,” *aspeers*, Vol. 12, 2019, 22-25.

<sup>100</sup> Lieback, “Truth-Telling and Trolls: Trolling, Political Rhetoric in the Twenty-First Century, and the Objectivity Norm.”

<sup>101</sup> Kimberly Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 4 (2008).

display a corresponding sense individuality and unconcern with the opinions of others. Additionally, it shows a certain degree of knowledge of online “meme” culture.<sup>102</sup>

### Current Issues

The public embarrassments and trip-ups in a political minefield do not seem all so egregious when compared to similar blunders made by their non-veteran competitors for revelations of bad behavior. The difference here is that because these companies have attempted to claim to be the voice for the veteran community, regardless of whether other veterans want them to be or not, their public behaviors seemingly reflect on the larger veteran population. Even though these companies do not speak for all veterans, because they have established themselves as “the voice” for the wider veteran community the association becomes assumed even if unwarranted. Army veteran and writer Matt Farwell sees these VetBro entrepreneurs as following the examples of generals who land jobs with defense contractors: just another racket, an extension of their wartime service.<sup>103</sup>

For the most part, GS will face little backlash for its potentially racist imagery or toxic workplace behavior because the people who would take issue with these things are already not in the company’s target audience. And so long as the product meets the needs and style of its customers, the CEO of GS will matter little. Interestingly, in some of their more recent public communications GS has already signaled a shift in its understandings of patriotism. In a video released on Thanksgiving Day, 2020, the narrator asks “What is patriotism? What does it mean?” The narrator answers this rhetorical question first by saying that “to many it means being proud

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<sup>102</sup> Lisa Silvestri, “Mortars and Memes: Participating in Pop Culture from a War Zone,” *Media, War & Conflict* 9, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>103</sup> Matt Farwell, “We Have Reached Peak VetBro Brand,” *The New Republic*, January 17, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/156236/reached-peak-vetbro-brand>.

of the greatest nation on Earth,” but the tone shifts. The narrator follows this by saying that it also means service to others and taking responsibility.<sup>104</sup> And a recent recruiting video discusses the importance of respect and diversity for all employees at GS, possibly referring to the accusations of a hostile workplace under the former CEO Alarik.<sup>105</sup>

But the case of BRCC and Rittenhouse shows a different problem of attempting to associate a brand with a particular type of political conservative militaristic patriotism. Because BRCC has established its brand as the conservative alternative to “West Coast elitist, progressive culture” coffee, their alleged betrayal of their stated ideals caused a backlash from their own customers.<sup>106</sup> Beyond the accusations of capitulating to “wokeness” or the “liberal mob,” according to Hafer, BRCC lost between 3,000 and 6,000 subscribers to their coffee club.<sup>107</sup> This initially seemed to be a bigger problem because the coffee club subscriptions represent a predictable source of sales each month and the subscribers are also among BRCC’s biggest spenders on both coffee and non-coffee merchandise. This episode was mockingly called the “Great VetBro Coffee War of 2021.”<sup>108</sup>

But less than a year later BRCC had a successful Initial Public Offering and raised over \$1 billion. However, after the IPO BRCC’s share price lost considerable value. They are now being sued for financial mismanagement. This is one of several legal issues facing BRCC. The

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<sup>104</sup> Grunt Style, *What Does Patriotism Mean To You?*, Video, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoCVYckD-P4>.

<sup>105</sup> Grunt Style, *GS Production Recruiting Video*, Video, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DPhECKtvWg>.

<sup>106</sup> Parke, “Veteran-Owned Coffee Company Donates to Oklahoma Police Bashed by Starbucks Barista.”

<sup>107</sup> Zengerle, “Can the Black Rifle Coffee Company Become the Starbucks of the Right?”

<sup>108</sup> Jack Murphy, “The Great Vet Bro Coffee War of 2021,” audacity.com, *Connecting Vets* (blog), July 19, 2021, <https://www.audacity.com/connectingvets/news/opinion-analysis/the-veteran-coffee-company-internet-war-of-2021-has-begun>.



company and Hafer personally are also being sued for a number of workplace harassment claims. Another set of lawsuits more specifically deal with the claims that BRCC is a conservative company. In these, the company is being sued due to the fact that a former Obama administration official has been named to the Board of Directors.

Both BRCC and GS are confronting the fact that their respective apparel was seen being worn by some of the participants in the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, riot, and attempted insurrection at the US Capitol.<sup>109</sup> Most prominently, a man dubbed “zip-tie guy” was photographed walking in the gallery of the Senate carrying flex-cuffs wearing a BRCC ball cap.



Image 22 “Protestor carrying flex cuffs in Senate gallery,” by Win McNamee, Jan 6, 2021.

It is unclear if the people seen wearing the shirts and ball caps of these companies are regular customers or only bought the apparel for their planned participation in the January 6 events. Regardless, the apparel sold by GS and BRCC resonated in a particular way with the January 6<sup>th</sup> participants that caused them to want to wear it to the event. While BRCC has stayed quiet about

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<sup>109</sup> Brandon Lingle, “S.A. Firms’ Gear Popular with Mob at Capitol,” *San Antonio Express-News*, January 18, 2021.

their apparel being seen among the rioters, GS quickly and unequivocally denounced and distanced themselves from the rioters.<sup>110</sup>

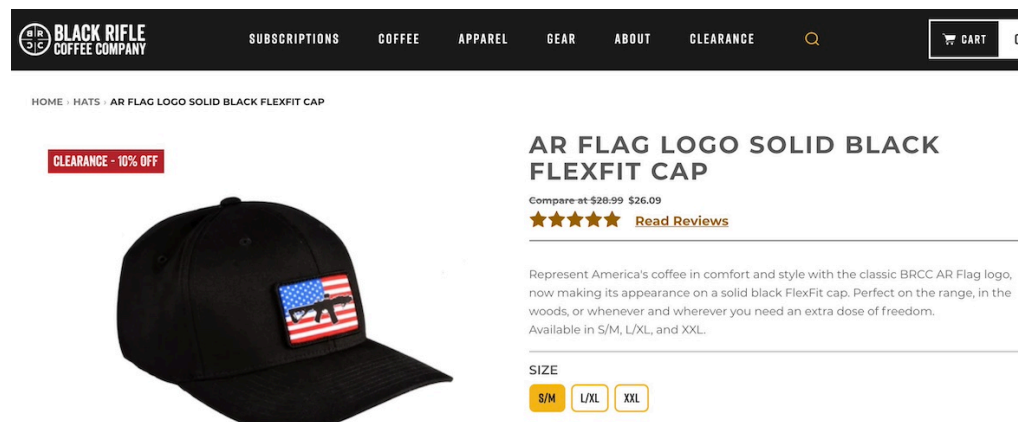


Image 23 Screenshot from blackriflecoffee.com. Image shows “AR Flag Logo” cap, portions of online store. Ad copy includes “Representing America’s coffee in comfort and style with the classic BRCC AR Flag logo...Perfect on the range, in the woods, or whenever and wherever you need an extra dose of freedom.”

Many of the products offered by Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company are innocuous and of little real harm. Much of what these companies offer are simply a company logo slapped on a shirt or a bag of coffee with an American flag; at worst they are tacky or in poor taste. But the companies themselves are as much products as the items they produce. Due to the corporate organizing and communications strategies favored by lifestyle brands, these companies intertwine their corporate management and communications with their products and customer relations. The products and their messages can then be seen to express support for the other messages and actions of the company to include its politics.

The innocuous and noxious products work together, the former gives cover for the latter. Similarly, the corporate messaging works alongside the products themselves; the values put forward by the companies are displayed in their product lines. They claim to make products for all Americans, but they force a narrow understanding of who Americans are and what they value.

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<sup>110</sup> Lingle, “S.A. Firms’ Gear Popular with Mob at Capitol.”

These companies, their products, their images they wish to portray, and the VetBro style exist in an environment of prescribed patriotism, militarization, and fetishization of the military and military veterans. And they are attempting to turn these into a “lifestyle.”

The lifestyle brand model and these companies use of it does raise questions and concerns about the objects which they are designing their lifestyles around. Lifestyle Brands typically focus on activities and associated looks. Even the lumbersexual was about a look and associated activities even though we can see that it semiotically functions as a reaction to perceived violation in gender norms. The VetBro companies here present patriotism itself as the lifestyle. It is not an attitude or belief, but a way of life. How they then present their models (idealized customers) is also how they present what patriotism *looks* like. This removes patriotism from its object of devotion (the political system) and places it onto an identity defined by various ways of behaving. Patriotism is already an abstract concept, and patriotism as a lifestyle further abstracts it.

In a study of social media spaces dedicated to teaching methods of beard care and promoting beard care products, Christopher Schneider notes a certain irony in the very existence of a beard care industry. Beards hold a great deal of symbolic significance for expressing masculinity and counter-cultural status. These companies all promote the beard as just that: masculinity and individuality. These companies use social media to promote not only their products but also the symbolic significance of beards. This turns them into “a 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of the culture industry—an industry that is set in a mediated communication order, *where the audience and content are often the same.*”<sup>111</sup> Following Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique

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<sup>111</sup> Schneider, “I Wish I Could Grow a Full Beard,” 304. Emphasis in original.

and analysis of culture industries Schneider argues that by selling beard products as an ideal of masculinity, the beard loses its masculine function.

For BRCC and GS to sell patriotism as an identity, as a lifestyle, they effectively strip away the actual function of patriotism: to love a country and defend its political order. By equating patriotism with its public expressions and not with working for the betterment of society, these public expressions lose their patriotic function. This is the problem of crafting patriotism as an exclusionary practice into a lifestyle. Patriotism is no longer defined by one's relationship to the country and its system of government but by a set of practices; one's patriotic credentials are then measured by their adherence to the set of practices. If someone is not presenting their patriotism properly, then they are not a "real" patriot in this manner of thinking.<sup>112</sup> More problematically, it requires little further work. There is no need to better the country if the country is already perfect.

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In this chapter I have examined how these VetBro companies position themselves in their respective markets and design their image and products around a certain sense of militaristic-patriotic-masculinity. The two companies featured here are the outfitters of the VetBro style. By taking the business and marketing strategies of lifestyle brands they have embedded the politics of the VetBro and not just the aesthetic tastes. Like any retail goods company, these companies have reacted to ideas that were already popular (i.e., the VetBro aesthetic) and they have attempted to create a place for themselves within this framework that is both unique while still fitting with the broader idea.

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<sup>112</sup> Scanlon, "'Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore': U.S. Consumers, Wal-Mart, and the Commodification of Patriotism."

These companies are not unique in the military veteran-themed marketplace. There are other companies that use the same types of patriotism, militarism, and masculinist themes to promote their particular brands that also fit with the VetBro aesthetic. Some of these companies are direct competitors to Black Rifle Coffee and Grunt Style, while others are in entirely different markets but still appealing to the VetBro style. What makes these two companies stand out is their relative size and prominence in their respective markets. But they all see themselves as having a similar, if not the same, target audience: (mostly) men who are military veterans or are still serving and who want to plainly display their connection to military service, patriotism, and with views of masculinity. A large portion of their secondary audience are people who have not served but wish to signal to others that they support the militarism, patriotism, and hegemonic masculinity of the primary audience. Also, as with other military-themed products, sometimes it is the parents or wives or girlfriends of these types of men who are the ones making the purchases, possibly with little understanding of the imagery.<sup>113</sup>

As with any fashion trend, the VetBro “look” will have a limited life. It is difficult to imagine what the fashion trend will replace the VetBro look. As these style choices become more and more mainstream, they become less distinctive for the subculture to set itself apart (a problem for many subcultures). For the target demographic of military-age men with strong feelings of patriotism and masculine entitlement, there will most likely be a desire for clothing or a particular style to express those even if (really, when) the VetBro subculture dissipates. And the end of “active” combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq may hasten the end of the VetBro look for whatever its replacement will be.

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<sup>113</sup> Rachel Woodward and Neil K. Jenkins, “Military Memoirs, Their Covers and the Reproduction of Public Narratives of War,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, (2012): 365.

As shown in Chapter 2 on memoirs by US Navy SEALs, these conceptions of militaristic patriotism tied to an overtly aggressive masculinity are not limited to these retail products and reflect a broader ideology among some veterans and their civilian supporters. From the products and the public communications of these companies we can see what the VetBro wants to express about patriotism, militarism, and masculinity. But it is more than an expression of their beliefs and values they want to be seen as the type of person who believes these things. Humor also functions as a way to create some degree of separation between the message and potential negative connotations. More importantly, like the humor presented in the previous chapter, it works to delineate membership in the “in-group” of veterans.

By attempting the lifestyle brand business model, Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company show that being a VetBro may have life outside of a fad or trend and that the identity’s look may evolve even as its ideology and politics remains stable. These companies have connected their products to conservative causes and many like-minded people enjoy the companies’ sloganeering, as demonstrated with the number of their products seen during the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. This shows the problems raised by catchy sloganeering and patriotic kitsch and how that can be twisted to support attempts for the overthrow of government with no obvious loss of sincerity. How VetBros understand patriotism and their commitment to the US is clearly a political matter. This will be seen clearly as I turn from juvenile humor and catchphrases to campaign slogans and political speeches.

## **5. “I’ll fight for you in Congress just as hard as I fought for you in uniform:”**

### **VetBro Politicians**

During the Post-9/11 Wars, the claimed lack of veteran representation in Congress was seen to impair the proper legislative oversight of the wars and even said to be a reason for increased partisanship in Congress. The overwhelming public support for the military and “thank you for your service” culture caused many political observers and activists to push the idea that the country needs more military veterans in elected office. But the realities of more veterans gaining elected office will depend on their political beliefs and how they value their civilian peers. More veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars in Congress will indeed change Civil-Military Relations and civilian control over the military, but again it is the particular politics of the veteran that will shape how this will change.

As with other trends involving veterans, the VetBro style of aggressively masculine patriotism is now part of elected politics. VetBros are using their veteran identity to win votes in elected office and are promoting their understanding of militaristic patriotism. In this chapter I show, as in previous chapters, how VetBros try to communicate themselves as being necessarily distinct and different than civilians—here it is a concerted effort to highlight these perceived differences for political power by insisting on a supposedly unique perspective and its value to civilians. This political power can possibly shift the balance of civilian control over the military due to how VetBros understand war and the military as an institution.

In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress (2021-2023) there were 74 veterans serving in the US House of Representatives and 17 in the Senate, 50 of whom served in the Post 9/11 period, including 37 who served in Afghanistan or Iraq. All but 25 ran for reelection in 2022, to include retirements and Senators not up for re-election. There were another 130 veterans running as challengers or in

open seats in the House or Senate in the November 2022 general election for a total of 195 veterans running for Congress—more than a third of all races. Dozens more lost their primary bids and even more ran in state and municipal offices. This is remarkable considering veterans make up only about 10% of the total population.

Throughout this dissertation I have shown different veterans telling stories about themselves and their military service; they claim they are just providing the perspective of a veteran. And sometimes these perspectives are subtly racist or sexist, but they use the position of “just providing the perspective of a veteran” to dodge responsibility for accountability for their politics. The veterans featured in this chapter engage in electoral politics by telling stories about their military service and how it has shaped them and made them the better candidate for election. And good campaign communication is about telling a story that resonates with voters.

Scholars of campaign communications (and rhetoric more broadly) have shown the importance and persuasiveness of narrative-based structures (e.g., stories about the candidate, testimonials from voters) as opposed to more “informational” structures. Because a narrative is a story, the audience is less likely to resist the message, according to the prevailing theories.<sup>1</sup> Others have noted that narrative accounts as opposed to informational accounts in news stories can shift audience’s stances on issues.<sup>2</sup> These narratives are intended to be persuasive but appear as if it is only a story about someone’s life or experience.<sup>3</sup> Another benefit of a story or narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Fuyuan Shen, Lee Ahern, and Michelle Baker, “Stories That Count: Influence of News Narratives on Issue Attitudes,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Michail Vafeiadis, Ruobing Li, and Fuyuan Shen, “Narratives in Political Advertising: An Analysis of the Political Advertisements in the 2014 Midterm Elections,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 62, no. 2 (2018).



in political communication is that it allows a candidate to connect on a more emotional level with potential voters (and donors).

Key to any candidate's campaign is the story of the candidate's life and motivation for running. They do not just state "I am running because I have the best qualifications and ideas." They engage the audience to be involved in their story and even connect their story to other narratives with which the audience may already be familiar. So, for veterans, especially these VetBros, they talk about their service in the military, love of country, and being compelled to run for office due to a sense of duty.

Veterans who run for office (not just VetBros) use their military background in different ways while campaigning. Discussions of military service can be divided into two types: as part of their biography or as proof of policy expertise. These are often referred to in scholarship on political communications as "image/character" or "issue/policy" arguments. Campaign communications are about making a candidate preferable and establishing difference between the candidate and their opponents. Using military service to establish difference and preference shows how a candidate considers the importance and meaning of that service. It shows how they believe voters will best judge their character, expertise, and ability to represent them in office.

By the end of this chapter, I will demonstrate how some of the rhetoric used by these military veteran candidates may signal current and future problems with Civil-Military Relations more broadly. Some of these veterans view the political process in strictly warlike terms and describe political opponents as an existential threat to the country—they understand patriotism itself in terms of fighting the nation's enemies. Many seem highly attached to the idea that they took oaths to defend the county. The intensity of this attachment may have even led some to participate and support (or at least not condemn) the January 6, 2021, insurrection.

## Researching Veterans in Political Office

### History of Military Veterans in Congress

Veterans have been part of American political life since the country's beginning. The first members of Congress and state legislatures were almost entirely veterans of the Revolution or earlier conflicts. Up until the 1980s anywhere from half to three-quarters of the members of the US Congress were military veterans. Of course, they were mostly officers (i.e., white, college-educated men) who served during times of a conscription military. As the World War II cohort began to retire from public office, there were not as many veterans from subsequent wars to replace them. And since 1987, fewer than half of the members of Congress have been veterans.

Historian Michael D. Gambone writes that veteran status is a “gold standard in American politics.”<sup>4</sup> Traditional wisdom among election analysts is that military veterans make for better candidates based on the positive images and stereotypes of the military and veterans (and perhaps a poor understanding of electoral politics). Some even argue that veterans make better members of Congress as well due to the assumption that their military service shows they can put the nation before their own self. But Gambone shows veterans are just as susceptible to partisanship and corruption as their non-veteran peers in Congress.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the veracity of these claims about veterans' superiority in electoral politics, politicians and political operatives have used them to advance election campaigns and raise donations.

In the 2006 Congressional elections the Democratic Party made a concerted effort to run veterans, “The Fighting Dems,” in their bid to tap into anti-war sentiment without appearing anti-military.<sup>6</sup> But their focus on running veterans in traditionally strong Republican areas meant they

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<sup>4</sup> Michael D. Gambone, *The New Praetorians: American Veterans, Society, and Service from Vietnam to the Forever War*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Gambone, *The New Praetorians*, 119-128.

<sup>6</sup> Gambone, *The New Praetorians*, 129-130.

had little success. Only a handful of the almost 50 veterans running as Democratic candidates in 2006 won their races, but it signaled the beginning of institutional support by a major party to find, train, and support military veterans as candidates. While the Republican Party maintained a slight edge in veteran representation among its candidates, in 2018 they set up their own official organizations to help find and support military veterans as first-time candidates.

For many, the idea that veterans make for better candidates and politicians seems to be self-evident and they state it with little evidence. And there is not much research establishing this one way or the other. In fact, political scientists who study veterans in electoral politics often note the limitations of the scholarship. In 1948, Albert Somit wrote one of the earliest political science papers arguing that veterans, specifically “military heroes,” win more elections.<sup>7</sup> As it is only focused on the election outcomes of Presidents between 1828 and 1916 it really cannot demonstrate the claim in any conclusive matter. Also, Somit distinguishes between “military hero” and those who served honorably but without any particular distinction. More recent scholarship directly refutes the proposition and questions the validity of Somit’s methods.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary political scientists who study veterans seeking political office have more nuanced views. Some research does seem to indicate that veterans have an electoral advantage, but only in certain cases. One study on veteran status and electoral preferences shows that voters do not change their perceptions of leadership ability based on military experience, but they do see veteran candidates as better able to handle defense and security issues.<sup>9</sup> Other experimental

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<sup>7</sup> Albert Somit, “The Military Hero as Presidential Candidate,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Karsten, “Veteran Electability to the Presidency: A Critique of the Somit Thesis,” *Armed Forces & Society* 38, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy M. Teigen, “Military Experience in Elections and Perceptions of Issue Competence: An Experimental Study with Television Ads,” *Armed Forces & Society* 39, no. 3 (2013).

research shows that military service alone does not “boost” candidates, but it does act as an information “shortcut” for some voters.<sup>10</sup> The researchers demonstrate that stereotypes about military service help voters infer information about the candidate’s competence on certain matters as well as their policy preferences. But this only matters electorally, it seems, among voters who have more interventionist politics when considering Democratic Party candidates who are veterans.<sup>11</sup> And an analysis of election results between 1982 and 2016 shows that the electoral advantage for veterans only applies to veterans in the Democratic Party who have been deployed to war zones and are running in open Senate races.<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not veterans are better candidates and more electable, there is a related line of thought that insists veterans are better when in Congress. Often this is an assertion based on little more than the common perception of the positive qualities possessed by veterans, specifically that they will put the country’s needs before their own self-interest as evidenced by their military service. Some base their belief that veterans are better for the country on a sense of nostalgia for a past period of Congressional politics. William Galston of the Brookings Institution has called the decades after World War II, when close to 70% of the members of Congress were veterans, a “golden era” of politics. “So many members of Congress had seen military service and appreciated other representatives—regardless of party—because they had a common experience of patriotism, duty and sacrifice.”<sup>13</sup> Confusing causation and correlation, Galston argues that the

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<sup>10</sup> Monika L. McDermott and Costas Panagopoulos, “Be All That You Can Be: The Electoral Impact of Military Service as an Information Cue,” *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>11</sup> McDermott and Panagopoulos, “Be All That You Can Be,” 302.

<sup>12</sup> David K. Richardson, “The Electoral Impact of Military Experience: Evidence From U.S. Senate Elections (1982–2016),” *Armed Forces & Society* 48, no. 4 (2022).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Diannie Chavez, “Thank a Veteran? Good Luck Finding One in Congress, as Numbers Dwindle,” *Cronkite News - Arizona PBS* (blog), November 11, 2021,

large number of veterans in Congress resulted in the greater degree of “civility” in political discourse. This line of thought remains quite popular for organizations seeking donations to support the elections of veterans.

More tangible measures of veterans’ performance in Congress do show some differences when compared to non-veterans but again only in specific situations. Ruben Gallego, a Marine Corps veteran of the Iraq War and Democratic Party representative from Arizona’s 7<sup>th</sup> District, argues that because there are not more veterans in Congress “you end up in 20-year wars.”<sup>14</sup> And political scientist Danielle L. Lupton has shown that Gallego may be right. In an analysis of voting records between 2003 and 2013, Lupton shows that Congressional representatives who are veterans were more likely to vote on bills and amendments that would extend Congress’s oversight over the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Veterans were more likely to vote for legislative actions that would increase Congress’s information on the war efforts or that would limit military deployments in support of the wars, but with other matters related to the military or foreign policy the veteran distinction almost disappears behind partisan preferences.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Lupton notes that legislators from districts with high casualty rates also share this preference for more oversight of the DoD and limits to deployment authority.<sup>17</sup>

Veterans would seem to have a greater interest in introducing legislation that aids veterans and in overseeing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), especially its health

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<https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2021/11/11/thank-a-veteran-good-luck-finding-one-in-congress-as-numbers-dwindle/>.

<sup>14</sup> Noah Garfinkel, “Rep. Gallego: Lack of Veterans in Congress Is ‘How You End up in 20 Year Wars,’” *Axios*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/11/10/gallego-veterans-congress-20-year-wars>.

<sup>15</sup> Danielle L. Lupton, “Out of the Service, Into the House: Military Experience and Congressional War Oversight,” *Political Research Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>16</sup> Lupton, “Out of the Service, Into the House.”

<sup>17</sup> Lupton, “Out of the Service, Into the House,” 333.

administration. But Lindsey Cormack shows that the best predictor of representatives promoting veterans' issues in Congress, oversight of the VA, or membership on relevant committees is the density of veterans in a constituency, not the veteran status of the representative.<sup>18</sup> So, rather than veterans wanting to help their comrades it is a matter of politicians responding to local concerns and possibly wanting to maintain the support of local veterans' organizations.

Regardless of the "traditional wisdom," there is no blanket advantage to veterans in elections, but there are particular cases when being a veteran can gain electoral advantage for a candidate. Likewise, veterans do not necessarily have different defense policy ideas than non-veterans, but they do seem more likely to encourage Congressional oversight of the DoD and limit overseas military operations. But even though these ideas about veterans in electoral politics are flawed, veterans running for office often attempt to use their veteran status as a potential advantage to their candidacy.

#### Selection of Political Campaign Materials

I focus this study on six VetBros, three winners and three losers, running as challengers or in open seats in the US House of Representative in the 2022 general election. Challengers and candidates for open seats typically have more communications regarding their background and character as they are still educating their voters about who they are.<sup>19</sup> An incumbent generally focuses on their record while in office and their plans for the next legislative session. In other

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<sup>18</sup> Lindsey Cormack, "Strength in Numbers: The Forces of Constituency Size, Legislator Identity, and Institutional Position on Veterans' Representation," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 6 (2021).

<sup>19</sup> William L. Benoit, "The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Communication," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 2014, 197-200.

words, challengers need to tell more about their personal story (and in the case of VetBros, military experience) during their campaigns.

For each of these candidates I look at the rhetorical content of their campaign materials, specifically their campaign websites, video advertisements, and some speeches. These election materials show how the candidates want themselves and their campaign to be represented. Whether this is a true reflection of what a candidate believes or a cynical attempt to dupe voters is not important. What matters is that the candidates want others to see them in a particular way and to get voters (and donors) to easily recognize their name and compare them to the incumbent.

A candidate's communication goals are to make them seem preferable to their opponent.<sup>20</sup> Of course, a candidate must speak to the overall factors that make up the "political landscape" of the race in which they are running, but I will focus on their invocations of military service.<sup>21</sup> In this chapter I am not interested in policy statements or commentary on the particulars of their district unless they are linked to military matters. How they discuss their military service appears in a variety of forms which can show how they understand its meaning and relevance. A biographical statement is about their identity as a veteran and overall character whereas discussing service in a policy statement is an attempt to use military experience as a source of credibility for their position. And this is all in a rhetorical situation of persuading voters who are mostly not veterans. In other words, these candidates have specific ideas about the role of military service in shaping their identity and they also have certain beliefs about what civilians think of and value military service.

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<sup>20</sup> Benoit, "The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Communication," 196.

<sup>21</sup> Heather E. Yates, *The Politics of Spectacle and Emotion in the 2016 Presidential Campaign* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 38-40.

Voters learn about candidate distinctiveness through a variety of media candidates control (e.g., their websites, television advertisements, speeches), media they do not control but can potentially influence (e.g., local media news stories), and also through discussions with friends or family.<sup>22</sup> This somewhat combines the “hypodermic needle” and the “two-step flow” models of communication theory. This is important to keep in mind when considering the research on media of political campaigns—for example, a researcher focusing on media coverage may demonstrate the effectiveness of a campaign (i.e., how well they are getting a message out) but may not accurately show a campaign’s rhetorical decisions (i.e., how a candidate is communicating their message). By centering on media candidates control I am able to keep my focus their rhetorical decisions and how they position their military experience.

Political campaigns are often eager to try out new communications technologies.<sup>23</sup> But most scholarship on political campaign communications has focused on radio and television. Even though political campaigns used web-based media as soon as they were commercially available, these media are often still discussed as complementary to television or as ways to turn supporters into donors.<sup>24</sup> But due to decreases in television audiences and the overall decline of television advertising, more political campaigns have focused on web-based media to deliver their messages to increasingly targeted audiences for relatively little money.

Campaign websites are convenient and comprehensive locations to examine a political candidate’s campaign rhetoric in the United States. Of course, websites are not a substitute for

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<sup>22</sup> Benoit, “The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Communication,” 196-197.

<sup>23</sup> James N. Druckman, Martin J. Kifer, and Michael Parkin, “U.S. Congressional Campaign Communications in an Internet Age,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 24, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>24</sup> Andrew O. Ballard, D. Sunshine Hillygus, and Tobias Konitzer, “Campaigning Online: Web Display Ads in the 2012 Presidential Campaign,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 49, no. 3 (2016), 414-415.



more traditional campaigning, but they have become an important part of a campaign's overall messaging strategy. Unlike a 30-second television spot or a campaign mailer, a website contains all of a candidate's platform. These sites are typically designed to speak to an audience of informed "general voters" or "undecided voters" while at the same time appealing to current supporters.<sup>25</sup> For the former groups, the sites are useful for trying to persuade them to vote; for the latter trying to turn that support into a donation.<sup>26</sup>

Some political scientists argue that campaign websites offer many "virtues...as an unmediated, holistic, and representative way to measure [political] campaigns."<sup>27</sup> Campaign websites are one of the few places that will host all of a candidate's various messaging on as many topics as possible. They also offer one of the few places where a political candidate can present their message completely on their own terms without fear of analysis, editorialization, or even comments and questions from detractors.<sup>28</sup> Even the images candidates choose to display can provide information about the rhetorical decisions they are making about how they want to be portrayed.<sup>29</sup>

A relatively new and under-studied part of political campaigns is the so-called launch video. The concept of a launch video is taken from corporate communications, generally in the technology sector. These videos are typically two to three minutes long; due to their length they

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<sup>25</sup> Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin, "Campaign Communications in U.S. Congressional Elections," 346-347.

<sup>26</sup> Lynda Lee Kaid, "Political Advertising and Information Seeking: Comparing Exposure via Traditional and Internet Channels," *Journal of Advertising* 31, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>27</sup> Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin, "Campaign Communications in U.S. Congressional Elections," 357.

<sup>28</sup> Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin, "Campaign Communications in U.S. Congressional Elections," 345.

<sup>29</sup> Vivian Ike, "Congressional Candidates' Photo Presentation on Their Campaign Websites," *International Social Science Review* 92, no. 1 (2016).

generally remain online or are shown at campaign events. Political campaign launch videos for challenger candidates have similar goals to the product launch for a company: introduce the audience to the new candidate, briefly describe their policy positions and how they differ from the incumbent, and state what they can do for the district. Just like their corporate analogues, all parts of the campaign launch video (e.g., music, lighting, text) are important in setting the overall tone and messaging for subsequent campaigning and advertising.

Most, if not all, of the messaging on campaign websites and in launch videos is in the form of “soundbites” or “talking points.” But these represent the consistent messaging of the campaign. They are meant to be short, to the point, and memorable. Importantly, because these media are totally in a candidate’s control, they are useful for understanding how a candidate understands their own identity. To be sure, they are designed, built, recorded, and edited by campaign staff and outside consulting firms. But the candidate gets the last word on the design, the image they are trying to portray, and the messaging.

While military veterans running in elected office have been a topic of interest for some scholars, there has been little research on the rhetorical content of the political campaigns of veterans. One of my goals in this chapter is to correct this. Veterans running for office discuss military service in two related but fairly distinct ways: military service as part of their biography and how military service gives them insight or experience regarding policy matters. The broader VetBro style is manifested in how they present their stories of service and the meaning and importance they give to it.

### **VetBro Candidates**

I focus on a selection of candidates, three winners and three losers, who exemplify the VetBro style in different ways. As the VetBro style expresses conservative cultural values and

politics, these candidates fit comfortably within the Republican party. The policy positions of the featured candidates here are typical for Republican politicians, such as advocating for “strong defense” or in support of “traditional values.” What is important is how they present their political ideas and policies and how they relate these to their military service.

The VetBro candidates I look at who won their races are Eli Crane (AZ), Morgan Luttrell (TX), and Zach Nunn (IA). Crane and Luttrell are both former Navy SEALs and won in safe districts. Luttrell’s twin brother, Marcus, is the author of *Lone Survivor* discussed in Chapter 2. Nunn is an Air Force veteran and is currently in the Iowa Air National Guard and the only one in this selection to have held political office before this election. His race was far more competitive and won with less than a percentage point margin of difference. The losing candidates I look at are Joe Kent (WA), Tyler Kistner (MN), and J.R. Majewski (OH). Kistner, a Marine Corps veteran, and Majewski, an Air Force veteran, both caught unwanted attention for inflating their service records. Kent, a former Army Special Forces (Green Beret) soldier, beat an incumbent Republican in the primary election and then lost in the general election.

After introducing each of the candidates and providing some background information on their campaigns, I turn to their campaign messaging. Specifically, I examine how they describe their own biography and military service, and how they relate their military service to political or policy expertise. Next, I look at each of these candidates’ personal style in terms of the types of images they use and how they present themselves in political advertisements and speeches.

### Eli Crane

Eli Crane was born in Tucson, Arizona and served in the Navy from 2001 to 2014—he enlisted the week following the attacks on 9/11. Most of his Navy career was spent in the SEALs and he deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq five times. While still in the Navy he and his wife Jen

started a company called Bottle Breacher—their products are bottle openers made from “dummy rounds” of .50 caliber machine guns and other large caliber weapons. They are stylized with military or first responder logos and often personalized to give as gifts. One of their more popular items are openers with “The Punisher” skull engraved on them. This started as a side project, but after Crane left the Navy in 2014, he and his wife appeared on the ABC show Shark Tank and received a large investment for the business.<sup>30</sup> The company quickly grew into a multi-million-dollar operation. Crane sold his stake in the company in 2022 in preparation for his Congressional campaign.

Crane represents the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District in Arizona. It is a sprawling district, the largest in Arizona, covering almost the entire northern and most of the eastern parts of the state, along with the suburbs to the south of Phoenix. It is also the only Congressional District in Arizona to not have any portion in the populous Maricopa County. He used the status gained from his television appearance and an early endorsement from President Trump to win the Republican primary.<sup>31</sup> One of the other primary candidates was a currently serving Representative who, due to redistricting, was forced to compete in the race.<sup>32</sup> While Crane won the general election with a comfortable 7.8-point margin of victory, it was a competitive race

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<sup>30</sup> Becca Smouse, “Arizona Veteran Uses ‘Shark Tank’ Appearance to Swim to Success,” The Arizona Republic, May 31, 2016, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/money/business/entrepreneurs/2016/05/31/arizona-veteran-uses-shark-tank-appearance-swim-success/84262046/>.

<sup>31</sup> Alia Shoaib, “Trump Looked Surprised When His Supporters Loudly Booed Him at an Arizona Rally over His Congress Endorsement,” Business Insider, July 23, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.in/politics/world/news/trump-looked-surprised-when-his-supporters-loudly-booed-him-at-an-arizona-rally-over-his-congress-endorsement/articleshow/93072496.cms>.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald J. Hansen, “State Rep. Walt Blackman, Former Navy SEAL Eli Crane Enter GOP Race for Arizona’s CD1,” The Arizona Republic, July 20, 2021, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2021/07/20/two-gop-candidates-enter-race-arizonas-1st-congressional-district/8034878002/>.

from the beginning with Crane raising and spending over \$3.5 million and his opponent, incumbent Tom O'Halleran, over \$4 million. O'Halleran had formerly been a member of the Republican Party and switched to the Democratic Party only in 2016 when he first won the seat. Upon arriving in Washington to begin his tenure as a Member of the House of Representatives, Crane was one of the Republican members to vote against Kevin McCarthy as Speaker of the House. In the fifteenth and final round of voting for Speaker, he changed his vote to "present."

### Morgan Luttrell

Morgan Luttrell is the twin brother of Marcus Luttrell, author of *Lone Survivor*, featured in Chapter 2. He obviously had a similar childhood as his brother to include an early desire to become a Navy SEAL. Unlike Marcus, Morgan chose to attend college at Sam Houston State University before he enlisted in the Navy in 2000. After becoming a SEAL and deploying several times, he was commissioned as an officer in 2007. In 2009, just three years after his brother's ordeal outlined in *Lone Survivor*, Morgan was in a helicopter crash during training and suffered a spinal and traumatic brain injury. He returned to service and was later medically discharged in 2014. After leaving service, Luttrell studied for a Master of Science in Applied Cognition and Neuroscience at the University of Texas, Dallas. From there he served as the CEO for a Dallas-based non-profit that assists veterans with individualized rehabilitation programs, especially those with PTSD and TBIs.<sup>33</sup> In 2017, Rick Perry, the Secretary of Energy and formerly governor of Texas, appointed Luttrell as a special advisor in the Artificial Intelligence and Technologies Office.

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<sup>33</sup> David Tarant, "Navy SEAL-Turned-Scientist Works to Solve the Puzzle of Battlefield Brain Injuries," Dallas News, August 10, 2016, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/healthy-living/2016/08/10/navy-seal-turned-scientist-works-to-solve-the-puzzle-of-battlefield-brain-injuries/>.

Luttrell represents Texas's 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District north of Houston. It is a mix of rural, small towns, and suburbs. Like many of the districts around the largely Democratic Harris County and city of Houston, the 8<sup>th</sup> has an "arm" that reaches out from its rural core and down to the Houston suburbs, effectively diluting the voting strength of the Democratic Party there. When the previous Representative announced his retirement, the open Republican primary attracted almost a dozen candidates.<sup>34</sup> Luttrell won handily with the help of the name recognition borrowed from his brother and early endorsements from Rick Perry and other well-established Republicans in Texas and nationally. He won in the general election in a predictable landslide, winning 70% of votes cast.

#### Zach Nunn

Of the featured politicians in this chapter, Zach Nunn is the only one who had held political office before running for the US House of Representatives in 2022. Nunn had previously served as an Iowa state representative from 2015-2019 and a state senator from 2019 until he began his term in the US House. Nunn served on active duty in the Air Force and in the Iowa Air National Guard as an intelligence officer and aviator with three overseas deployments to the Middle East. He is still a Lieutenant Colonel in the Iowa Air National Guard. Nunn's military and civilian careers have centered on intelligence and cybersecurity working in the practice, policy, and teaching of both. In his civilian capacity, most of his work has been for the federal government with only a handful of years working for private companies.

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<sup>34</sup> Emily Caldwell, "Morgan Luttrell, Long-Time Rick Perry Ally, Files to Run for Open Houston-Area Congressional Seat," Dallas News, June 1, 2021, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/06/01/morgan-luttrell-long-time-rick-perry-ally-files-to-run-for-open-houston-area-congressional-seat/>.

Nunn's experience in Iowa state politics certainly helped him as he won by an incredibly narrow margin, beating the incumbent Democratic opponent by 0.7 points, only 2,145 votes. He now represents Iowa's 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District which comprises much of the southwestern portion of the state and the city of Des Moines. Nunn has a history of beating incumbents. In his first run for the Iowa state House he beat the incumbent. And then four years later when he ran for state Senate, Nunn beat another incumbent.

#### Joe Kent

After Luttrell, Joe Kent probably had the best name recognition among conservative voters going into the 2022 election. His wife, Shannon, was killed in action in Syria in 2019 about a month after President Trump ordered the withdrawal of US forces there. Kent blames her death on the "Washington establishment" who prevented Trump from completing the redeployment of US forces. After this, Kent began appearing as a guest on several Fox News Channel programs and also conservative podcasts such as Steve Bannon's "War Room." His appearances were at first to provide his commentary in support of then President Trump's policies which went against the grain of more traditional national security expertise. He then briefly worked as a national security adviser for Trump's re-election campaign.

Kent's Congressional District, Washington's 3<sup>rd</sup>, has long been held by the Republican Party. It is in the southwestern corner of the state, largely rural, almost 80% white, and was seen as a solid Republican seat in the House. The previous representative, Jamie Herrera Beutler, was first elected there in 2010 and easily won her previous re-elections, sometimes by double digit margins, even though she had been one of the more moderate Republicans in the House. Following the January 6, 2021, insurrection, Beutler was one of 10 Republican members of the House to vote to impeach Donald Trump.

With Kent's ties to Donald Trump and his animus towards "establishment" politicians, he launched a primary challenge against Beutler. He was assisted by an early and predictable endorsement from Trump and more appearances on the Fox News Channel and Bannon's podcast. In the open (top two advance) primary, Kent placed second, narrowly pushing Beutler out of contention for the general election by a mere 1,067 votes. Although the Democratic Party nominee, Marie Gluesenkamp Pérez, placed first, the combined total votes cast for Republican candidates showed a preference for the GOP by more than 30 points, almost assuring a Republican hold on the seat. While Kent had strong support from conservative media, Gluesenkamp Pérez was almost unknown prior to the primary election. She focused her campaign on local issues as a way to burnish her more moderate credentials and highlight Kent's focus on national partisan fights.<sup>35</sup> In the end, Kent lost what should have been a safe Republican seat by 2,633 votes, about a 0.8-point margin.

#### Tyler Kistner

Tyler Kistner served in the Marine Corps from 2011 to 2019, including four years in the Marine Corps' Special Operations Force. He commissioned as an officer soon after completing college. After leaving the service he began running for political office. His failed 2022 campaign for Minnesota's 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District against incumbent Angie Craig was a repeat of the same race in 2020, only this time he lost by a slightly wider margin. The district, which covers many of the Twin Cities suburbs, did not change much in redistricting. Additionally, Craig only beat Kistner by about 2 points in 2020. And since 2022 was supposed to be a good year for

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<sup>35</sup> Jim Brunner and David Gutman, "Democrat Marie Gluesenkamp Perez Defeats Republican Joe Kent in WA House Race," The Seattle Times, November 12, 2022, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/democrat-marie-gluesenkamp-perez-defeats-republican-joe-kent-in-wa-house-race/>.



Republicans, some pollsters listed the seat as a “toss-up.” The conservative-leaning Real Clear Politics even predicted a likely Republican win. There is no single reason why Kistner lost this campaign. Certainly, one reason was that Craig raised far more campaign donations than he did, more than double. And Kistner may have been able to raise and spend more, but one issue certainly hindered this: he was not entirely truthful about his service in the Marine Corps.

In his first failed bid for the seat in 2020, Kistner had claimed, or at least implied, that he was a combat veteran. He had served overseas several times during his nine years in the Marine Corps, but never to a combat zone. But several times during speeches, debates, or interviews he referred to these as “combat deployments.” He also does not have a Combat Action Ribbon, an award given by the Marine Corps for any Marine who had been in direct combat (e.g., exchanged gunfire with enemy forces). Kistner implied that he had been in firefights and killed enemy combatants, but never using any direct statements. In a 2020 Republican Party primary debate he exclaimed that he was the “most decorated veteran” in the race which prompted one of his opponents, a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, to demand that he release his military records. He eventually did, showing the truth behind his exaggerated claims.<sup>36</sup>

The hint of dishonesty or just plain embellishment from the previous race did cause a Super PAC run by the Republican Party to pull an “incorrect version” of an advertisement they had made in support of Kistner’s campaign.<sup>37</sup> Even though Kistner’s inaccurate claims were two years old and were probably not attempts at willful deception, the Republican Party wanted to

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<sup>36</sup> Deena Winter, “Congressional Candidate Tyler Kistner Has Repeatedly Suggested He Saw Combat, but He Didn’t,” *Minnesota Reformer*, October 5, 2022, <https://minnesotareformer.com/2022/10/05/congressional-candidate-tyler-kistner-has-repeatedly-suggested-he-saw-combat-but-he-didnt/>.

<sup>37</sup> Winter, “Congressional Candidate Tyler Kistner Has Repeatedly Suggested He Saw Combat, but He Didn’t.”

keep its distance from candidates inflating their service records due to the embarrassments caused by one of their candidates in Ohio.

#### J.R. Majewski

J.R. Majewski achieved a degree of infamy that no political candidate should ever want. The political newcomer looked like he was going to achieve a rare upset. In a primary race he beat two state legislators and was poised to beat a 19-term Democratic incumbent. This was quite an accomplishment for the Air Force veteran who had worked as an energy consultant, peddled in QAnon conspiracy theories, and was a self-styled “MAGA rapper.” He entered the race with a viral video after turning his front lawn into a giant pro-Trump display.<sup>38</sup> But in September 2022, two journalists with the Associated Press, one a military veteran, tracked down Majewski’s various claims about his four years in the Air Force to show that he outright fabricated large parts of his biography.<sup>39</sup>

The 9<sup>th</sup> Congressional District in Ohio was redrawn by Republicans in the statehouse to oust Marcy Kaptur who had represented the Toledo area in Congress for almost 40 years. The Republican-controlled legislature drew the district lines in such a way that 2020 Trump voters outnumbered Biden voters by about a percentage point. It was one of five districts in Ohio that would have voted for Trump and were held by Democratic representatives based on this new

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah McRitchie, “Toledo Native Who Went Viral for Trump-Inspired Lawn Challenging Rep. Kaptur,” <https://www.13abc.com>, April 1, 2021, <https://www.13abc.com/2021/04/01/toledo-native-who-went-viral-for-trump-inspired-lawn-challenging-rep-kaptur/>.

<sup>39</sup> Brian Slodysko and James LaPorta, “Ohio GOP House Candidate Has Misrepresented Military Service,” AP News, September 22, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-afghanistan-ohio-campaigns-e75d2566635f11f49332bd1c46711999>.

map.<sup>40</sup> Two relatively young state legislators, with a couple terms each in the statehouse, were seen to be the likely contenders to run and defeat Kaptur in the general election. But the entry of Majewski and an early endorsement of him by Trump upset these plans. These two “establishment” candidates each earned about 30% of the GOP primary vote but Majewski beat them with 35%.

Majewski came into the race with a lot of baggage and quite a few stories that just didn’t add up. He had promoted the QAnon conspiracy theories on his social media accounts but had also denied or even denounced the movement.<sup>41</sup> He was at the Capitol during the insurrection on January 6, 2021, but did not enter the building. At various times he said he regretted not entering the Capitol and other times regretted being in attendance and that the rioters need to be prosecuted. But the most problematic were his claims about his military service.

In some campaign appearances and interviews Majewski claimed to have been in one of the first Air Force units in Afghanistan shortly after the US invasion in 2001 and that he went 40 days without running water and a shower. When pressed to show his military records, he replied that he was in a “secret” unit and that his service would not be documented. His actual records revealed that he spent much of his career at an Air Force base in Japan and deployed to Qatar in May 2002, but no mentions of being in Afghanistan or any of the awards that would suggest he was in combat. Further, he had been demoted at least once for getting in a drunken brawl and

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<sup>40</sup> Stephanie Akin, “These 47 House Democrats Are on the GOP’s Target List for 2022,” Roll Call, February 10, 2021, <https://www.rollcall.com/2021/02/10/these-47-house-democrats-are-on-the-gops-target-list-for-2022/>.

<sup>41</sup> William Vaillancourt, “MAGA Candidate Who Claims He’s Not a QAnon Follower Once Said ‘I Believe in Everything’ Q Has Released,” *Rolling Stone* (blog), May 9, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/jr-majewski-republican-nomination-ohio-qanon-1350624/>.

driving under the influence. Finally, he received a “bar to reenlistment” code meaning that his commander believed he was not suitable to remain in the service.<sup>42</sup>

Needless to say, these revelations created a lot of unwanted attention; even the satirical military news website Duffel Blog published a story poking fun at his outrageous claims.<sup>43</sup> Questions from journalists moved from campaign issues to questions about Majewski’s past. His opponent, Kaptur, seized upon this history of lying to attack his character and trustworthiness. Regardless of his attempts to control the narrative, he could not shake the new national interest in his false claims. And perhaps most damaging to the campaign, the Republican Party and associated Super PACs pulled their support and cancelled scheduled advertising media buys.<sup>44</sup> In the end, Majewski lost what should have been a competitive race by 13 points.

### **VetBro Candidate Communications**

In political campaign communications, candidates need to be mindful of the particularities of their district and the overall environment of the national campaign, what Heather E. Yates calls the “political landscape.”<sup>45</sup> A politician (typically through a trusted and skilled campaign staff) will know how to balance the competing personal, local, and national interests. Political campaigns are driven not only by the relevant issues of a particular district, but also the personality of the candidate. A skilled candidate and campaign staff work to find the right balance between talking about national or local concerns, along with the personal character of the candidate and their opponent. Regardless of the unique constellation of factors in each

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<sup>42</sup> Slodysko and LaPorta, “Ohio GOP House Candidate Has Misrepresented Military Service.”

<sup>43</sup> Clay Beyersdorfer, “J.R. Majewski Recalls Moment He Killed Bin Laden,” Duffel Blog, October 3, 2022, <https://www.duffelblog.com/p/jr-majewski-recalls-moment-he-killed>.

<sup>44</sup> Josh Kraushaar, “House Republicans Pull Ads from Ohio Trump District,” Axios, September 23, 2022, [https://www.axios.com/2022/09/22/house-republicans-ohio-trump-majewski?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_campaign=editorial](https://www.axios.com/2022/09/22/house-republicans-ohio-trump-majewski?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=editorial).

<sup>45</sup> Yates, *The Politics of Spectacle and Emotion in the 2016 Presidential Campaign*, 38-40.

race, the key to any political campaign is making a clear distinction between oneself and the opponent(s). The VetBro candidates accordingly use their military background and personal image to create that distinctiveness.

In his “functional theory of political campaign communications,” political scientist William Benoit states “voting is a comparative act. To win office, candidates only need to appear—and it is important to keep in mind the fact that political campaigns are about perceptions—preferable to their opponents.”<sup>46</sup> Campaigns make communicative decisions in order to distinguish their candidate from the opponents and make them preferable. Not “likable,” just preferable. Candidates should use every opportunity to distinguish themselves from their opponent. This is why a skilled candidate will use every opportunity to compare their agenda and their character to that of their opponent’s.

Campaign discourse will cover material that can be defined as either “character” or “policy” (others refer to this as “image” or “issue”).<sup>47</sup> Character matters will include personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals. Policy matters will cover both plans and goals, that is what they want to accomplish and how they intend to do it. I look at how these candidates approach both, but I focus on the role of military experience in how they fashion their image and argue their policy or character credentials.

### Candidate Biographies

A common feature of any political campaign is a discussion of the candidate’s biography. For military veteran candidates this often, but not always, has a “triptych” structure: their life

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<sup>46</sup> William L. Benoit, “The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Communication,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 2014, 196.

<sup>47</sup> Benoit, “The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Communication,” 197-198.

prior to joining the military, what they did in the military, their life as a veteran. Each candidate will weigh the parts of the “trptych” differently depending on how they wish to present themselves. VetBro candidates tend to focus on their military service and life after the military. This makes sense in that many of them enlist soon after graduating from high school or college (between the ages of 18 and 22), and much of their identity is centered on their “veteran-ness.” Of course, their descriptions of their pre-military life are still important as they help establish overall character, especially in terms of what they consider traditional American values which lead them to joining the military and how it informs their post-military life.

### **Before the Military**

“I was born in a cabin in Sweet Home, Oregon, and grew up in Portland, Oregon” is how Joe Kent begins his candidate biography.<sup>48</sup> His birthplace in a cabin begins his larger story of a frontier life. The name of his hometown also invokes an image of a family-centered life that is part of his campaign. Kent continues, “Growing up, I spent much of my formative years in the Cascades and the Columbia River Gorge, thanks to Boy Scouts and Explorer Scouts.” He maintains a certain “All-American boy” background of a rugged youth and being involved in traditional activities and patriotic organizations such as the Boy Scouts. “I have always considered the Pacific Northwest my home and wanted to fight for this nation.” Here Kent moves his home to include Washington state where he now lives and is campaigning, as well as expanding “home” to include the United States.

Morgan Luttrell is quick to point out his deep connections to the state of Texas. “Morgan Luttrell built a life centered around service. A 5<sup>th</sup> generation Texan raised on a horse ranch, at an

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<sup>48</sup> Joe Kent, “About Joe,” Joe Kent for Congress, accessed September 4, 2022, <https://joekentforcongress.com/about-joe/>.

early age Morgan learned the importance of hard work, discipline, and personal responsibility.”<sup>49</sup> Luttrell invokes another image of the West, this of the rancher. Like Kent, Luttrell emphasizes a traditional boyhood, in his case centered on working on a farm and riding horses. Also like Kent, Luttrell connects his upbringing to his later military and political careers: “[Luttrell] turned his strong values, deep love for America, and passion for helping others into a career of distinguished service.”

J.R. Majewski’s stresses his deep connections to the Toledo, Ohio area, his immigrant ancestors, and also hints at his time in the military. “I Believe in the American Dream. I’m the great-grandchild of European immigrants, and the grandchild of war veterans. I was born in 1979 on Veterans Day in Toledo and grew up in the old Polish village, right off Lagrange Street.”<sup>50</sup> He also mentions that his parents were high school sweethearts, and his father was a union autoworker in one of Toledo’s GM factories, employing mid-20<sup>th</sup> century tropes of white, working-class family life.

### **Military Service and Life as a Veteran**

VetBros typically over-hype their record of military service. This has been a common theme throughout this dissertation: these men want to make sure everyone knows they were in the military and that they did “cool guy” stuff, or make it appear that way. Joe Kent narrates his military career picking up after stating that he wanted to fight for the US. “When I was eighteen, I enlisted in the Army as an infantryman and earned my way into the Ranger Regiment and then Special Forces,” that is, two of the top-tier Special Operations units in the US military. He continues, “After 9/11, I volunteered at every opportunity to serve in combat. I did this for over

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<sup>49</sup> Morgan Luttrell, “Meet Morgan,” Texans for Morgan Luttrell, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.morganluttrell.com/meet-morgan>.

<sup>50</sup> J.R. Majewski, “About,” J.R. Majewski for Congress, accessed September 24, 2022, <https://jrmajewski4congress.com/about/>.

twenty years and eleven combat deployments.”<sup>51</sup> This is a lot of deployments, although fairly typical for SOF units who do three or six month-long deployments instead of the yearlong deployments standard in the conventional military.

Kent explains that after his wife was killed in action, he had to leave active service as he was the sole caregiver for their children. But it was the circumstances around her death that drove him into politics. “Shannon was killed approximately one month after President Trump attempted to pull our troops out of Syria because we had met our military objective. This attempt to end a war brought out the Establishment’s true colors as they resisted him at every step.” While many of these VetBro candidates use their military credentials as part of their qualifications for office, Kent is one of the few that explicitly traces a path from military service to his particular political beliefs.

His animus towards “The Establishment” led him to begin speaking to the media in support of Trump’s policies. He says he was “let down” by Representative Beutler in Congress (presumably for her vote to impeach Trump after January 6, 2021) and that he needs to continue fighting for what he believes in. “I want to go forward and fight because I want to fight, and I know how to fight. This is for the future of our nation and the legacy that we will leave for our children. This is what is compelling me to run for office. It would be an honor to earn your vote and serve this great country once more.” The concept of service is quite common among all of the veteran candidates.

Luttrell’s military career is similarly impressive as Kent’s. “From Basic Underwater Demolition SEAL training (BUD/S) to Officer Candidate School, Morgan excelled as a top grad—no matter the challenge. He served multiple combat deployments and led his troops as a

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<sup>51</sup> Kent, “About Joe.”



Naval Special Warfare Officer.”<sup>52</sup> It is not just that he was in an elite unit, he was one of the best. Then in a helicopter crash, he was injured with a broken back and Traumatic Brain Injury. Nevertheless, “Determined to get back in the fight with his teammates, Morgan rehabbed, recovered, and returned to the frontline,” showing and emphasizing his commitment to service.

Somewhat similar to Kent, Luttrell uses his Special Operations career as a launching point for his life as a veteran. Unlike Kent, Luttrell did not jump into politics right away. “Morgan retired from the Navy in 2014 and applied his personal success and experience to help fellow veterans recover from PTSD and traumatic brain injuries sustained in battle.” He then returns to school for a Master’s degree in neuroscience and then “created an innovative health and wellness platform helping veterans heal from their physical and psychological injuries.” So, he first uses his background to help his community of veterans. He then enters civilian government service, first through a job in the Department of Energy (DOE) led by Rick Perry, the former governor of Texas. “Secretary Perry appointed Morgan to serve as a Special Advisor at the DOE—leading the creation of the Artificial Intelligence and Technologies office to ensure America continued to outpace Russia and China in the development of machine-learning technology.” Even out of military service, Luttrell is showing that his work is still dedicated to protecting the interests of the United States. Not only that, he tells his audience that this can help with healthcare problems as well.

Luttrell draws a direct line from his service in the military to helping fellow veterans to service as a politician. “Morgan has poured every ounce of himself into protecting America and saving as many lives as he can. He’s ready for his next mission: serving as our conservative Congressman.” He also effectively connects this sense of service and mission to core

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<sup>52</sup> Luttrell, “Meet Morgan.”

conservative issues. “Under the Biden and Pelosi regime, Morgan knows our freedoms are under constant threat of the socialist agenda.” He does on to stress that he “will bring bold leadership” to end the “radical indoctrination in our kids’ classrooms,” secure the border, and defend Israel, among other typical Republican political stances.

Zach Nunn’s military service is mentioned all over his campaign website. He even uses a logo image similar to the Air Force’s. The home page features him in an Air Force utility uniform while standing in front of a military aircraft (a static display at a museum). Nunn is still an officer in the Iowa National Guard and has the longest military service record of any of the candidates featured in this chapter. In his “About” page he declares “PROVEN LEADER. PROVEN FIGHTER. PROVEN WINNER...As a combat aviator with the US Air Force, Zach is a fighter for America.”<sup>53</sup> Further down on the page he shares more details. “Zach deployed three times to the Middle East after 9/11. Flying over 700 combat hours, Zach received numerous Defense decorations for saving US Forces ambushed by Taliban insurgents, executing special operations, and leading COVID-19 recovery efforts with the Iowa Air National Guard.”

Nunn further boosts his military credentials and credibility stating that even as a member of the state legislature he still “served as Squadron Commander and continues to amass combat tours as the airborne intelligence officer aboard reconnaissance aircraft. Zach received the prestigious General O’Malley ‘Best in the Air Force’ Award for life-saving support to Special Operations Forces combating a stronghold of 2,000 insurgents attacking US troops.” This is slightly misleading, as the award was for the aircrew which he commanded. And as they were a reconnaissance flight, they were surely far from the hostile actions.

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<sup>53</sup> Zach Nunn, “About,” Iowans for Zach Nunn, February 2, 2021, <https://zachnunn.com/about/>.

On his home page and “about” page, Tyler Kistner tells his audience not only that he served 9 years in the Marine Corps, but that he was in an “elite” Special Operations unit and served on four overseas tours. To be sure, he never mentions combat anywhere on his campaign website—all the accusations that he exaggerated his service stem from comments he made in his 2020 run. But he does play up his service as being exceptional. “Tyler served on four overseas tours and advanced rapidly to command over 500 U.S. and partner nation personnel on numerous counterterrorism and counter China/Russia aggression operations.”<sup>54</sup> While this sounds impressive, given the type of unit he was in, this is quite typical for an officer with his length of service. “During his active service, Tyler had command and control of Special Operations programs totaling over \$100 million in budget and assets.” Again, this does seem to be a huge responsibility for a junior officer, but it is not out of the ordinary in special operations.

Eli Crane’s website’s description of his military service is probably the most subdued of this group. “Eli went on five war time deployments, three of them to the Middle East with SEAL Team 3 and served our country for 13 years.”<sup>55</sup> The former SEAL seems to be above bragging in this one respect, or perhaps he reasons that his SEAL credentials speak for themselves.

With all his bluster on the campaign trail and in interviews on right-wing radio shows and podcasts, J.R. Majewski does not have much to say about his military service on his official campaign website. He does include a photo of himself in an Air Force dress uniform, although it appears to be the standard portrait taken at the end of basic training. The only other photo does not include Majewski (perhaps he is the photographer). It shows a group in Air Force desert uniforms in what looks to be a cement bunker, possibly from Majewski’s time in Qatar.

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<sup>54</sup> Tyler Kistner, “About,” Kistner for Congress, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.tylerkistnerforcongress.com/about>.

<sup>55</sup> Eli Crane, “About,” Crane for Congress, February 2, 2021, <https://eliforarizona.com/about/>.

Considering the scope of his lies, the fact that he does not recreate them in his webpage probably shows the lack of intent on his part.

### Candidates on the Issues

As is standard practice in all campaigns, each of these candidates has a page on their campaign website that lists out their policy priorities. Some of these are thoughtful and detailed and some are little more than slogans. For the most part they try to address issues of particular relevance to their constituents. Morgan Luttrell's page on issues is unique in that he has short videos embedded on the page instead of text. In each one he is talking to the camera and sometimes this is interspersed with relevant images or video.

None of the candidates in this group have policy ideas that are different than standard Republican politicians. Where they differ is how they use their military background and experience to support their stances. This is typically limited to national security and defense-related matters but can sometimes spill into other areas. The phrase, "As a veteran..." is common in campaign statements to signal that they are connecting their military service to the policy issue at hand. Likewise, they sometimes use imagery related to war or fighting in their discussions of other policy realms.

### **Military**

Matters relating to the military and defense are an obvious point of assumed expertise for all veteran candidates. But this does not mean that they have any new ideas about it. For example, Zach Nunn argues that "we must continue protecting our citizens from all enemies foreign and domestic—both at home and abroad."<sup>56</sup> It's a plainly obvious statement that no reasonable opponent would question. He continues, "As a combat veteran, I know the

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<sup>56</sup> Zach Nunn, "Issues," Iowans for Zach Nunn, February 2, 2021, <https://zachnunn.com/issues/>.

importance of a strong military when it comes to defending our country, protecting democracy, and promoting peace.” So, while he does remind his audience of his military background and signals it as giving him expertise in the subject matter, there is nothing unique or insightful here.

Joe Kent and J.R. Majewski do stand out among their fellow VetBros in that they want to reduce the US’s overseas military commitments. They both point to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as examples of mistaken policy. Majewski offers few details about the basis of his opinions and simply says “I believe that America must sustain a strong military and stop committing to the endless wars of recent decades.”<sup>57</sup> Kent is clearer and states that the initial invasion of Afghanistan was good, but the subsequent nation-building was not. He also says the Bush administration, along with “establishment democrats...lied to the American people to get us into a second regime change war [i.e., the 2003 invasion of Iraq].”<sup>58</sup>

The views of Kent and Majewski track closely to Trump’s stated views on the wars of the last two decades. Kent even uses the same tone of contempt for the military leadership and “establishment” politicians. He also argues that the military needs to refocus on other threats such as from cyber and information warfare. Kent is also the only one to devote serious space directly on China; Luttrell does mention China a handful of times but never as the main point of discussion. In the section labeled “CHINESE AGGRESSION,” Kent argues, the “Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is our number one national security threat and is already at war with us.” While he does not use his military background to support the claim, by declaring it to already be a war does imply that he is speaking from a position of authority.

## **Border Security**

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<sup>57</sup> J.R. Majewski, “On The Issues,” J.R. Majewski for Congress, accessed September 24, 2022, <https://jrmajewski4congress.com/issues/>.

<sup>58</sup> Joe Kent, “Issues,” Joe Kent for Congress, accessed September 4, 2022, <https://joekentforcongress.com/issues/>.

Military and defense experience is sometimes expanded to include other aspects of national security. They also often conflate their limited, tactical knowledge to broader, strategic issues, as well as non-military matters related to it. Eli Crane directly connects his wartime experiences to domestic issues. “As a Navy SEAL in Iraq, Eli stopped terrorists from wreaking havoc. As your Congressman, he will work tirelessly to stop human traffickers, cartel drug dealers and terrorists from entering our southern border.”<sup>59</sup> He describes immigration issues as a “border security” problem, saying it to a threat to sovereignty and likens immigrants to an enemy force. Highlighting this military framing he says “There is an invasion on our southern border. It’s time we gained operational control of our borders and empower border patrol agents.” The claim that the US lacks “operational control” of the borders invokes an image of not being in control of a line of battle, and that the border patrol agents are engaged in a war.

In fact, all six of the candidates featured in this chapter connect immigration issues to security issues, just perhaps without Crane’s enthusiasm. Kent focuses on the economic and labor issues involved with immigration, his first comment on it is that the country needs “a robust physical border wall to ensure our nation’s security.” And Nunn links border security and human trafficking.

### **Law Enforcement**

Like the companies featured in Chapter 4, the VetBro candidates strongly identify with law enforcement personnel. Of course, being supportive of law enforcement is a standard part of the Republican Party platform, typically in opposition to proposals that could limit law enforcement activities. What the VetBros do that is distinctive is that they imagine policing in ways similar to their own roles in the military. Kent connects law enforcement to

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<sup>59</sup> Eli Crane, “Issues,” Crane for Congress, February 2, 2021, <https://eliforarizona.com/issues-eli-crane/>.

counterterrorism, saying that he wants to support the police and that he “will fight to use the tools of federal law enforcement to dismantle the Antifa terrorist organization.”

Tyler Kistner begins his statement on law enforcement saying, “We need to protect our communities from domestic threats and the record increase of crime. The ‘defund the police’ movement has made America more dangerous and our communities less safe.”<sup>60</sup> He says that Congress must work to support law enforcement and also improve policies. He is seemingly interested in the importance of messaging: “This starts with supportive rhetoric and always standing with our law enforcement community who heroically put themselves in harm’s way to protect our communities.” And Majewski is similarly worried about rhetoric: “I will fight against the perpetuation of communist propaganda intended to divide the trust between the general public and our men and women of law enforcement.”<sup>61</sup>

Luttrell makes the connection between policing and the military most blatant in his short video on the subject. “In the Navy, I had to deploy overseas to fight the war on terror to defend our country,” he says in a voiceover while still images of him in uniform and combat kit are displayed. Cutting to a shot of Luttrell talking to the camera, “Our police and first responders deploy out their front door every day.”<sup>62</sup> The video cuts to stock footage of police and firefighters in staged emergencies or otherwise posing. While his message includes firefighters, law enforcement seems to take priority. Especially important is the role in “protecting,” which he mentions while the video playing shows a person in a police uniform holding an AR-15 or similar firearm, which is related to the preferred firearm of the US military. By framing police as

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<sup>60</sup> Tyler Kistner, “Issues,” Kistner for Congress, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.tylerkistnerforcongress.com/issues>.

<sup>61</sup> Majewski, “On The Issues.”

<sup>62</sup> *Morgan Luttrell: Supporting First Responders*, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_x-7sp0U28M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_x-7sp0U28M).

“heroic first responders,” Luttrell and others are able to downplay the role of police in the maintenance of white supremacy.<sup>63</sup>

### **Other Issues**

There are some additional policy positions that these candidates connect to military service or combat. All of them have fairly typical statements for Republican politicians on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment issues. Nunn directly connect these with his military service: “I’ve put my life on the line to protect our First and Second Amendment Rights. Right now our country is under attack from the radical efforts of the far left and Big Tech who are muzzling our constitutional rights.” So, not only does he say he fought overseas for these rights, he states they are now under threat from enemies at home.

Interestingly, only one of these candidates had anything to say about veterans’ issues. Kistner says, “As a Marine veteran, healthcare for our veterans is a very personal issue for me....Veterans gave America everything they could, so we need to make sure America gives them our best when they come home.” He also includes a vaguely worded statement that signals his support for privatizing Veterans Affairs healthcare.

With few exceptions the political positions of these VetBro candidates do not differ much from typical Republican platforms. Even Kent and Majewski’s desires to scale back overseas military operations is a point of debate in the party, although it is still a minority view. At times, they leverage their veteran status as an attempt to show their credibility on certain issues, whether this is warranted or not.

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<sup>63</sup> Joshua Guitar and Sydney Griffith, “Constructing Police as First Responders: A Critical Rhetorical Archetype Analysis,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 38, no. 4 (2021): 327-330.



## Candidate Style

The VetBro image is more than what these politicians say about their military careers and their policy positions, it is also how they present themselves. That is, it is not about the facts of their biography and their politics, but how they tell a story about the military and patriotism, and how they perform their sense of masculinity. Candidates do this through all of the various media they produce and speeches they give. A more recent element of Congressional campaigns is the “introduction” or “campaign launch” video. In these videos a candidate declares their intention to run for office and introduces themselves to voters and donors by providing some biographical information as well as policy priorities. All of the various elements of these videos, image, music, setting etc., fit into the overall style the candidate is trying to present. In fact, smaller selections from the launch videos are often repurposed for 15 or 30-second television advertisements and memorable phrases show up in stump speeches.

### Crane

Eli Crane’s launch video begins with a close up of his face. He is wearing a cap with his company’s logo and a shirt for the Chris Kyle Memorial Benefit.<sup>64</sup> Looking at the camera he says, “The problem with Washington politicians is,” at this point the camera zooms out to show he is seated in a tattoo studio and an artist is working on his arm, “They have no skin in the game.”<sup>65</sup> Rock music starts playing in the background. “Well, I’m not a self-serving politician. My whole life has been about service, family, and community.” His voiceover continues as video plays of Crane flexing his arms to show off more patriotic-themed tattoos. He continues with a short biography of his background showing images of himself in uniform, with his family, and working on engraving bottle openers for his company.

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<sup>64</sup> Named for the author of *American Sniper* featured in Chapter 2.

<sup>65</sup> *Eli for Arizona Launch*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmRJ82NbXe8>.



Image 24 Screenshot “Eli for Arizona Launch,” 2021. Eli sitting in a chair while tattoo artist works on his arm.

At the end of the video Crane says, “It’s time for we the people to take our country back,” and as he speaks the video cuts to an extreme close-up to reveal the tattoo “We the People” stylized in the manner from the original draft of the Constitution. “I’m Eli Crane, and I’m ready to fight for us.” In addition to heavy-handed patriotic imagery, the framing of “Us vs. Them” is present throughout his video as it is for many of his fellow VetBros. The in-group/out-group dichotomy is accompanied by discussions of fighting. And it is unclear where the line is drawn by “fighting” as a metaphor and fighting as a physical altercation.

### **Majewski**

More than any of the others in this chapter, J.R. Majewski most consciously stylizes himself as a “MAGA” Republican. His particular style was built around a working-class, Rust-Belt aesthetic. The settings of the images from his intro video and on his website are in and around industrial settings such as old factories. Majewski sports a buzz-cut and a well-maintained beard. He typically appears in jeans and work gear or business casual wearing a shirt or vest embroidered, “VETERAN FOR CONGRESS.” But he also can be seen in a fitted suit.

His campaign launch video is titled “Make AMERICA Dominant Again,” an obvious connection to Donald Trump’s political messaging.<sup>66</sup> The video shows him walking into an old factory while ominous music plays in the background. Majewski is wearing a windbreaker, jeans, and work boots. The camera moves around him as he surveys the scene full of broken windows and old equipment, his breath is visible, and his voiceover states that “establishment puppets” have “waged a war against American success and independence.” He continues with a narrative of American decay, again in-line with Trump’s messaging. Now speaking to the camera Majewski exclaims, “That stops now! It’s time to make America dominant again!” As he finishes the line the camera pulls back to show him walking past a truck trailer with that slogan painted on its side.



Image 25 Screenshot “Make America DOMINANT Again,” 2022. J.R. walking past truck.

He emphasizes his local roots and qualifications of working in the nuclear power industry, being a “veteran,” and an “unapologetic patriot,” as well as his desire to “represent the hard-working people Ohio’s Ninth District with action.” His video hits many of the issues standard in far-right talk radio and internet. The narrative of decay is combined with culture war grievances and some conspiracy theories. And Majewski argues that he is “fueled by [his]

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<sup>66</sup> *Make AMERICA Dominant Again*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZkgK4YrSyw>.

patriotism,” to do “whatever it takes to return the country to return this country back to its former glory.” As he says these words, Majewski is walking toward the camera carrying an AR-15 at the low ready. The scene cuts to a steel door swinging open and Majewski walking through it saying to the camera “And if I gotta kick down doors, well that’s just what patriots do.”



Image 26 Screenshot “Make America DOMINANT Again,” 2022. J.R. holding an AR-15 while walking towards camera.

The video continues with Majewski stating what he will do if elected, but these statements do not extend beyond his commitments to American independence and strength, “like the country [he] fought for.” He then knocks down a sign that reads “CLOSED” and speaking to the camera he says “Patriots, the cowardice ends with us. It’s time to restore American dominance.” The video ends with Majewski flipping a switch to turn on the lights in the factory space, the area is now clean.

## **Nunn**

Like Majewski, Zach Nunn is an Air Force veteran, but with a much different and much longer career. He also has served the previous seven years in the Iowa state legislature. He is the most polished of the candidates featured here both in terms of messaging and look. Everything he says is clear and concise almost to the point of over-simplification. And he is able to show himself embodying all of the various roles an Iowa politician should fulfill. In his website, he

shows a mix of images of himself in uniform; in a collared shirt while sitting in a pickup or with his family; in a suit at an American Legion post and also in church; wearing a fleece sweater embroidered with the seal of the state of Iowa at a prison and another in a large barn around tractors, presumably acting in his state legislator role.

Even though Nunn had been elected to the state legislature multiple times, in his race for the US House he still needed to introduce himself to a much larger audience. His campaign launch video starts by showing a computer-generated video of a F-35 in flight. Nunn's voiceover begins, "When our communities needed a fighter, we answered the call."<sup>67</sup> The video cuts to a close shot of Nunn standing in what appears to be a war memorial ringed with American flags. He is wearing a button-down shirt without a tie. Squinting into the sunlight and the camera he introduces himself, "I'm Zach Nunn and I'm proud to have served our country as a combat veteran." The video cuts to stock footage of people in military uniform performing various tasks. His voiceover continues, "Flying over the front lines, I fought to defend our freedom."

Nunn then moves to discussing his Iowa roots and connection to agriculture and "the heartland." He mentions his experience and accomplishments in state politics all related to Republican Party platform aims. "We've got a battle ahead of us," he claims, "I'm a proven fighter for you, on the battlefield and in our state capital." He then lays out some more standard Republican platform planks such as tax cuts, supporting police, and complaints about "big tech." He closes by saying that he will "never stop fighting for you."

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<sup>67</sup> *Zach Nunn for Congress Launch Video*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tA6xQtSn-mc>.



Image 27 Screenshot “Conservative, Combat Veteran Zach Nunn is Ready to Fight for You!” 2022.

Nunn keeps this all-inclusive image in mind in his shorter 30-second advertisements made for television. One of them begins showing Nunn in a flight suit, walking near aircraft. Large text appears covering much of the screen “COMBAT VETERAN—3 TOURS OF DUTY.”<sup>68</sup> The scene changes to the interior aircraft hangar, a large US flag hangs on the wall. Nunn is now wearing a fleece sweater with the state senate seal embroidered on it and is walking and speaking directly to camera: “The military instills patriotism, courage, and service above self. These are the values I’ll bring to Washington.” In a voiceover, he states some of his policy ideas while footage plays of Nunn speaking to men in the same hanger, then a group of women eating breakfast in a diner, and then with a family and a cow. He concludes the 30-second spot with a slightly different version of the closing in his launch video, “I’ll fight for you in Congress just as hard as I fought for you in uniform.”

Nunn’s time in the Iowa state legislature shows. His message is clean, and he gets to the point quickly. He is able to hit on the common themes his fellow VetBro candidates do, but still presents himself in an approachable manner. Given the dynamics of his district and the

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<sup>68</sup> *Conservative, Combat Veteran Zach Nunn Is Ready to Fight for You!*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyMOUuhrREQ>.

competitiveness of the race, this may have been a conscious effort on his part to avoid alienating the more moderate voters he surely needed to win.

## **Kent**

Joe Kent had already spent time cultivating his personal style through appearances on Fox News Channel programs and Steve Bannon’s podcast. So, while his style is distinct, it is not as politically polished as Nunn’s. Considering the “outsider” image he tries to portray, this lack of polish may have been purposeful to show his authenticity. His video begins with an extreme close-up of Kent’s face; he is standing in a forest. Speaking fast, he introduces himself, “My name is Joe Kent I’m an America-First Republican running against Congresswoman Beutler.”<sup>69</sup> He reminds the audience that she voted for the impeachment of President Trump “with the Democrats.” Given that Kent was running in what any reasonable observer would consider a safe Republican district, he probably figured that beating all the other Republican candidates in the primary race would ensure a victory in the general election.

Then he discusses his background using many of the same themes from his biography. While he narrates this the video shows him hiking through the woods, stopping at a riverbank to admire the view.

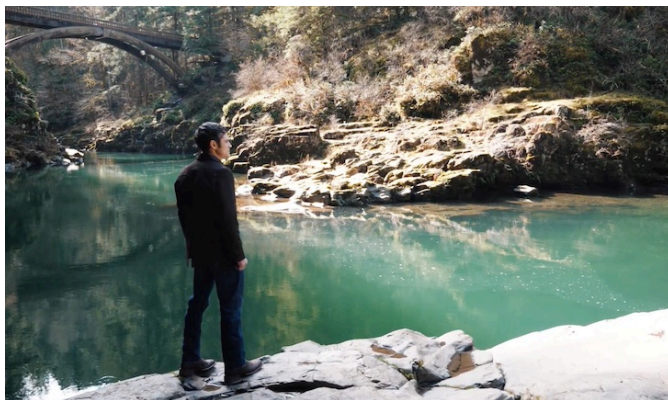


Image 28 Screenshot “Joe Kent for Congress: Send Me,” 2021. Joe standing next to river.

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<sup>69</sup> *Joe Kent for Congress: Send Me*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVzr1Y3Nlu4>.

The voiceover talks about his time as a Boy Scout, then joining the Army and defending the country, meeting his wife who was also in the military, and her death in 2019. After the death of his wife, Kent states he retired from government service to return to the Pacific Northwest and raise his sons. “But peace wasn’t in store for us. Shortly after we returned home, I watched Portland and Seattle devolve into nightly riots and lawlessness. Once beautiful cities destroyed by the Left’s quest for power.” At this point video plays, apparently from one of those cities, showing some sort of violent altercation to emphasize his comparison of the domestic environment to that of his wartime experiences. “I wanted to do something to stop the downward spiral our society is heading in. In 20 years on the battlefield and through my wife’s death, I know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of failed policy.” At this point he lists several right-wing talking points, clearly connecting domestic issues to his wartime experience. Issues such as lock downs, riots, an election “manipulated by a cabal of technocrats and bureaucrats,” and the impeachment of President Trump, “made it clear to me that I had to go forward and fight once more.” As with many of his fellow VetBros, fighting is key to how he positions his political career, just as it was during his time in the military.

But it is not just that he wants to fight for the sake of fighting. He says that he wants to fight for others. “I’ve never been someone who could ask others to fight for me. That’s why I’m asking to go fight for you in Congress just like I did throughout my eleven combat deployments.” He elaborates that his political ambitions are motivated by the same drive that motivated his military service and overseas combat, “I view this fight in Congress as a continuation of the oath that I took 23 years ago. I’m here to support and defend the Constitution and fight for my fellow Americans.” Given his earlier statements about “the Left,” it seems that he does not view them as being “fellow Americans” and more akin to a foreign enemy.



## Kistner

Tyler Kistner does not have the distinct physical presence of Crane, Luttrell or Majewski, and he also lacks the mature gravitas (in their unique ways) of Kent and Nunn. Kistner’s look is far more generic with a patchy stubble and wearing plain button-down shirts along with slacks or jeans, or a suit at a business meeting. Since Kistner joined the Marine Corps shortly after college and began running for political office right after leaving active duty, he relies almost completely on his military experience. In one ad, the opening shot is an extreme close-up of Kistner talking to camera with a caption “Tyler Kistner—Independent Voice for Congress.” He says to the camera, “My dad dug ditches. My mom worked two jobs. And I joined the Marines.”<sup>70</sup> He does not mention that he joined only after completing a degree at the University of Minnesota.



Image 29 Screenshot, "Why?" 2021

His campaign launch video is titled “Why?” In it, Kistner appears in a feature-less white stage wearing a light-blue button-down shirt with sleeves rolled up and dark blue jeans. The video opens with shots of Kistner holding his kids, and close-ups of his infant. In a voiceover he asks, “Is there anything you wouldn’t do for your children...I’m a father, these are my kids I’d fight for them; sacrifice for them; go to war for them.”<sup>71</sup> Text appears to highlight main points

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<sup>70</sup> *Ditches And Jobs*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggDWGb7ohp8>.

<sup>71</sup> *Why*, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zX\\_N3unvPo0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zX_N3unvPo0).

written in a font designed to resemble handwriting in the style of the calligraphy in the Declaration of Independence.

Kistner asks a series of hypothetical questions about whether “our children” will have a future in America and what will that future look like. Meanwhile, stock video cuts in at times that thematically match his points. These questions map onto many typical conservative political positions about immigration, the economy, voting, but only through implication. For example, rather than stating a desire to “secure the borders,” like Crane does, Kistner asks “Will the country we leave to our children have borders?” After cycling through some of these, Kistner turns to discuss his understanding of the present problems. “Right now America is experiencing the early stages of tyranny. An oppressive government merging with corrupt institutions to strip us of our rights, crater our economy, and rob our children of their future, their birthright as Americans.” After addressing perceived failures of Democratic political leaders in Minnesota, he goes into his military background as credibility. “As a Marine veteran I served four overseas tours. We took an oath to defend our Constitution. This isn’t about left versus right; this is about freedom versus tyranny.” He again characterizes the “leaders in Minnesota” as failures who have “sold out our children’s future to the radicals who wish to destroy the American dream.” Kistner offers a softer approach to the more typical VetBro style. He has all the same political preferences but is just quieter about them. Perhaps being called out in 2020 for inflating his service record humbled him some.

### **Luttrell**

Morgan Luttrell’s story shows several different facets of his life. The images Luttrell uses on his campaign’s website include him in casual clothes (polo shirt and shorts), work clothes (jeans, button-down shirt with sleeves rolled-up), and in a suit. His campaign launch video starts with quick cuts: an American flag on the back of a truck, Luttrell driving, Texas and US flags,

Luttrell entering a BBQ restaurant and chatting with customers and staff. While this video is playing, Luttrell in a voiceover says, “There’s a political battle going on in our country. It’s a fight for the heart and soul of America and our way of life here in Texas.”<sup>72</sup> Before he even brings up his military credentials, he starts talking about (culture) war. He then states his Texas roots while the video shows images of him playing with his kids. He continues while images are shown of him in combat kit in the desert, “As a combat veteran I know what it means to defend something you believe in.” Like his fellow VetBro candidates, Luttrell connects his experience in combat to domestic political issues.



Image 30 Screenshot “Morgan Luttrell for Congress,” 2021. Morgan on porch.

Like Crane and Kent, Luttrell clearly defines an enemy that he must fight: “Today our values are under attack in Washington, D.C. and around the country. I promise to take on the socialist assaults on the principles we hold dear.” He then lists off some typical Republican platform items, such as secure borders, education, and support for law enforcement. As he concludes with the FEC-required statement that the advertisement is made by his campaign, he adds a personal twist, “I approve this message because we need experienced, tough leaders in Washington who will stand up for what’s right and always put America first.” Luttrell presents

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<sup>72</sup> *Morgan Luttrell for Congress*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAoJ8YCKoTc>.

all of the aggressive, and even violent, masculinity of the VetBros but without being as coarse as Crane or Kent. Like Nunn, Luttrell is able to present himself as a competent communicator by highlighting his relevant credentials and favored conservative policies.

An important consideration for the storytelling aspect of the launch videos is the location. For each of these candidates, setting is important for how they define their overall personality and also their particular type of masculinity. Kent places himself in a redwood forest to highlight his background in the Pacific Northwest along with participation in the Boy Scouts and activities like hiking and camping when he was growing up. Majewski emphasizes his Rust-Belt roots along with the tale of American decay and the “forgotten man” by showing himself in a run-down industrial setting. By placing himself in a tattoo studio for his launch video, Crane attempts to demonstrate his “outsider” and “tough guy” image.

Kistner’s setting of a feature-less, white background has the effect of making him appear generic and lacking a personality. One possible explanation is that he was attempting to be a “blank slate” in hopes of attracting moderate voters while not alienating his Republican base. In one advertisement he says that he is “an independent voice for Congress,” and in his launch video he says that the election “isn’t about Left versus Right; this is about freedom versus tyranny.” Of course, this concern over tyranny is quite common in the far-right. Whatever the case, his attempt to appeal to a broader section of the electorate was not successful.

Luttrell and Nunn, perhaps the most polished candidates in this group, place themselves in a variety of settings to connect to more and different groups. Luttrell sits on his front porch, an enduring sign of a Southern gentleman, to communicate his concern for the future of the nation. He also places himself in a BBQ restaurant to show appeals to a more Texas-specific culture.

Even though Nunn’s military credentials are front-and-center of his campaign, he is also sure to place himself in quintessential Iowa settings, such as a diner and the state fair.



Image 31 Screenshot “Zach Nunn for Congress Launch,” 2021. “Put Iowans First.”

### Discussion of Themes

These VetBro candidates show us some of the nuances of the broader style while also showing the larger similarities in terms of how they understand themselves, the importance of the military service, and even their relationships with other Americans. In this section I turn to some of the major themes of their candidacies which connect to larger concerns raised in other parts of this dissertation.

#### Patriotism in Thoughts, Words, and Deeds

Each candidate presents their patriotic credentials in ways that align with their broader campaign and show a similarity in how they understand patriotism as a larger concept. All see patriotism as synonymous with fighting for the country, that is how John Bodnar describes “war-based patriotism.”<sup>73</sup> It is also a duty or higher calling that demands obligations. And while some like Luttrell, Kent, and Crane envision service to the community as part of patriotic duty, that

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<sup>73</sup> John Bodnar, *Divided by Terror: American Patriotism after 9/11* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

does not mean that they really share more progressive understandings of patriotism, or Bodnar’s “empathetic patriotism.” How they define their service to community is deeply conservative and even reactionary due to how they define their community.

Patriotism for the VetBros is demonstrated through their commitment to the United States, often proven by their willingness to take an oath to protect it. Some Political Action Committees (PAC) that solicited donations and supported all of the candidates featured in this chapter almost singularly focused on the importance of “oaths.” The SEAL PAC and the SOFA PAC both highlight a “sworn oath” or “blood oath” to defend the Constitution and the nation against foreign and domestic. They also claim that the “oath does not expire” and continues after military service.<sup>74</sup> Like the PACs, some of these VetBros also emphasize that the oath they took to defend the Constitution does not expire. This language bears remarkable similarities to the right-wing, anti-government militia The Oath Keepers.<sup>75</sup> While none of the veteran candidates specifically mention this group, by using similar language to it they may be signaling their affinity to it. Many current and former police and military members are part of the Oath Keepers who took a leading role in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection.<sup>76</sup>

Related to the idea of an “oath” is the concept of service, or the idea that the candidate or veterans more generally are “called to serve” the country or their community. Tyler Kistner argues that “Congress would be a whole lot more functional if every representative viewed their

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<sup>74</sup> SEAL PAC, “Home,” SEAL PAC | Electing Military Candidates, accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.sealpac.org>.

<sup>75</sup> Sam Jackson, *The Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>76</sup> Saric, Ivana. “Oath Keepers Members List Includes Military, Law Enforcement, Politicians.” Axios, September 7, 2022. <https://www.axios.com/2022/09/07/oath-keepers-member-list-military>.

job as a service, not a status.”<sup>77</sup> He claims that he is “running for Congress to ‘serve’—not to serve big business, not to serve the political elites—but to serve Minnesotans.” Luttrell’s campaign highlights the language of “service” stating that he “built a life centered around service...He turned his strong values, deep love for America, and a passion for helping others into a career of distinguished service.” After detailing his military and post-military careers, “Morgan has poured every ounce of himself into protecting America and saving as many lives as he can. He’s ready for his next mission: serving as our conservative Congressman.”<sup>78</sup>

The patriotism of the VetBros is displayed to their expressed love of the country and their dedication to it and willingness to serve in various capacities. Another component of this conception of patriotism is their readiness to fight and even die for the country. They see themselves engaged in a concerted defense of their individual liberties and willing to fight for them. But this community is also limited to a select few. They recognize people who are a threat to their community values and ability to live freely, so they recognize people whom they must fight.

How they discuss “fighting” for the country or “defending” sometimes extends beyond links to patriotism and is meant to be more or less literal. Some candidates are not just “fighting for” their constituents, but also “fighting against” perceived enemies. They often claim to have been doing so while in the military and then want to do so again in Congress and that their military service provided them the ability to do so. Majewski walking through an old factory holding an AR-15 saying he is “willing to do whatever it takes.” Kistner is more abstract by

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<sup>77</sup> Kistner for Congress, “About.”

<sup>78</sup> Texans for Morgan Luttrell, “Meet Morgan.”

saying that he “would fight for [his children],” and that he “would go to war for them.” And Nunn frequently states that he “will fight for you in Congress just as [he] did in uniform.”

As with many issues, Crane, Kent, and Luttrell bring the most militaristic language to bear in their appeals. Kent likens the situation in the US to his time fighting counterterrorism missions while in the military. For his part, Luttrell refers to political issues as a “battle for the heart and soul of America,” and that “as a combat veteran” he knows to fight for what he believes in. And Crane, after listing off many problems he perceives in the US exclaims, “It’s time that we the people fight back.”

Only Nunn and Kistner are indirect in identifying enemies. The other four are sure to identify enemies beyond their particular political opponents, even though this identification is sometimes vague or embedded in the “dog whistles” of right-wing conspiracy theories. The VetBro candidates see the naming of enemies as evidence of their commitment to their cause unlike more traditional candidates.<sup>79</sup> The VetBro candidates see the community they are serving in fairly binary terms. You are either in or you are out. They also want their community to not change—more precisely, they want to return to an imagined past. Kent and Luttrell are the most vocal about this in their campaigns, directly calling out what they see as Leftist or socialist political goals as destroying their traditional communities and values.

#### Performances of (Working Class) Masculinity

Military masculinities are multiple due to the proximity of military leadership to centers of power and the rough and dirty life of a “grunt” in the trenches and the many occupational specialties to support the combat troops. It goes between a clean-cut performance in dress

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<sup>79</sup> Benoit, “The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Communication,” 199.



uniform to a more working-class or rural performance in the field.<sup>80</sup> So, for Luttrell to show himself in a business suit in one image and work clothes in the next is fairly consistent with how military masculinities are understood in terms of their aesthetic appearance. Kent relies on a different form of rural masculinity by showing himself in the forests and mountains, and also his contempt for “urban” areas. And Majewski clearly makes attempts to connect himself to the industrial working-class masculinity of Rust Belt factory workers.

As military masculinity is often associated with hard and demanding labor along with the literal sacrifice of one’s body, it is readily legible among working class and rural masculinities. This allows many veterans (not just VetBros) to give themselves a working class “look” without being accused of feigning authenticity. They understand the taste politics of the working class and rural aesthetics and are able to appropriate them. Even if they do not have the same economic precarity of their working-class voters, they indicate their class solidarity through aesthetics and taste. The VetBro politicians may present themselves as exceptional through their military service, but they do not alienate themselves from their rural and working-class voters because they are able to unironically conform to those taste cultures.<sup>81</sup>

Their military service is also used as a way to perform what Reece Peck calls a “popular intellect.”<sup>82</sup> They use military service to communicate that their expertise and qualifications do not come from elite knowledge, rather they are more “common sense.” Even though Luttrell’s post-graduate education and Nunn’s experience in the state legislature are mentioned in their respective websites, their video advertisements focus on their military experience and

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<sup>80</sup> Rachel Woodward, “Warrior Heroes and Little Green Men: Soldiers, Military Training, and the Construction of Rural Masculinities,” *Rural Sociology* 65, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>81</sup> Reece Peck, *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 142.

<sup>82</sup> Peck, *Fox Populism*, 147.

connections with voters as a way to show they know what needs to be done and that they share the values of their voters. Their knowledge on the issues comes from their practical experiences in the military and their connections to their respective communities. Their shared rural and working-class cultural identities are easily translatable through their military service. They further demonstrate their rural and working-class solidarity through resentment towards purported cultural and political elites who are argued to be threatening their identity and values.<sup>83</sup>



Image 32 Screenshot “Morgan Luttrell for Congress,” 2021. Morgan shaking hands with staff at BBQ restaurant.

The imagery some of these candidates use draws from a rich semiotic history connecting men to particular settings, often with firearms as a way to demonstrate their ability and willingness to fend for themselves and also protect others.<sup>84</sup> In addition to their connection to rural life, there is a historic cultural connection to the myths of westward expansion and colonialism.<sup>85</sup> These VetBros are also part of a growing trend of political candidates (mostly members of the Republican Party) using guns in political advertising.<sup>86</sup> Beyond the connection to

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<sup>83</sup> Amanda Nell Edgar and Holly Willson Holladay, “‘Everybody’s Hard Times Are Different’: Country as a Political Investment in White Masculine Precarity,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2019): 125.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth C. Hirschman, “Men, Dogs, Guns, and Cars: The Semiotics of Rugged Individualism,” *Journal of Advertising* 32, no. 1 (2003): 20-21.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth C. Hirschman, *Branding Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 50-58.

<sup>86</sup> Ryan Neville-Shepard and Casey Ryan Kelly, “Whipping It out: Guns, Campaign Advertising, and the White Masculine Spectacle,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37, no. 5 (2020).

military service or “rugged individualism,” guns in political advertising demonstrate a commitment to violently upholding white, patriarchal values without ever needed in reference race or gender.<sup>87</sup>

One specific performance of military masculinity at play for all of these candidates is the “operator.” Combat is the defining principle of how military masculinity is understood, especially by VetBros. Obviously, the primary purpose of the military services is to engage in combat, and all of the most prestigious military awards and recognition are related to performance in combat. This is why all of the various internal hierarchies in the military tilt up towards the branches closest to combat.<sup>88</sup> So, the “operator,” or member of one of the elite Special Operations units, sits at the top of the ordering of military manliness. This connection to the pinnacle of military manliness makes their overall appearance and even politics attractive to others trying to demonstrate their own military masculinity. Among VetBros, being a combat veteran carries a special weight, so much so that all of the men featured in this chapter who have been in combat are not shy about pointing it out. Even Nunn, who says he “flew over” combat, wants voters to know that. And the prestige of combat experience among VetBros is why Kistner and Majewski were tempted to lie about being combat veterans even though they are not.

The “operator” as an elite of the military is also seen in how civilians understand the military. As discussed in Chapter 2, Navy SEALs have a special place in narratives about war in the US due to their “elite” status as well as their own self-promotion. Many of the themes and imagery present in the memoirs of Navy SEALs are present in the campaigns of these former

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<sup>87</sup> Neville-Shepard and Kelly, “Whipping It out: Guns, Campaign Advertising, and the White Masculine Spectacle,” 468-469.

<sup>88</sup> Ramon Hinojosa, “Doing Hegemony: Military, Men, and Constructing a Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 18, no. 2 (2010).

SEALs. The three Special Operations veterans (Crane, Kent, and Luttrell) have similar politics and ways of presenting their politics. The close, insular nature of the Special Operations Forces likely promotes a certain degree of uniformity of political beliefs. The fact that their politics are mirrored by many non-SOF veterans may demonstrate an aspirational quality that some have called the “cult of the operator.” Just as the SOF service members are highlighted as the best of the military, SOF veterans fill the same role for VetBros.

#### Possible Issues Raised by VetBros in Office

VetBros are going to be a part of US politics for some time. Popular cultural productions such as memoirs, streaming comedy programming, and fashion are necessarily important to the overall cultural and ideological landscape, but their creators have no direct access to political power. While the effects of VetBros (and the larger generation of Post-9/11 veterans) on US politics remains to be seen, the campaigns featured here do point to some issues that will need to be considered.

The esteem given to veterans and the military has been used (or manipulated) by veteran candidates for their electoral purposes. Even though they both lost, Kistner and Majewski’s tall tales about their service recall issues of “stolen valor” and point to how the issue is now understood. The VetBros’ militaristic understanding of political conflict and their overall militaristic political views will influence how they legislate and oversee military affairs and the future of Civil-Military Relations. Finally, given the participation of veterans in the January 6, 2021, insurrection, to include some who ran for office in 2022, how veteran politicians understand the constitutional order will be important.

#### **Stolen Valor**

Military service does not guarantee electoral wins, but it does make for compelling stories a candidate can tell on the campaign trail. But it seems that in telling stories about their

military service, Kistner and Majewski let their stories get away from them. And they are far from being the first veteran politicians to get in this type of mess. One similar example is Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal who got in trouble in 2006 for saying he was a “Vietnam War veteran” when in fact he had only served during the Vietnam War era. Among veterans, the debate over who is a “combat veteran” and who is not is a thorny issue, and it is not always a straight-forward answer.<sup>89</sup>

Obviously, these examples are not the same as outright fabricating non-existent military service as in the case of Xavier Alvarez who, while running for a seat for a Southern California water board, not only lied about receiving the Medal of Honor but had never served in the military at all. In 2005, the Stolen Valor Act made these types of lies punishable with prison. But in 2012, the Supreme Court held in *United States v. Alvarez* that the Stolen Valor Act violated protections of free expression. The decision in the Alvarez case stated there can be no law against lying on the campaign trail in order to secure votes.<sup>90</sup> It may be unseemly and inappropriate, but that is a matter for voters to decide. When Kistner and Majewski’s embellishments and lies came to surface, the two were mocked for their claims and opponents were able to impugn their credibility. Political Action Committees and the national Republican Party withdrew their support and the two candidates ultimately lost. It seemed that the Alvarez decision was correct; it was the voters who punished the two for their lies.

What is important for this dissertation is that they tried to inflate their military service because they believed it would help them electorally. They believed voters would respect them

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<sup>89</sup> Katharine M. Millar and Joanna Tidy, “Combat as a Moving Target: Masculinities, the Heroic Soldier Myth, and Normative Martial Violence,” *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>90</sup> Anthony Kennedy, *United States v. Alvarez* 567 U.S. 709, No. 11-210 (U.S. Supreme Court June 28, 2012).

more. Even if there was no deliberate plan on their parts to defraud the voters and the embellishments happened spontaneously in the excitement of a campaign rally, they still saw value in pumping up their military records. This demonstrates the appeal of military service and overall esteem granted to it. The persistence of Stolen Valor does point to problems with how civilians understand military service and how veterans assume civilians understand military service. Interestingly, it shows clear boundaries that must not be crossed in elections. Credible accusations of lying about one's military service is beyond the pale while credible accusations of sexual assault are not.

### **Civil-Military Relations**

One area of governing VetBros could change is Civil-Military Relations (CMR). Because of their perceived expertise in military affairs, it is sensible that VetBros would want to show their ability and focus on that area in legislative activity and committee work. In fact, Luttrell is now a member of the House Armed Services Committee. This addition of military experience will surely change CMR and Congressional oversight of the DoD, what is not clear is how.

Contemporary CMR scholars have voiced concerns about the current balance of civilian control over the military. While this is a perennial concern of the field since its inception, it has been exacerbated by the presidency of Donald Trump. In some ways Trump over-relied on the military expertise many senior military officers, especially retired generals. But at the same time he was outright hostile to the idea that military officers knew more about military affairs than he did.<sup>91</sup> And when pressed on his relationship with the military Trump stated that he respected

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<sup>91</sup> Leo Shane III, "Trump Blasted Top Military Generals as 'a Bunch of Dopes and Babies' According to New Book," *Military Times*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/01/17/trump-blasted-top-military-generals-as-a-bunch-of-dopes-and-babies-according-to-new-book/>.

lower ranks more than the generals who were all war-mongers.<sup>92</sup> He fit his anti-elite, populist messaging into the realm of military affairs, but still sought the credibility offered by proximity to the military elites.

CMR scholars see related but somewhat contradictory problems with the current state of relations. For one, they point to too much deference given to the military leadership by civilians, especially in Congress, and believe civilian leaders need to reassert control.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, CMR scholars are worried about attempts to make the military partisan, and this sometimes happens when civilian leaders call the uniformed leadership to task for certain issues, that is when they are trying to assert control.<sup>94</sup> While the balance has always been difficult, the Trump presidency certainly put it to the test.

On the military side, CMR scholars see a problem with a certain degree of contempt for civilians felt by military officers. In surveys given to US Military Academy cadets and officers advancing into senior ranks, researchers noted that a large majority of their respondents displayed negative attitudes towards civilian cultural values.<sup>95</sup> Also, regardless of public acclamation of support, these cadets and mid-career officers believed that civilians do not appreciate the sacrifices made by the military.<sup>96</sup> A military that feels itself to be superior to its civilian leaders and, at the same time, feels isolated and unappreciated is certainly a problem for

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<sup>92</sup> Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Steve Holland, “How Trump Fell out of Love with His Generals, and Why the Feeling Is Mutual,” *Reuters*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-military-idUSKCN26E2YV>.

<sup>93</sup> Alice Hunt Friend and Sharon K. Weiner, “Principals with Agency: Assessing Civilian Deference to the Military,” *Texas National Security Review* 5, no. 4 (2022).

<sup>94</sup> Kori Schake, “Don’t Drag the Military into Politics,” *War on the Rocks*, December 13, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/12/dont-drag-the-military-into-politics/>.

<sup>95</sup> Susan Bryant, Brett Swaney, and Heidi Urben, “From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint: The Societal Implications of Military Exceptionalism,” *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 2 (2021).

<sup>96</sup> Bryant, Swaney, and Urben, “From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint.”

continued civilian control of the military. But there is also a recognition that its professional culture has prevented some of the worst excesses of Trump's uses of military power. That is, because of their sense of having a superior culture, they were better able to resist and defy orders that were in clear violation of law.<sup>97</sup> While this is surely a good result, there are also instances of the uniformed leadership resisting orders that were arguably bad although surely lawful.

Increased veteran experience in Congress will change these dynamics. Military experience among legislators will possibly mean that they ask better questions of the military leadership and push to hold General and Flag Officers accountable. They may want more of a say in defense policies, challenge executive war-making authorities, and reassert Congress's role, following previous observations of veterans in Congress.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps due to own their own experience in following the professional standards of the military, veterans in Congress may hold their civilian colleagues accountable and prevent them from dragging the military into partisan fights. But these are all idealistic assumptions.

If the VetBros use their stated understandings of politics and security affairs, the rosy beliefs about veterans in Congress will be challenged. For starters, they show no desire to want to work with Democratic Party lawmakers (including those who are veterans) and have even signaled some out as being dangerous for America, even enemies. While they may indeed work to hold the senior uniformed leadership accountable, they have shown contempt for that military leadership, somewhat similar to Trump's. Kent is very clear that he blames the "establishment"

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<sup>97</sup> Risa Brooks and Sharan Grewal, "'Twice the Citizen': How Military Attitudes of Superiority Undermine Civilian Control in the United States," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66, no. 4-5 (2022).

<sup>98</sup> Lupton, "Out of the Service, Into the House."



leadership in the DoD as the reason for his wife’s death. In a sense, he is angry that Trump did not have more control over the activities of the military.

The VetBros have also indicated that they want to extend their oversight of the DoD to include personnel matters. The professional culture of the military is another of the perennial issues of CMR, and VetBros have made it clear that they are not happy with how (they perceive) it has changed. One problem that they have already broached is what they see as a problem of a “woke” military personnel policy which they blame for recruiting challenges despite the lack of evidence. The new chair of the Sub-Committee on Military Personnel is Navy veteran Jim Banks of Indiana, who is attempting to take on the VetBro style for his 2024 Senate campaign. Banks has already indicated that he believes President Biden’s “woke agenda” is hurting the military and that troops need to be prepared for “success on the battlefield...not for fighting the Left’s culture wars.”<sup>99</sup>

The VetBro politicians have shown their problems with the DoD’s uniformed leadership and how they see it acting “politically” when really it is acting as a large bureaucratic institution trying to maintain its relevance. The VetBros want the military to conform to their own normative understandings of it, particularly around issues regarding gender. This will surely go beyond recruiting problems and presidential authority and can seep into the actual conduct of war. President Trump’s pardons of convicted war criminals Eddie Gallagher and Clint Lorance shows a broader disregard for the laws of armed conflict and military order and discipline.

As shown in Chapter 2, the Navy SEAL memoir writers all had their criticisms about the Law of Armed Conflict and Rules of Engagement. It is reasonable to assume that Representative

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<sup>99</sup> Rebecca Kheel, “Republicans Aim at ‘Woke’ Military and Biden as House Finalizes Military and Veteran Panel Membership,” January 27, 2023, <https://www.yahoo.com/now/republicans-aim-woke-military-biden-220319765.html>.

Morgan Luttrell has similar views as his brother Marcus and sees Rules of Engagement as a problem in conflict. Or like Evan Hafer of Black Rifle Coffee featured in Chapter 4, they may not see any issue with the war crimes of Eddie Gallagher (among many others). They may even watch Vet TV and find violence and the brutalization of the enemy funny. Through their past participation in the violence of combat, and commitment to the country, they claim moral authority over how to use and judge violence; if it is performed for the mission, then it is acceptable. To question why violence was used in combat is, for these VetBro politicians and other special operators, is to “politicize” the conflict. They argue for the “depoliticization” of violence so that they can politicize it for their own moral and political ends.<sup>100</sup>

If the VetBro attitudes towards military culture are accepted by others, particularly their civilian Republican colleagues, this will erode the professional culture of the military. The policies they are complaining about they see as a result of liberal or bureaucratic takeover of military culture. What they are calling the politicization of the military (e.g., disobeying Trump, more inclusive personnel policies) is the professional culture attempting to maintain its own set of standards. The VetBros want it to enforce their standards based on their political beliefs they learned in the cultures of their military units. Their goal of “depoliticization” is just pushing their own political beliefs onto the services. The new problem will be a lack of deference to military leaders. But a bigger issue is how they understand the military’s place in the Constitutional order and perhaps the Constitutional order itself.

### **January 6, 2021**

Approximately 20% of those arrested for participation in the insurrection and riots at the Capitol were veterans, about twice their representation in the general population. Some of the

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<sup>100</sup> Julien Pomarède, “Normalizing Violence through Front-Line Stories: The Case of *American Sniper*,” *Critical Military Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018).

most prominent convictions for seditious conspiracy were of veterans who were members of the paramilitary organization The Oath Keepers. Several of the candidates featured in this chapter are supporters of the riot and insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and several Republican candidates for state and local offices were active participants. Others publicly defended the actions of January 6<sup>th</sup> or maintained the false narrative that explained the events as a “peaceful protest” or decried the violence but stated that they understood the motivations.

Another Navy SEAL veteran who also exhibits the VetBro style, Derrick van Orden from Wisconsin, was at the Capitol that day but did not enter the building. He condemned the violence, but he also maintained that the rioters were justified in their motivations.<sup>101</sup> J.R. Majewski was also present and has at different times condemned the violence and expressed his regrets for not being a more active participant.<sup>102</sup> Joe Kent was not in Washington, D.C. that day but has openly defended the Capitol rioters as “patriots” and claimed that they were “political prisoners.” Since the 2020 election Kent has falsely claimed that Trump won, and that the election was “stolen” from him. One item on his agenda had he been elected was to investigate the Department of Justice and FBI for their prosecutions of Capitol Rioters.<sup>103</sup> Critical to his primary win over incumbent Jamie Herrera Beutler was her vote to impeach Trump after the insurrection, one of only ten House Republicans to do so. During the primary race, he never missed a chance to remind voters and donors of this fact.

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<sup>101</sup> Thomas Beaumont, “In Wisconsin, Voters Shrug off GOP Candidate’s Jan. 6 Tie,” AP NEWS, October 16, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-presidential-washington-election-2020-donald-trump-35be0e64d964726eacad5c4eda20d422>.

<sup>102</sup> Slodysko and LaPorta, “Ohio GOP House Candidate Has Misrepresented Military Service.”

<sup>103</sup> Jim Brunner, “Congressional Candidate Joe Kent Wants to Rewrite History of Jan. 6 Attack,” The Seattle Times, November 4, 2022, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/congressional-candidate-joe-kent-wants-to-rewrite-history-of-jan-6-attack/>.

The 118<sup>th</sup> Congress (2023-2025) now has the largest number of veterans in its ranks since 2007 with 80 in the House and 17 in the Senate, 19 of whom were first elected in 2022. There are veterans from 36 different states, and Texas has the largest share with 10. Seven of the veterans serving are women, the highest number of women veterans in the history of Congress.<sup>104</sup> Veterans seeking political office is nothing new. The range of veterans who sought office in 2022 resembles previous generations of veterans: there are civic-minded individuals who believe strongly in serving their community and country, opportunistic and power-hungry characters who know how to take advantage of the political situation, and just regular narcissists who truly think they are the best thing for the nation. None of these general characteristics are unique for VetBros or veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars.

VetBro politicians, and veterans more broadly, emphasize that experience is knowledge. They know better because they have “been there.” Having been in the military they argue that they are better qualified to speak about the military; having been in combat they are better qualified to speak about war. This is reminiscent of the authority the authors of the memoirs discussed in Chapter 2 claim. And even veterans taking anti-war stances claim the same expertise and authority.<sup>105</sup>

What is different is how the VetBro culture of the Post-9/11 generation of veterans has emphasized the importance of their military service for themselves in terms of how they view themselves and also in how they view their analysis of political problems. They have brought to the political arena their particular understanding of patriotism and its relation to militaristic

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<sup>104</sup> Leo Shane III, “Breaking down the Number of Veterans in the 118th Congress,” *Military Times*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/election-2022/2023/01/03/breaking-down-the-number-of-veterans-in-the-118th-congress/>.

<sup>105</sup> Joanna Tidy, “Gender, Dissenting Subjectivity and the Contemporary Military Peace Movement in *Body of War*,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 3 (2015).

masculinity. Of course, the VetBros are a minority of the veterans in Congress. But they are also very sure of themselves and are eager to make their voices heard, so they may try to define what it means to be a veteran in elected office.

Other chapters have shown how VetBros have attempted to use their military service to gain cultural or economic advantage by trying to dominate the common narratives about the military, patriotism, and war. In this chapter I show how veterans try to gain political power, again through various uses of their military service and narratives about the meanings of patriotism. Their election campaigning also points to the larger problem of the contested meanings of patriotism and the attempts to claim ownership of its meaning. Even the claim that one thing or another aligns with “patriotic values” implicitly excludes competing claims. Similarly, some of these campaigns point to differing ideas of service to the nation and the meanings of military service.

All these VetBro candidates, and many like them not featured here, use emotionally charged campaign language as a way to signal their moral commitment and group identity. While some critics claim emotional campaign advertising appeals to “base instincts” rather than reason and are meant to appeal to “uneducated” voters, this is based on a mistaken belief that elections are meant to solely be about policy prescriptions.<sup>106</sup> Group identity and conceptions of morality are at the heart of electoral politics; emotional political advertising is about crafting an argument based on moral claims and group identity.

Candidates’ use of “emotional cues” built around issues such as national security and patriotism or masculinity and willingness to fight can express a moral stance that will possibly

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<sup>106</sup> Ted Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 35-39.

resonate with voters.<sup>107</sup> For these candidates to be so open about their love for the country, their anger at those they consider enemies, and their fears about the future of the country show their commitment for potential voters and their association with like-minded people. The candidates are signaling group identity and values, something that all of these VetBros featured in this dissertation are doing. They are trying to show that they are part of something bigger. They want to identify as veterans because they desire membership in a larger group.

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<sup>107</sup> Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds*, 62-68.

## Conclusion

In the aftermath of previous conflicts in US history veterans often banded together and formed formal organizations commonly referred to as Veterans Services Organizations (VSO).<sup>1</sup> These groups have been critical in advancing national policy to support veterans as well as providing local clubs or “posts” that serve as meeting places for veterans, generally in the form of members-only bars. These posts also raise money for local charities and take on active roles in civic events, especially patriotic celebrations such as 4<sup>th</sup> of July parades. They provide veterans spaces to enjoy the company of other veterans, to feel as if they are still a part of a larger community, to have a purpose.

The VSOs were not hospitable to the generation of veterans who returned from the Vietnam War. They even lobbied against Veterans Affairs legislation that would have provided support for the younger veterans’ unique needs for fear money would be diverted away from programs serving their members of the WWII and Korean War generation.<sup>2</sup> Several years after the end of the Vietnam War the VSOs began to change because they realized they needed a new generation of veterans to fill their ranks.<sup>3</sup> The “stab-in-the-back” myth that began in the Nixon White House had firmly taken hold and the war’s outcome was blamed on a lack of public support.<sup>4</sup> Conservative activists had built a myth of a “noble cause” that was undermined by

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<sup>1</sup> The largest VSOs currently operating in the US are the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

<sup>2</sup> Wilbur J. Scott, *Vietnam Veterans since the War: The Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange, and the National Memorial* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Scott, *Vietnam Veterans since the War*, 177.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey P. Kimball, “Out of Primordial Cultural Ooze: Inventing Political and Policy Legacies about the U.S. Exit from Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (2010).

liberal politicians, their allies in the press, and anti-war activists.<sup>5</sup> Feminists were similarly blamed for undermining traditional gender roles and therefore weakening the military force, but in both the political and cultural spheres the masculinity of the US, and more specifically the US military, had been reclaimed.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the stories about the Vietnam War worked as a “subtle white racial movement” that made “veteran” synonymous with “white.”<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the first invasion of Iraq in 1991 the VSOs eagerly welcomed the veterans of that conflict.<sup>8</sup> The “Vietnam Syndrome” had been kicked and the public was firmly supportive of the military and its veterans due to purposeful messaging by the government and press.<sup>9</sup> But even though the veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars also enjoyed high degrees of public support, they have not sought membership in the traditional VSOs. In fact, many local posts risk being closed for want of members. The reputation of the VSOs for being filled with conservative, white men in funny hats has made many younger veterans, especially women and non-white veterans, wary of these organizations. And while the VetBros featured in this dissertation share many of the politics of the traditional VSOs, their stodgy reputation is uninspiring. But that does not mean that Post-9/11 veterans, and VetBros in particular, do not seek the company of like-minded peers. The VSOs’ sentimentality and respect for tradition is antithetical to what the VetBros wish

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<sup>5</sup> Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 331-334.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Alena Papayanis, “Everybody’s Coming Back a Hero: Reflections and Deflections of Heroism in the Gulf,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas D. Beamish, Harvey Molotch, and Richard Flacks, “Who Supports the Troops? Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the Making of Collective Memory,” *Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (1995): 354-356.



to express. VetBros want to be brash and irreverent because it emphasizes their belief that they are unique and outsiders.

In this dissertation I have shown how some veterans have expressed the VetBro identity as something unique to the Post-9/11 generation of veterans. This identity has manifested as it has due to the particularities of the Post-9/11 Wars. But VetBros will not go away anytime soon just because these wars have concluded—in fact, currently serving junior soldiers are among the target audiences for the VetBro brands and media. VetBros see themselves as different, indeed better than, previous generations of veterans, not just civilians. And they also see themselves as outsiders, as members of a counterculture. The VSOs symbolize entrenched power; in no way can they claim any countercultural status that the VetBros seek. In the Introduction I argued that VetBros are not a subculture as typically understood in sociological theory but that studying them as a subculture is useful as a way to see the various aspects of VetBro identity and how they work to support each other. This is following the insights of Stuart Hall, Dick Hedbige, and their contemporaries at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1970s and 1980s Great Britain who emphasized the interconnections between subculture group outlook and style; the outward expressions are part of the overall message.

Perhaps another way of looking at VetBros is that they *want* to be a subculture. They want to see themselves as outsiders even though their social and political views are conservative, a feature they share with the so-called “alt-right.” So they latch on to the idea of being a “cultural outsider,” a victim of “cancel culture” for speaking their minds and being true to themselves. The principal reason I stop short of labeling VetBros as a subculture is because there are no clubs, festivals, or events that explicitly try to bring VetBros together in shared community. There are no VetBro bands, although some country musicians cater to aggressive masculinity and

patriotism. The “Irreverent Warrior” events organized by Vet TV founder Donny O’Malley include many veterans who would never want to be considered a VetBro, even some who are turned off by Vet TV’s humor.

But even though there may not be VetBro gatherings, and even though few VetBros would want to self-identify as one, I do not foreclose the possibility that they are indeed searching for some type of connection to others and finding the need for meaning within connections to others. They may miss the close interpersonal relationships they remember from their time in the military, the feeling as if they are a member of a group with a higher purpose. So they take on a look and style as a way to feel as if they are a member of something. They want to be identified as veterans; they wear the veteran “uniform.” Their broader cultural infrastructure (i.e., memoirs, consumer brands, comedy) further helps to communicate their identity and values and to spread their message.

Understanding how VetBros imagine the core concepts discussed in this dissertation (patriotism, masculinity, militarism, legitimate use of violence) can help show how like-minded civilians understand these concepts as well. Civilians tend to look up to veterans already, so will likely take cues from like-minded veterans. The VetBros that move on to electoral politics will try to craft policy based on these values. Due to this cultural/social capital granted to them, some VetBros will attempt to leverage it to define the military and military activities past and present. For example, they will use their position to describe the Post-9/11 Wars as being lost due to a “stab-in-the-back,” something for which the war memoirists featured in Chapter 2 have already set the stage in their critiques of the military’s Rules of Engagement. They have already used their credibility to excuse past war crimes and even propose future ones.

VetBros are a minority of a minority in the US; they do not represent all veterans even if they would like to believe they do. Veterans from all time periods represent about 10% of the total US population. Veterans of the Post-9/11 Era make up only 2% of the population.<sup>10</sup> Policy and politics kept most Americans isolated from the wars. While trying to separate the effects of wars from most civilians, politicians and the Defense Department waged effective public relations campaigns extolling the virtues of the military and veterans and connecting them to patriotic commitments. Public relations (or propaganda) campaigns such as these are typical for any wartime government; the difference during the Post-9/11 Wars is that the government did not also demand that civilians sacrifice as well. The government did not attempt to raise taxes or ration consumer goods. Civilians were told, instead, to spend freely; the richest were given hefty tax cuts. Rather than attempting to attach the virtues of the nation's fighting forces with patriotic self-sacrifice by civilians through foregoing household goods and paying higher taxes, civilians were only told how great the military was and to not think too much about the conduct of the wars.<sup>11</sup>

This focus on the troops allows the state to rhetorically distance them from the actual wars.<sup>12</sup> This separation of the military from the politics of the wars and from the civilian population combined with patriotic propaganda created an almost deification of the military and veterans. And this deification of the military and veterans further encouraged their isolation.

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<sup>10</sup> Katherine Schaeffer, "The Changing Face of America's Veteran Population," *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 5, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, "'Your Flag Decal Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore': U.S. Consumers, Wal-Mart, and the Commodification of Patriotism," in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity*, ed. Dana A. Heller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Bulmer and Maya Eichler, "Unmaking Militarized Masculinity: Veterans and the Project of Military-to-Civilian Transition," *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 165.

Journalist and Iraq War veteran Alex Horton described this as putting veterans on a “pedestal.”<sup>13</sup> He argues that putting veterans on a pedestal simultaneously glorifies them, keeps them away from civilians, and causes veterans to look down on civilians and feel superior to them. But this glorification creates an impossible standard, that of the “hero.” And if a veteran does not meet this impossible standard then they must fall into one of the other stereotypes: broken and/or dangerous. These stereotypes take hold due to the small size of the military which means many people only have media representations to base their knowledge of veterans.<sup>14</sup>

Vet TV’s Donny O’Malley exclaims the heroism of the Post-9/11 veterans and singles them out for their unique ability to “annihilate the enemy” while being “careful not to hurt civilians.”<sup>15</sup> Leaving aside the obvious inaccuracy of his statement, it is a widely shared belief among VetBros. So is his contention that these “heroes” are forgotten and have no one to turn to, which is his rationale for the comedy network. Evan Hafer of Black Rifle Coffee Company clearly points to this problem. He says that civilians are actually comfortable with not knowing veterans and that they would rather not think about how 18- and 19-year-olds are being sent to war and coming back “broken.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time he sees war as a place where one can be challenged and come out better, using the “hero” image. Chris Kyle, the author of *American Sniper*, also comfortably holds on to these different images of veterans. He demands that

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<sup>13</sup> Alex Horton, “Help Veterans by Taking Them Off the Pedestal,” *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/11/help-veterans-by-taking-them-off-the-pedestal/281316/>.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Parrott et al., “Mental Representations of Military Veterans: The Pictures (and Words) In Our Heads,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6, no. 3 (2020): 67.

<sup>15</sup> Donny O’Malley, “VETv, Veteran Entertainment Television,” *Donny O’Malley* (blog), June 18, 2016, <https://donnyomalley.com/vetv-veteran-entertainment-television/>.

<sup>16</sup> Black Rifle Coffee Company, “It’s Who We Are: Evan Hafer,” Video, YouTube, October 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GiAE07z31k>.

veterans “be treated like the men they are: equals, heroes.”<sup>17</sup> This is comparable to what medical anthropologist Zoë H. Wool describes as the “extra/ordinary” of veteran reintegration. She noted that many supporters of veterans simultaneously claim to want wounded veterans to feel “ordinary” again while also holding them up as heroes, as extraordinary.<sup>18</sup>

VetBros recognize that they are a minority of the population and have internalized the gratitude from civilians. They do not feel as if they are a part of civilian society. They even claim to be shunned by society and popular culture. But unlike their fathers and uncles of the Vietnam War generation, VetBros *embrace* the feeling of being shunned as it gives them a unique identity. They believe that being a veteran makes them outsiders; that their numerical minority equals marginalization. They claim that supporting war, patriotism, and being a traditional masculine man are all “not cool” according to popular culture, so they emphasize those very aspects to make themselves stand out.

VetBros may not have close-knit communities to turn to but act as if they do. The fact that there is not a music scene or festivals that bring VetBros together does not necessarily mean that they do not have ambitions of larger group affinities. This is why previous generations of veterans have sought membership in VSOs such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars, or more recently the disaster relief organization Team Rubicon. They are trying to show others that not only are they veterans, they are veterans who believe in certain things. O’Malley’s “Irreverent Warrior” events and his stated purpose behind Vet TV are attempts at providing avenues to social support through camaraderie, but without the sentimentality of the traditional

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<sup>17</sup> Chris Kyle, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. History* (New York: Harper, 2012), 423.

<sup>18</sup> Zoë H. Wool, *After War: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 123-129.

VSOs or the seriousness (and seriously hard work) of disaster relief with Team Rubicon. But it is a fleeting attempt at trying to create a community. Even hardcore fans of Vet TV and devoted participants in “Irreverent Warrior” events cannot recreate close communities through texting and fun runs. So, by adopting a larger style they are trying to signal membership in a group—part of something bigger than themselves.

This desire for finding meaning in a community dedicated to a common goal may also help explain why so many veterans were present at the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Their patriotic commitments demanded of them, in their understanding, a response to help secure the Constitutional order, just like their military service was driven by patriotism, and their aggressive masculinity made them willing to get in the fight.<sup>19</sup> Finally, their sense of having tactical training and experience contributed to veterans trying to take the lead, exemplified by the scene of members of the Oath Keepers, wearing tactical kit, walking in a “stack formation” up the steps of the Capitol.

Veterans trying to find meaning in the collective action of insurrection is indeed a scary and worrisome possibility. It mirrors the worries that Willard Waller expressed in 1944 when he noted that disaffected veterans became the nucleus of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party.<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Belew noted a similar problem with veterans of the Vietnam War joining white supremacist militias.<sup>21</sup> This remains an ongoing problem for veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars as well.<sup>22</sup> This potential for collective action should not overshadow the problem of veterans trying

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<sup>19</sup> Luke Mogelson, *The Storm Is Here: An American Crucible* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Willard Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back* (New York: Dryden Press, 1944).

<sup>21</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Travis Tritten et al., “The Threat from Extremist Groups Is Growing. Service Members and Vets Are Getting Sucked into the Violence.,” *Military.com*, April 5, 2023,

to “prove themselves” to others through individual acts of violence. On May 1, 2023, Daniel Penny, a 24-year-old Marine Corps veteran, murdered Jordan Neely, a Black street performer in the midst of a mental health crisis, on a New York City subway. Possibly due to his Marine background, Penny was quickly hailed as a “hero” for his actions. Neely was vilified as a “wolf” while Penny was the “sheepdog” doing his job protecting the other passengers, the “sheep.” His status as a veteran was used to explain that his actions were not only in self-defense, but he was also defending his community.

This rhetoric of the “sheepdog” became popular among veterans as well as police with the release of Clint Eastwood’s film adaptation of Chris Kyle’s *American Sniper*. Even though Kyle never mentions anything like this in his book, his family believes that he would have approved of the message.<sup>23</sup> The most-likely source was Dave Grossman’s book *On Killing* (2004). The filmmakers probably wanted to use the parable to show that Kyle is not a ruthless killer, but rather a man devoted to the people he loves.<sup>24</sup> The idea that he is this “sheepdog” gives his violent actions some sort of moral vindication. Military and police have adopted this idea to similarly excuse their violent excesses.<sup>25</sup> The sheepdog, like the image of “The Punisher” that Kyle uses in his book, creates an easy-to-understand meme to explain their violence. And memes

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<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/04/05/threat-extremist-groups-growing-service-members-and-vets-are-getting-sucked-violence.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Cummings and Eric Cummings, “The Surprising History of American Sniper’s ‘Wolves, Sheep, and Sheepdogs’ Speech,” *Slate*, January 21, 2015, <https://slate.com/culture/2015/01/american-snipers-wolves-sheep-and-sheepdogs-speech-has-a-surprising-history-with-conservatives-and-the-right-wing.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Brenda M. Boyle, “Lone Wolf Family Man: Individualism, Collectivism and Masculinities in American Sniper(s) and Lone Survivor(s),” *European Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Lengbeyer, “Rhetoric Matters: Inviting Military Overreach with the Sheepdog Analogy,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 20, no. 1 (2021).

are the preferred way to communicate complicated messages for VetBros and their alt-right peers.

Participation in an attempted insurrection and lone acts of violence are two sides of the same coin: trying to prove oneself to others. It is more than just taking a stand for what they believe in; they want others to know what they believe in and that they are willing to act on their beliefs. In these cases they are able to showcase their masculine commitments under the guise of patriotism or defending others. I am not claiming that all the veterans who participated in the January 6, 2021, insurrection or who kill others while claiming self-defense are all VetBros. But their attitudes and values all stem from the place. The men who adopt the VetBro style are signaling their desire to be recognized as a veteran, as a member of something bigger than themselves. Adopting the style is not only a way to be recognized as a veteran but to also be recognized as holding a particular system of politics and values, not unlike wearing a red “MAGA” hat.<sup>26</sup>

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VetBros remain an idea, a meme, a stereotype. They are products of the Post-9/11 Wars, but the formal ends of these wars does not mean the style itself will go away. The young men currently enlisted in the military and those soon to join will look up to their VetBro elders (i.e., service members and veterans in their late-20s and early-30s), just as every generation of service members looks up to the ones who came before them. These elders serve as reference points of what a member of the military and what a veteran should be. The youngest people serving will decide whether these are people to emulate or reject.

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew Porter, “Dialectical MAGA: Sociopolitical and Legal Perspectives of a Little Red Hat,” *The Journal of American Culture* 46, no. 1 (2023).



The VetBro style itself will change as all fashions do. But the underlying values that animate the VetBros have staying power across many parts of internet culture and conservative politics. Hostility towards women and gender nonconformity has been exemplified through the rise of online communities of so-called “incels” (involuntary celibate), and the Republican Party’s current attacks on transgender rights. The exclusionary patriotism of VetBros has long been a staple of nativist movements and is currently part of the Republican platform. Militarism never seems to be out of fashion in the US, regardless of political party.

As I argued in the introduction, veterans are a symptom of the relationships between the state, the military, and the broader society. This dissertation is an attempt to describe one of these symptoms, the VetBro, and infer its origins, meanings, and potentials for harm. The outspokenness of VetBros in contemporary military/veteran culture shows that even if VetBros are not a majority of the military/veteran community, many of their ideals and values are common enough.

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