



From Service to Insurrection: How faith in the American way of life drew service members to right-wing ideology

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From Service to Insurrection:

How faith in the American way of life drew service members to right-wing ideology

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

In the almost 20 years between the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the American-citizen led insurrection on January 6th, 2021, the cultural, societal, and political terrain of America shifted significantly. During this time, the mythology and faith of many conservative service members also began to shift. Rhetoric grew more vehement, adherents more willing to see enemies at home and home itself as a battlefield. This paper seeks to explore how and why one in five insurrectionists at the Capitol in January 2021 were affiliated with the military. Drawing on historical precedent, analyzing American mythology, and assessing the role of identity and communication, this paper investigates the conditioning and development of faith in the articulated and interpreted American Value system.

Author's Biographical Sketch

A graduate of Georgetown University, Carlin Keally first studied Arabic and Theology before commissioning into the U.S. Army as an Armor officer. She served as a tank commander on M1A2 Abram Tanks, as an Aide de Camp to the Deputy Commanding General of Readiness at the 3rd U.S. Infantry Division, and as the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon Leader at Fort Myer, VA where she and her men delivered fallen soldiers to their final resting place in Arlington National Cemetery. In 2020, Carlin Keally began to study the intersection of Right-Wing Politics and American Christianity at Harvard's Extension School. Over the last five years, she has learned much about service members, about their motivations, and about what it means to be an American. This thesis is a culmination of what she has learned from leaders, from followers, and from everyone in between in the service, in academia, and from every community of which she has had the opportunity to be a part.

Dedication

To the soldiers and officers with whom I served in the United States Army from 2018 to 2023. Your dedication to the mission, to your country, and to yourselves is and will continue to be an inspiration to me.

Acknowledgments

There were several individuals who were instrumental in the completion of my thesis. Among them were Professor Jeffrey Seul, a phenomenal mentor and thesis director. When I brought my intellectual sword to practice with him, I always left our meetings sharpened, not dulled. This is a rare and precious thing.

I would also like to thank Dr. Lauren Kerby, whose steadfast conversation about heroism and the powers of democracy, nationalism, and the intersection thereof allowed me a deeper understanding both of my men and the academic material with which I was working. I would also like to thank Colonel Michael Adams. Soon to be retired, COL Adams offered guidance both within my academic discussion and on the line; I will never forget that. Lastly, I would like to thank Trudi Goldberg Pires, without whose attention to detail and patience I would not have had the capacity to finish this work.

To everyone else, my family, my friends, my soldiers, my peers, thank you for the motivation to continue and dedication to my work that allowed me to pursue this goal. I appreciate you.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

On September 11th, 2001, religiously motivated terrorists boarded four planes in the continental United States. Three found targets in the sides of America's economic capital and military headquarters. The last fell in a Pennsylvania field, after its passengers elected to sacrifice their own lives to stop its arrival in the side of the Capitol Building, the assumed fourth target of the attackers. Not one of the terrorists that day was an American citizen.¹

On January 6th, 2021, Americans from across the country stormed the U.S. Capitol, attempting to stop the peaceful transfer of power that was established as and has remained a hallmark of the American experiment. They failed, and many are now facing severe consequences as the American Justice System works through the aftermath of that day.²

One in five of these insurrectionists was affiliated with the military.³ Further, those with military experience were among the leaders of groups who aided in fomenting the insurrection,⁴ implying an outsized influence of this demographic within the

¹ "11 September 2001 Hijackers," Wayback Machine, March 24, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100324195110/https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/2002/DCI_18_June_testimony_new.pdf.

² "1,000 People Have Been Charged for the Capitol Riot. Here's Where Their Cases Stand," NPR.org, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/25/1165022885/1000-defendants-january-6-capitol-riot>

³ "Nearly 1 In 5 Defendants In Capitol Riot Cases Served In The Military," NPR.org, accessed May 30, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>.

⁴ Konstantin Beynon, Steve Toropin, "Veterans Make Up Most of Proud Boys Members Indicted on Sedition for Jan. 6 Violence," *Military.Com*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/06/07/veterans-make-most-of-proud-boys-members-indicted-sedition-jan-6-violence.html>.

insurrectionists as a whole. Also worth noting were the publicly acknowledged ways in which many insurrectionists, both military affiliated and not, referred to themselves. Many of these insurrectionists understood themselves to be soldiers fighting for the soul of their country.⁵ Many used symbology that mirrored the U.S. Army's coveted "Ranger Tab" to establish their patriotism by association. Within the twenty years of the worst terror attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor, soldiers, sailors, airmen, coastguardsmen, and other Defense Department members had evolved both intellectually and emotionally to perceive the American democratic process itself as a threat to the American way of life and values they had sworn an oath to defend. Deep in the binary symbolism of attacks on the Capitol lies an irony in the way a profound faith in America's righteousness led American Citizens to attack that which they had professed to defend for so long.

This paper seeks to investigate the ways in which some of America's Global War on Terror (GWOT) service members found themselves on the far-right side of a political battle, and how self-perception of "chosenness," a willingness to accept exceptionalism, and the cognitive dissonance of America's martial precedence inculcated a religious faith in American values in these individuals that in turn, evolved perspectives of the "Other" inside the American Identity.

⁵ Spencer S. Hsu, Rachel Weiner, and Tom Jackman, "Proud Boys Saw Themselves as 'Trump's Army,' U.S. Says in Trial Closings," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/04/24/proud-boys-trial-closings/>.

Literature Review

There are three main sections of this paper: history, identity, and faith. Within the historical context, I explain how America arrived at the beginning of the invasion into Afghanistan, how the identity of the modern American service member and the mythology of America's veterans shape political conflict at home, and most importantly, how American political identity has evolved into a faith for citizens and fostered an intractable conflict. In this literature review, I discuss some of the more prevalent sources on which I have drawn to introduce this conversation and to further discussion. As of now, the main gap in the literature lies in addressing how and why conservative Americans, particularly conservative service members, have become antagonists in an identity-based conflict at home. I hope to fill some of this gap.

Historian Kathleen Belew's work on the socio-political landscape of the disillusioned Vietnam veteran informs much of my historical research. She argues that a shifting social fabric in the United States invited a backlash in small parts of the veteran community who felt they had been forgotten, forsaken, and left behind.⁶ These sentiments often ran hand in hand with a contempt for government, an animosity towards racial and gender progress, and an overall nostalgia for a time wherein certain identities held and wielded greater power. The quest for restoring a Christian, western nation, often united these ideologues in content if not methodology.

America's relationship with its military has always centered on its public engagement with national mythology, argues Andrew Seidel in *The Founding Myth*.⁷

⁶ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), 19.

⁷ Andrew L. Seidel, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American*, (New York: Sterling, 2019), 14.

The “Founding Fathers” and the revolutionary war take on nearly typological significance when considered in colloquial conversation.⁸ The origin of the nation and its conceivers are sacralized, educated into public school students, and vaunted as exceptional, chosen, special. The vast majority of public school students are taught that the first colonists ventured to American shores in search of religious freedom, a pillar of American identity that reverberates through current generations.⁹ Indeed, as James Fraser highlights in his work on religion and American public education, the question of freedom, freedom to speak, to worship, to build, has often been employed in rhetoric of American leaders, from politicians to religious authorities to generals. The idea that America must fight to maintain this freedom is also deeply ingrained in a society born (at least mythologically, scripturally if you will) from war. As such, periods after wars fought and won, namely the Revolutionary War and World War II, are rosily depicted in modern historical conceptions. World War II engendered the “Greatest Generation,”¹⁰ citizen soldiers who harkened back to the militiamen defending their colonized land from the oppression of a distant king. The Greatest Generation, in turn, offered a period of peace, particularly for white, male, Christian Americans that has rested collectively in textbooks as an era of prosperity, until recently.¹¹ Soldiers who served in this war were venerated, returning home heroes to their families and communities, vanquishing a distant foe to preserve the freedom and honor of American society.¹² Nancy Ammerman

⁸ Seidel, 31.

⁹ James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 10.

¹⁰ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections*, 1st ed, (Easton Press, 1999), xv.

¹¹ Fraser, *Between Church and State*, 162.

¹² Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, 165.

has begun to explore the sociological implications of religious identity in American institutions, an inherently American tug of values.¹³

The perception of the Vietnam War and its veterans contrasted significantly with the Greatest Generation. Soldiers, who were often drafted, could return home to protests and epithets screamed in their direction. While they were at war, trying to preserve “the American Way of Life,” their country was changing socially and culturally, sometimes so much that returning veterans felt there was no place for them anymore.¹⁴

This concept of rosy-lensed history leading to a discontent in contemporary living is not new. In attempting to understand the modern American right-wing populism, Chip Berlet and Sunshine Spencer note the “left behind” feeling, as well as the sentiment that individuals who founded America are being “cut” in line.¹⁵ This concept of organizing American lineage by precedence of its citizens only lends itself to the hierarchical living conditioned by the U.S. Military.

For soldiers who felt they had answered their country’s call, only to be scorned by those who had not experienced combat trauma, to feel as though those who had not “paid their dues” (namely people of color and women) had “cut” in line for the American Dream, the change triggered a nostalgia and a desire to return to a normalized status quo, a restoration of a “proper” order.¹⁶

This concept lies in conversation with Galtung’s concept of cultural violence. Cultural violence, or “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence...that

¹³ Nancy T. Ammerman “Religious Identities and Religious Institutions,” in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 212.

¹⁴ Susan Jeffords, “Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male,” 526.

¹⁵ Chip Berlet and Sunshine Spencer “Rural Rage: The Roots of Right-Wing Populism in the United States,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 3 (April 16, 2019): 483.

¹⁶ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 23.

can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence,”¹⁷ cultivates the legitimacy of tacit exclusion, acceptable coercion, and ultimately the devaluing of groups of individuals.¹⁸ These are tactics that offer soldiers survival mechanisms to win wars; they do not simply vanish in one’s psyche upon return from battle. While this framework is useful when considering the way veterans both experience and choose to act in relation to others they identify as “enemies” at home, it is not the sole cultural terrain of the service member or warfighter. Cultural violence and its ramifications pervade the civilian landscape too, exacerbated by a population’s perpetual sentiment that they are under, or will be under, some kind of attack from both outside and inside their spheres of influence. This will be significant as we investigate how leaders communicate this threat to those who share their group identity, particularly those who have been conditioned to responding to conflict with direct violence.

In this scope of research, Belew offers seminal analysis into the far-reaching consequences of the Vietnam War on the White Power movement. She details a social upheaval and the absence of gratitude for wars fought that incubated an intense persecution complex in many veterans who returned to America.¹⁹ This allowed a deep disenfranchisement to penetrate the veteran community, which became a virulent breeding ground for the alt-right and paramilitary groups who already bore a distrust for the government and embraced a restoration ideology.

Partnered with the studies of the effects of the Vietnam War, studies on America’s relationship with religion and its veteran community grew once more after 9/11. Bruce

¹⁷ Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291.

¹⁸ Galtung, 291.

¹⁹ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 49.

Lincoln's *Holy Terrors* discusses the States' consideration of Abrahamic religion after the attacks. American politicians often offered the Global War on Terror (GWOT) in the shadow of a threat to the "American Way of Life," similar to the fears of encroaching communism during the Vietnam War era. In the 2000s, however, an all-volunteer force waged these wars, the draft being a thing of the past. Politicians and media moguls framed GWOT as a crusade, the rhetoric often mirroring this exact wording,²⁰ driving home a subconscious point that American soldiers were protecting and defending the Judeo-Christian heritage of America against an Islamic aggressor.²¹ This study also discusses the relationship between the narrative, a collective story, and the implications of faith on the way groups of individuals choose to prosecute conflict.

Abigail Hall argues that the right-wing political extremism in the military that was on display on January 6th at the U.S. Capitol stems from this phrasing and framing of the War on Terror.²² This is a similar dish to the social development in Vietnam War veterans, albeit served with different seasonings: instead of Communism as the creeping threat to American lifestyle, it was Islam. Between the two police wars, similar moral crises rocked America's understanding of the hero soldier, forged in the crucible of World War II (My Lai, Abu Ghraib).

Further, as many scholars in the military studies community have discovered (and many veterans have testified), the anti-ideology nature of GWOT lent itself to dehumanizing others who might have come in contact, or indeed harbor values associated

²⁰ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 20.

²¹ Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 56.

²² Abigail Hall, et al., "Militarized Extremism: The Radical Right and the War on Terror," *The Independent Review*, 26, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 226.

with “terrorism.”²³ Books like *On Killing* elaborated on the way modern war allowed the U.S. Military to more effectively condition service members to see the “enemy” as inhuman, civilian casualties as reportable but not catastrophic.²⁴ Sebastian Junger’s *Tribe* also considers the way weaving persons together into a community can contribute to the aforementioned cultural violence.²⁵ Inculcating in service members the idea that America is the greatest, the most righteous, and most exceptional offered soldiers the intellectual backdrop to functionally pull a trigger in a war that, as many scholars attest, remains ill-defined.²⁶ This psychology, cultivating a “saviorship” complex in the American service member, also fomented the idea that these individuals were protecting American ways of life, just like the service members deployed to “stop the spread of communism.” The tacit promise in both these motivators is that soldiers are fighting to save the white, Christian west, the sometimes unspoken but politically acknowledged American identity.

The GWOT conflict differs in its predecessor slightly in that it strikingly highlights the American side as defending the “Judeo Christian” heritage of American Identity in contrast to the Islamic Fundamentalist’s purpose. This put GWOT into an entirely religious context, as opposed to the Vietnam War, which acknowledged communism as “Godless” but did not highlight the binary so thoroughly. Both conflicts created an “us vs. them” mentality within the melting pot of American culture, focusing on race and religion as flashpoints for individuals to capitalize on culturally accepted violence in the name of protecting and defending America.

²³ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, (New York, New York: Back Bay Books, 2009), 118.

²⁴ Grossman, 124.

²⁵ Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, (New York, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2016), 6.

²⁶ Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 4.

With this psychological shift, the Southern Poverty Law Center argues on several occasions, it became increasingly easier for the veteran community to lay blame for the challenges of the last twenty years at the feet of the federal government.²⁷

For a conflict that was at times loosely, at times overtly, communicated in the language of belief,²⁸ GWOT veterans exited a perspective structure based on faith in a cause, where truth was not necessarily evidence based so long as it allowed the mission to be accomplished.

This is the crux of an issue as yet unstudied; America offered GWOT veterans an implicit faith in America's identity war, through a religious, restorative lens, then offered no offramp to the conditioning required to kill people for a holy war. This mentality foments an intellectual and emotionally charged terrain for political and social organizations looking for disenfranchised, weapons-qualified individuals. Part of the appeal of veterans, Belew notes, is their familiarity with violence.²⁹ For groups who are looking for conflict in the name of their cause, veterans, those who have been conditioned to fight, are desirable candidates for membership. Indeed, many of the most famous names in the history of the alt-right, white-power, and militia movements were veterans (Louis Beam, Timothy McVeigh, Randy Weaver).³⁰

These studies are recent, both in terms of analyzing the effects of the Vietnam War and especially in terms of reflecting on the last five to ten years of GWOT veteran

²⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, last accessed August 7, 2023, "Extremism Among Active-Duty Military and Veterans Remains a Clear and Present Danger," <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/10/12/extremism-among-active-duty-military-and-veterans-remains-clear-and-present-danger>.

²⁸ "The Bush Record," White House Archives, accessed August 7 2023, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/>.

²⁹ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 20.

³⁰ Belew, 182, 196, 210.

activity. The George Washington Program on Extremism as well as think tanks and research programs such as PERIL, START, and ICSR are beginning to shift from studying “extremism” in terms of Islam to “extremism” in terms of domestic religious nationalism and the effects of a disenfranchised veteran population and the rise of Christian hate groups.

With the rise of social media and the ability to communicate quickly, repetitively, and in echo chambers that offer “truth” throughout the internet, it is easy for veterans seeking community to find “like minded” people, who, in turn, can serve to crystalize a worldview of persecution, martyrdom, and righteous violence for the survivorship of the country. If the mentality is “once a soldier, always so,” it becomes ever easier to take up arms, like the mythological minutemen and the Greatest Generation in defense of a narrativized attack on American identity and values.

Studying the way GWOT veterans imbibed the idea of a holy war in defense of an implicit Judeo-Christian heritage, and how this relationship with America affects their exodus from the armed forces is incredibly important to understanding the way the United States might better off-ramp and de-radicalize veterans and military personnel. While the military has, to date, taken steps to address extremism head-on,³¹ there are few methods for the veteran community to escape algorithms after their service. As the socio-cultural and political polarization reverberates around the country, allowing former service members a different way to see service, a new way to understand national

³¹ “Report on Countering Extremism Activity within the Department of Defense,” last modified 7AUG23, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Dec/20/2002912573/-1/-1/0/REPORT-ON-COUNTERING-EXTREMIST-ACTIVITY-WITHIN-THE-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE.PDF>.

defense, and a different outlet for their faith in America would allow for a de-escalation of wartime rhetoric on the home front and in domestic politics and organizing.

Much of this conversation lies in social identity theory and the empathy required to understand someone else's worldview. Seminal studies from Jeffrey Seul shape pieces of this paper's argument and inform the way compassion and negotiation can offer compromise to an individual and group's sacred values. Chapter one begins with a consideration of the American socio-political terrain and cultural environment prior to the invasion of Afghanistan after the terror attacks of 9/11. Discussing the Vietnam War, the rise of the Religious Right, and the way conservative America was socially primed to "Other" an enemy brings the argument to chapter 2, in which we consider the identity of the American service member. Here, we dissect the martial identity of America as a whole, the way modern service members are conditioned to close with and destroy the enemy, namely dehumanizing their opponents, and the way such conflict requires a faith in its purpose. This transitions to chapter 3, wherein American identity, values, faith, and way of life apply to the growth of conflict between neighbors and the desire to engage with views that only echo our own. Chapter 4 covers the technology shift in the way Americans communicate with each other and the effects this has on the conservative service member coming home from the Global War on Terror and the way they perceive the "Other" on the home front and the violence that has grown acceptable within their frame of reference. Chapter 5 concludes the paper with a way forward.

Chapter II.

The Rise of the Religious Right and Perception of the Enemy: How We Arrived at

October 7th, 2001

Change necessitates loss. Any change requires some relinquishment of what is and was in order to grasp what could be and what is coming: this implies loss of some kind. This can be frightening, even if the loss is something of lesser value than that which one is gaining in the change (be it resources, identity, etc.). It is important to keep this in mind because much of this conversation revolves around the way change triggers a fear of the unknown, loss of power in a normalized status quo, and identity. Losing or even shifting a piece of an identity can be the hardest change to catalyze. Empathy is required at all levels. We begin in 1973, with two significant events transpiring in American history.

In this year, Congress eliminated the draft for the Armed forces,³² and the Supreme Court ruled the constitutionality of a woman's right to abort her unborn child.³³ Taken separately, these events were hallmarks of a shifting America, a country working through progressive social change. They were harbingers to some who held a specific set of conservative values: they represented a loss of power and a shifting social landscape. This change in American norms would invite a new era of fear-based domestic politics that in turn, would offer conservative Americans a set of "traditional" values that would

³² "All-Volunteer Force (AVF) Britannica," last modified March 20 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/all-volunteer-force>.

³³ "Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)," *Justia Law*, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/410/113/>.

grow to inform their politics and their identities as a whole. Much of this paper considers the challenge of originating an identity against some threat, as opposed to building an identity around something hopeful. We cannot consider the events of the last few years nor the actions of the service members on January 6th without acknowledging the historical precedence and popular zeitgeist from which emerged the Global War on Terror.

This chapter will explore the path from 1973 to October 7, 2001, America's invasion of Afghanistan after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, including the rise of the religious right, the post-Vietnam veteran mentality, and setting the stage for the escalation of a culture war.

Identity, Change, and Violence

We begin with a study of identity and violence. For the purposes of this piece, we will consider Johan Galtung's three strata of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. "Direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is an invariant, a 'permanence.'"³⁴ These three strata build and reinforce each other as they permeate society: the greater the direct violence, the more it becomes structural, the greater the inescapability of the structural violence, the more it becomes normalized and part of the culture. The more it becomes culturally legitimate, the greater the direct violence against whomever the original direct violence was carried out.

This theory is critical to this paper insofar as much of our discussion hinges upon the right to violence, the necessity of violence, the purpose of war, and how these three

³⁴ Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 294.

concepts affect the psychology of an individual prosecuting violence and attempting to find peace. This consideration of what is normal, legitimate, and acceptable also ties directly into our discussion of identity.

Identity, or “the relatively stable elements of an individual’s sense of self”³⁵ allows people to understand the world, their community, their values, their relationships, with a sense of security. In identity there exists a pattern that is comforting, reassuring, and non-threatening. Individuals understand themselves as generally favorable, and thus surround themselves with shared stories, biases, and narratives that reinforce this self-perception. This invites the group identity, or “members’ shared conception of its enduring characteristics and basic values, its strengths and weaknesses...its past history, current purposes, and future prospects”³⁶ to exclude those who do not self-identify with this collective. It invites a survivalism, a “safety in numbers” attitude that not only reassures its members that theirs is a correct way of life, but it is also more ubiquitously legitimate because they are not the only ones living it. Group identity also implies a shared tradition, be it of perspective, ritual or worldview. Theologian Hans Georg Gadamer notes that our fore-conceptions, or “fore-meanings and prejudices”³⁷ are tied to tradition, which

is not for us something other in the past, but it is a part of us. Neither is tradition something that is univocal. It consists of multiple voices that all echo the past.³⁸ We produce tradition by understanding it, by participating in its evolution and, eventually, by determining it. Tradition not only conditions our ‘being’ in the world. We are also within the situation that

³⁵ Jeffrey R. Seul, “‘Ours Is the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, And Intergroup Conflict.” *Journal of Peace Research*, 36, no. 5 (Sept. 1999): 554.

³⁶ Seul, 556.

³⁷ Tarja Väyrynen, “A Shared Understanding: Gadamer and International Conflict Resolution,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 42, no. 3 (2005): 350.

³⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975), 252.

provides us with a standpoint, and that is determined by the prejudices we carry with ourselves. Our standpoint limits the possibility of vision.³⁹

As stated, identity limits the possibility of vision. Identity requires a specific view of a horizon seen differently by someone on a different boat. One becomes increasingly invested in one's own view of said horizon, one's own identity, because it is stabilizing. It satisfies a need to understand oneself and the groups one belongs to as correct and true. A change to this vision, to this situating, to this identity, can imply a threat of loss, often unknown loss.

Groups do not exist in a vacuum, and the engagement or comparison with other group identities often offers sense of competition or need to prove superiority and thus validate one over another. This competition can be perceived as threatening to the legitimacy, and thus existence, of the group identity (and, transitively, the individual identities of group adherents). Threat can invite violence. Violence substantiates the perception of the threat, and the conflict only grows more entrenched. While identity is often enough to invite such conflict, it is also worth considering here the nature of religiosity within an individual and group identity.

Religion has been defined many different ways for as long as man has had the capacity to study it. That tautology aside, for the purposes of this paper, we will consider religion in conjunction with the following definitions.

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁴⁰

³⁹ Väyrynen, "Gadamer," 350.

⁴⁰ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System,"
<http://people.uncw.edu/ricej/SOC490/Excerpts%20from%20Clifford%20Geertz.htm>.

"Religion as a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence."⁴¹

"Religion is the human attitude towards a sacred order that includes within it all being human or otherwise i.e., belief in a cosmos, the meaning of which both includes and transcends man."⁴²

All from different theologians and thinkers, the coherent idea that threads through these three definitions is order, relationship, and a transcendent power that disinclines compromise of the first two tenets. Religiosity, thus, "resists constant change in the negotiation of social meaning, thus affording individuals and groups more secure anchors for self-reference."⁴³ In religion lies a stability that elides the threat to one's identity that so often comes with the promise of change. Again, with change comes loss, loss perhaps of a ritual, a piece of a collective story that was understood as sacred or righteous, or loss of an understanding of a small piece of the world. That is not to say that change does not bring with it the potential for new sacred tenets, new rituals, new ways to understand the world that might even benefit an individual experiencing the change. Nonetheless, such change can be turbulent and threatening to the status quo. For humans, particularly those who feel as though they deservedly hold the power in a relationship, collective or individual, this change can feel threatening. Again, with threats come the desire to defend one's identity and the predictability, continuity, and stability inherent therein.

This is where we begin the history that will lead to an understanding of why conservative service members attacked the U.S. Capitol in a fit of direct violence,

⁴¹ Robert N. Bellah, "Religious Evolution," *American Sociological Review*, 29, no. 3 (1964): 359.

⁴² Nathan Grossman, "On Peter Berger's Definition of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14, no. 3, (1975): 289.

⁴³ Seul, "'Ours Is the Way of God,'" 556.

perceived, on their side, as vengeful patriotism. Change, loss, identity, and violence all frame the history and current events of the last fifty years. Let us begin.

The Rise of the Religious Right

Tumultuous times and periods of crisis intensify group identity. Crisis and its accompanying rhetoric imply and inform an individual of the threat to her own identity, the stability of her material needs, and the danger to her group. As stated above, 1973 was a bellwether for the shifting power dynamic in American society. Still in the mele of integration,⁴⁴ the country now saw the right of a woman to choose her reproductive future. For a country whose mythological origin rested on the back of straight, white, Christian men from the founding fathers to the Greatest Generation,⁴⁵ this power shift indeed blew out of Washington as a threat to the identity needs and the future position of the previous powerholders. This is the environment to which members of the evangelical movement and the Republican Party responded in the 1970s. Minority political groups had begun to challenge the cultural and political hegemony of these identity-holders in American society. This, understandably, threatened them, their perception of the potential prosperity for their families, and what they felt as reliable and positive values for their country. It was in this social turbulence that leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Richard Nixon, and the like found a socio-political terrain ripe for a restoration campaign.

⁴⁴ “Timeline,” *The History of Integration*, <https://diversity.utexas.edu/integration/timeline/>.

⁴⁵ Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*, 1st ed, (W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 44.

On the far side of a lost war, of which we will discover additional ramifications later, these political leaders found citizens struggling with the cognitive dissonance that resulted from being part of a losing side and returning to a country whose norms and policies they did not recognize. These individuals were excellent candidates for restructuring an outlook on the progression of America, reframing it as a loss of moral tradition, and further, the loss of a sacred identity. Leaders of this new right did this by framing an apocalyptic narrative against the backdrop of a Christian nation threatened by its own constituents.

Understanding culture as “the prime instrument through which groups mobilize themselves, construct their collective identity, and effect their solidarity by excluding those whom they identify as outsiders,”⁴⁶ elevating the Christian religion in American conservative culture allowed leaders in this effort to deliberately tie the values and value systems of religious scripture to the burgeoning culture of the religious right. This in turn, offered a legitimacy that no earth-bound social mores could overcome. While these Christian values were consistently tied with one of the two (if not both during some parts of history), leaders of the new right used the cultural shift to call overtly to these Christian values as a political platform, effectively binding the traditional Christian morality with the Republican Party’s agenda in a way that had not yet been done.

With this in hand, Falwell, who is often credited with the rise of the religious right⁴⁷ for his vehemence and influence in policy measures, was able to effectively ally the political trajectory of the Republican Party with the transcendent will of God. He

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 52.

⁴⁷ Andrew Bell, “Radical Religious Rebels: The Rise and Fall of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority,” *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, Aug. 2008, <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/1948>, 359.

could now preach that the political right, at least those individuals and their policies which he supported, were effectively “insulated against criticism by mere mortals.”⁴⁸ While Falwell was influential at this time, he was by no means the only leader on the right who elected to use “religious discourse [to] recode the same restrictions as transcendent principles and divine commands,”⁴⁹ effectively communicating to followers that any political resistance to this perspective was a direct threat against them *and* their God. Now, whenever an adherent was fighting for a political battle, say pro-life policy or the restriction of LGBT rights, she was fighting on behalf of something much greater than her dislike of a political policy, she was fighting for her own soul and the soul of her country.

This era and this political shift signaled the first rise of ongoing martial rhetoric. Instead of discussing a war abroad, leaders in the Republican Party and Evangelical leaders used the social change in the United States to usher in a state of perpetual crisis. In the shadow of American conflict, none so darkens American history nor perpetuates a cultural violence than the Civil War. As leaders claimed their era a state of crisis, this biblically endorsed Armageddon began to seep from the rhetoric of conservative religious leaders into the words and perspectives of conservative political leaders (though it must also be stated that many of these individuals occupied the same space). There began a small opening of door to internal war once more. This invitation to embrace division on behalf of some greater purpose and force, once thought anathema to America whose stitches seemed to have fallen out, would grow into a movement much greater than the religious right in the 1970s. That being said, in this frame, when leaders on the religious

⁴⁸ Bell, 55.

⁴⁹ Bell, 56.

right communicated such an ongoing state of warfare to their followers, it served to amplify the threat against their own identity, the well-being and social position of their offspring, their own sacralized worldview, and, most importantly, this conflict-speak intensified group identity.

An excellent example of this doomsday rhetoric comes in 1981, when Jerry Falwell composed a fundraising letter to his adherents, employing scripture and apocalyptic language to describe the cultural changes he perceives to be threatening the wellbeing of America. This particular rhetorical example employs his dislike of the homosexual population in America at this time and admonishes his followers that “many of them are out after my children and your children.”⁵⁰ He goes on to assure his readers that “militant gays are doing everything they can to silence [him]” and that

“In almost every one of my “I Love America” rallies on the state capitol steps, large groups of homosexuals come and demonstrate against me. They shout obscenities into the air. They lift signs and placards with vulgar words on them. It sounds a great deal like Sodom and Gomorrah. As I interpret Scripture, when a society becomes like Sodom and Gomorrah, it is not far from destruction. Some of these people are dangerous.”⁵¹

It's worth noting some of the rhetorical uses in this call to arms. This was similar rhetoric to that which he employed on his shows. His typological alliance of the Bible with America allows his followers to place their identity as Americans in hand with their identity as Christians, and, further, allows the persecution of their Christian forebears to alight on their American Christian identity and invite them to fight against modern persecution. Further, Falwell entangles his patriotism, noting his “I Love America”

⁵⁰ Jerry Falwell, “[Letter from Jerry Falwell on Keeping Old Time Gospel Hour on Air].” *UNT Digital Library*, 13 Aug. 1981, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc177440/>.

⁵¹ Falwell, “[Letter from Jerry Falwell].”

rallies with the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah. This allows the reader to ally their own patriotism with the fight against this particular group of Americans due to their “sins.” Lastly, he employs apocalyptic immanence to instill a fear of national destruction unless adherents take action: it is not surprising that this language in its ubiquity inculcated a fear of persecution, end-times, and punishment into his followers. It also easily aligned his conservative responsibility with his Christian duty, effectively merging two previously separate identity groups. This example was not an isolated event, either.

Endemic to this end-of-days rhetoric was the rise of the televangelist and the megachurch. With much easier access to followers, the anti-change, restoration message became much more easily spreadable, much more consumable. This allowed leaders in this field to create, define, and promulgate the “Judeo-Christian Heritage.”⁵² Situated within the cultural origin story of religious freedom seekers, the Judeo-Christian Heritage asserts that the values, identity, and history of American are inherently Biblical. This phrase is used most often in the Protestant Christian identity group, particularly in reference to political culture wars and their perceived encroachment of groups who do not espouse the same interpretation of American values. Employing the Judeo-Christian heritage, in turn, allowed for the legitimacy of a particular brand of “American,” a specific American identity to be valued over others at a national level. The ubiquity of this mythology also inculcated its normalcy across a plurality of society, making its way into public schools and scouting organizations, to name a few disseminators of the myth. Once allocated as the norm, this is a hard status quo to break or change, which, when

⁵² “Once, the ‘Judeo-Christian Tradition’ United Americans. Now It Divides Them.” *Washington Post*, last modified 17 Apr. 2019. [www.washingtonpost.com, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/17/once-judeo-christian-tradition-united-americans-now-it-divides-them/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/17/once-judeo-christian-tradition-united-americans-now-it-divides-them/).

challenged, would cause those who identify with this “heritage” and its hegemony to fear that shifting culture and subsequent power loss.

Religion tends to solidify identity by “favoring the preservation of old content..., offering individuals a basis for reconstructing their identities within a stable or very slowly changing universe of shared meaning.”⁵³ This protectionist, preservation mentality lends itself to the righteous restoration of traditional, American values that the leaders on the religious right began to espouse in the 1970s.

So severely mixing politics and religion allowed for an easy “Othering” of progressives. At the end of this path, faith in one’s political party would trump the community goodwill that once defined the American “melting pot.”⁵⁴

This is where the significance of the religious right comes to play with regards to the post 9/11 conflicts in the Middle East. By the time America sidled into the 90s, the economy was booming, and social change seemed to have leveled out, at least compared to the tumultuous 60s and 70s.⁵⁵ There was an air of “end of history,”⁵⁶ and the doom that many on the religious right had been promising on the backs of so much social progression had not materialized. On September 11, 2001, however, religiously motivated terrorists smashed into the symbols of this prosperity, killing Americans on American soil in the process.

The first communication from Jerry Falwell was that God withdrew his protection from the United States, allowing the terrorist attacks to happen, because the country had

⁵³ Seul, “‘Ours Is the Way of God,’” 556.

⁵⁴ William Booth, “Myth of the Melting Pot: America’s Racial and Ethnic Divides,” last modified February 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/meltingpot/melt0222.htm>.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey Frankel and Peter R. Orszag, “Retrospective on American Economic Policy in the 1990s.” *Brookings*, 30 Nov. 1AD, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/retrospective-on-american-economic-policy-in-the-1990s/>.

⁵⁶ Frankel, “1990s.”

failed to respect tradition and God's values.⁵⁷ While he and Pat Robertson rescinded their remarks and apologized,⁵⁸ the cultural footprint and identity-based sentiment endured: because America failed to ally fully with the religious right, she invited terror onto her soil.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the idea that America's way of life was under attack, her values, her freedoms, her very identity, invited much of the rhetoric about traditional values, codes, ethics, and patriotism into the mainstream consciousness. To oppose violence or invasion against those who had just knocked America down in her own yard was regarded as "un-American."⁵⁹ This fervor did not invite any analysis on the last conflict with a group whose identity was deeply founded in an ideology. The Vietnam War and its own aftermath had not dented the desire for conflict aimed, once more, at restoring America and protecting her virtue. In the wake of 9/11, the American group-identity strengthened, and under the watchful eyes of moral traditionalists, America conflated patriotism with crusades, and marched her sons and daughters to war.

Losing the Vietnam War and the Conglomeration of the Alt-Right

Before arriving once more on the steps of the graveyard of empires, it is imperative to understand the aftermath of the Vietnam War, perhaps America's best-known loss. Into America's generational consciousness had been scorched, once more, the "chosenness" of a people to liberate, protect, and defend. When World War II ended,

⁵⁷ Laurie Goodstein Times, "Falwell: Blame Abortionists, Feminists and Gays," *The Guardian*, last modified 19 Sept. 2001, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/19/september11.usa9>.

⁵⁸ "Falwell Apologizes to Gays, Feminists, Lesbians" *CNN.Com*, last modified, September 14, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130401182609/http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/>

⁵⁹ "Is It Anti-American to Be Anti-War?" *Baltimore Sun*, last modified 9 Mar. 2003, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2003-03-09-0303100435-story.html>.

America sank into a Cold War, with an anti-communist fear permeating her collective consciousness.⁶⁰ It was out of this fear, this ubiquitous dread that “they” were coming for America’s values, her freedom, that the country entered its second police war in Eastern Asia.⁶¹

It's worth mentioning that the Korean War did not, and still does not, play to the country’s cultural memory as does Vietnam,⁶² and this is significant for three reasons. The first is that the Vietnam War was the first war in which American citizens felt as though, and perhaps they were justified in feeling this way, their government lied to them to promulgate the conflict.⁶³ Whether or not the American government had obfuscated wartime purpose before was irrelevant; this war was the first in which it felt like a betrayal. This leads to the second reason that this war is significant in America’s memory bank: it felt like crime. Indeed, with the photos of agent orange aftermath and the dehumanization of the enemy, many soldiers did not feel as though they understood the mission and returned home to nurse those memories with no psychological off ramp.⁶⁴ For a country that was self-considered the greatest, most righteous, and morally superior, the difference between what soldiers understood about their group-identity and what they volunteered or were ordered to do often resulted in a severe cognitive

⁶⁰ David O’Connell, “Arms, Armageddon and the Evil Empire: Ronald Reagan’s Religious Rhetoric on Defense Spending,” *SSRN Scholarly Paper*. Rochester, NY, 2012, 17.

⁶¹ William L. Hosch, “The Korean War and the Vietnam War: People, Politics, and Power,” *Britannica Educational Pub.*, 2010.

⁶² “Vietnam and Korea—A Comparison of the U.S. Commitments,” *New York Times*, last modified 11 Oct. 1964, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/10/11/archives/vietnam-and-koreaa-comparison-of-the-us-commitments.html>.

⁶³ Elizabeth Becker, “The Secrets and Lies of the Vietnam War, Exposed in One Epic Document,” *New York Times*, last modified 9 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/09/us/pentagon-papers-vietnam-war.html>.

⁶⁴ Christina M. Marini et al, “Psychological Adjustment of Aging Vietnam Veterans: The Role of Social Network Ties in Reengaging with Wartime Memories,” *Gerontology* 66, no. 2 (2020): 140.

dissonance, shaking identity to the core. Lastly, America lost. Many of the starkest images carved into the national consciousness are of the fall of Saigon,⁶⁵ helicopters lifting off of buildings, abandoning a war America could not definitively win. For a country whose origin lies in the mythological “chosenness” of an underdog battle, this loss splintered a national psyche. Either citizens considered the trauma of the war and were forced to reflect upon what it meant to be American in a new martial context, or they doubled down on the narrative that America *could* have won if she did not abandon her soldiers and their cause. This latter mentality lent itself to the conglomeration of the alt-right, white-supremacist groups, and a re-alignment of conservative values in relation to the U.S. service member.

Indeed, “the idea that the nation had wrongly rejected, failed to honor, and impugned veterans created an emphasis on healing and memorialization. This discourse papered over a critique of the war itself by foregrounding the wounded and wronged veteran.”⁶⁶ This is significant in that resituating a war within the memory of a group of individuals allows those individuals to reimagine themselves and the potential complicity of their country in a preventable conflict. Undeniably, “a systematic accounting of wartime atrocities—including official apologies for events such as the massacre of hundreds of civilians at My Lai—came to be seen as an open threat to an ascendant neoconservative world-view.”⁶⁷ Post-war conservatism, thus, “required the systematic exclusion of an antiwar critique and transformed what appeared to be an apolitical,

⁶⁵ Steve Donoghue, “Apocalypse Still: 40 Years on, the Fall of Saigon Remains Traumatic for the US,” *The National*, last modified 23 Apr. 2015, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts/apocalypse-still-40-years-on-the-fall-of-saigon-remains-traumatic-for-the-us-1.38100>.

⁶⁶ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 23.

⁶⁷ Belew, 23.

intimate style of memoir and narrative into a conservative political project.”⁶⁸ This opened the door for a conglomeration of what would previously have been fringe groups to both appeal to mainstream conservative narratives and slip into the New Right rhetoric under the guise of libertarianism, traditional values, and restorationism.

An example of this conflation and contraction lies in the right’s perception of post-war refugees. Galveston Bay in Texas grew into a nationally known battleground between white fishermen and Vietnamese refugees who settled there.⁶⁹ While these fishermen plied the only trade they had brought with them from a war torn country, the white fishermen, irritated that they now had to contend with new competition, “alleged that the refugees were welfare cheats and wards of the state.”⁷⁰ This was particularly damaging as this rhetoric “provided a bridge between Klan and neo-Nazi publications and a strongly anti-statist current of anti-welfare discourse in the mainstream New Right,”⁷¹ effectively legitimizing the alt-right perspective in mainstream value systems. Within this framework, it became ever easier to erase the free-market capitalism that had driven the Republican Party for so long and replace it with a cultural warfare aimed at revaluing certain citizenry over others. When right wing leadership emphasized that America was still, always fighting against communism, it became much easier to “bring the war home”⁷² and erase any potential common bonds one might have found with refugees.

⁶⁸ Belew, 23.

⁶⁹ Belew, 42.

⁷⁰ Belew, 44.

⁷¹ Belew, 44.

⁷² Belew, iii.

Another challenge to this goodwill was that during the Vietnam War, while soldiers were away defending one articulated set of traditional American values (the same ones the Greatest Generation had defended), America's home front was developing. Civil rights were evolving, as were women's rights, particularly the "right to choose." Many veterans who came home after being battered for what felt like no particular reason returned to a social and cultural landscape that looked much differently than it had before the war. This only echoed the subconscious dissonance in the loss of the war: not only had America failed to stop the spread of communism abroad, but she failed to protect the moral purity, peace, and traditional values of her people at home.

This mentality partnered well with the rhetoric developing within the Religious Right, and indeed, by the time the 1980s rolled around, the cognitive dissonance of the Vietnam War had solidified into a partnership with the transcendent legitimacy of the "moral majority." "Apocalyptic rhetoric augmented violence and separatism within the white power movement, but also worked as a bridge issue with the evangelical right, creating opportunities for recruitment."⁷³

It was from under this symbiosis that the hero-myth of the American soldier grew, and thus the severe challenge of attributing negative, "extremist"⁷⁴ behavior to the American soldier normalized. The phenomenon of active-duty troops stealing equipment and materiel for paramilitary groups (paramilitary groups being almost exclusively right wing at this point), grew in the 1980s. "Despite the impending threat documented by the FBI, active-duty soldiers remained free to participate in a movement involved in the

⁷³ Belew, 187.

⁷⁴ "Right-Wing Extremism in the Military," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT*, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/right-wing-extremism-military>.

sustained theft of military weapons and matériel”⁷⁵ for organizations whose rhetoric, stated goals, and leadership vaunted the “violent overthrow of the government”⁷⁶ and restoration of a traditional, Christian-infused America.

This era set the precedence for both civil and military leadership choosing not to probe or prosecute individuals in the armed services for their political views, indeed including what they actioned upon in the name of those views.

An abrupt shift in the national consciousness as the country reeled headlong into the 90s and the end of the Cold War “rendered obsolete much of the anticommunist rhetoric that had structured white power activism through the previous decades.”⁷⁷

As discussed, both the alt-right and religious right “had been preoccupied with the idea of apocalypse following Soviet nuclear attack. People in both groups after the end of the Cold War were, in a way, in search of a new enemy to fight in their foretold end times battle.”⁷⁸ As such, when the Gulf War presented an opportunity to both “vanquish the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’ and end the public’s reluctance to engage in militarism abroad,”⁷⁹ politicians moved for a chance to solidify another, easily defined enemy with an ideology different from that of the right’s mythologized values. Indeed, the relatively speedy and low impact victory in the Gulf cemented the soldier as a hero, sacrificing for American interests, while also producing a “new generation of combat veterans, and a militarization of American society more broadly.”

⁷⁵ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 63.

⁷⁶ Belew, 147.

⁷⁷ Belew, 187.

⁷⁸ Belew, 187.

⁷⁹ Belew, 211.

When three buildings collapsed on 9/11, the lens through which most politicians and the American public thus viewed an impending conflict was tinted with victory, and not the multi-decade aftermath of the war that would most resemble the coming conflict.

When Soldiers eased over the border of Afghanistan in October, 2001, the expectation was twofold. First, the conflict would be quick,⁸⁰ and secondly these service members were walking into a crusade steeped with rhetoric of “saviorship.” This history, the still-fading stigma, and the religious component of this particular Other would not only cultivate a dangerous phobia of another group identity, but it would foment a culture war already brewing on the home front.

Culture War, Erasing the Neighbor, and the Other Imperative

Before finally arriving at the morning of September 11, 2001, there are a few more socio-cultural events that would affect the way America went to war a month later. First, the mainstream rise of the internet and the shifting methods of communication that this would trigger began in the late 1990s. This allowed for, among other things, the alt-right to digitize.⁸¹ What began as a way to avoid the government in the 1980s became a serious method for recruiting, distributing information, and radicalizing individuals without the delays and limitations of proximity.⁸² Secondly, the rise of the internet would change the way Americans communicate with each other, effectively rescinding the face, name, identity, and thus consequences of someone who would throw vitriol or slander at someone else. The concept of dis/mis/mal information still held firmly in the realm of

⁸⁰ Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 53.

⁸¹ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 237.

⁸² Belew, 237.

psychological operations in warfare, and had not yet permeated the civilian sphere, nor had its infiltration normalized.

The internet, combined with thirty years' worth of right-wing value system conglomeration set the stage for an Othering that would not only play out on the battlefields across the world, but would also come home to roost in America's neighborhoods, the rhetoric of her politicians, and the development of a defense industry whose continued existence would require more conflict.⁸³

By the time the twin towers collapsed onto the streets of New York, Americans, whether they knew it or not, were ready for war. The month between the attacks and the invasion saw a tidal wave of punditry,⁸⁴ rearticulating the mythology of America's "chosenness," her winningness, her right to defend herself. In the months and years after the invasion, America also saw the denigration of those who opposed the war(s) and ongoing conflict, as well as many of the tools the American government employed and legitimized to "bring justice"⁸⁵ to those who died in the attacks.

For a political party who had increasingly failed to set boundaries on what it meant to be an "enemy" in American colloquialisms, the Othering of the Arab and anyone who did not approve of, appreciate, or articulate support for the War on Terror was noted for their "anti-American" sentiment.⁸⁶ This echoed the early Cold War red

⁸³ O'Connell, "Arms, Armageddon and the Evil Empire," 29, 30.

⁸⁴ Jim Rutenberg, "A Nation at War: The News Media: Cable's War Coverage Suggests a New 'Fox Effect' on Television Journalism." *New York Times*, last modified 16 Apr. 2003.

⁸⁵ "Irrefutable." *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/02/06/irrefutable/e598b1be-a78a-4a42-8e1a-c336f7a217f4/>.

⁸⁶ "The Press and Public Misperceptions About the Iraq War," *Nieman Reports*, last modified 11 June 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110611121300/http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100831/The-Press-and-Public-Misperceptions-About-the-Iraq-War.aspx>.

witch hunts of “Godless Commies”⁸⁷ on American soil. While both possessed the “us vs. them” ideology flavored with a Judeo-Christian America defending herself, the Global War on Terror would take on a heavier religious zest as rhetoric fueled fear of the Muslim and Islam itself. That perpetual fear would only help to engender a normalized culture of paranoia and defensiveness over the coming decades.

This perfect storm of cultural exclusivity and political alienation communicated ever faster with the rise of new media would perpetuate the idea that a threat from the Other was immanent and widespread. This ease with which Americans began to erase the bonds of neighbors bespeaks the way violence becomes a loop of destruction.

In the way we have seen earlier, loops of violence have a way of building on themselves, until a community legitimizes cultural, perpetual violence against others, that in turn, invites both structural and direct violence. As discussed, this builds into an identity whose norm can center around, or at least hold power over those whom they perceive to be morally bankrupt, absent of enough shared values, or a threat to their own identity group’s power dynamic.

In future chapters, we will see how the perpetual and ubiquitous conflict between certain groups of individuals would lend credence and legitimacy to a culture war waged not on some distant battlefield, but rather in the minds of certain service members and civilians on the home front.

⁸⁷ O’Connell, “Arms, Armageddon and the Evil Empire,” 38.

Chapter III.

The Most Lethal Force to Walk this Earth: Othering the Enemy

America's mythological origins sprung to life on the roads between sieges, the retellings of a surprise crossing of the Delaware River, and the repeated accounts of American audacity and willingness to face conflict. The mythos of the Revolutionary War would only grow in the subsequent conflicts between Anglo-Americans and their opponents to settling and expanding their new country.

Between the blood and bullet foundation and the embedded "searching for religious freedom" narrative, the mythic origin of America blossomed out of conflict and the quest for "liberty." These are heavy topics, and they have imbued the American identity with a sense of responsibility, often God-given responsibility,⁸⁸ difficult to lay down and set aside for analysis. We've seen how identity needs can play a significant role in inciting conflict between groups. This chapter will consider the identity of the modern American service member, specifically those who served in the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

American Martial Identity: Origin Myth

As we begin, it is imperative to understand that all war in and of itself is usually existential.⁸⁹ Whether both groups are fighting for physical needs (material resources) or

⁸⁸ John Cotton and Reiner Smolinski. "Gods Promise to His Plantation (1630)," *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, Jan. 1630, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/22>.

⁸⁹ "Existential War," *The Mackenzie Institute*, <https://mackenzieinstitute.com/2008/04/existential-war/>.

identity needs, the impact is perceived similarly: to lose means you and your way of life no longer exist. This is no different for American warfare, except that the mythology of America's existence remains tied to a sense of destiny and "chosenness," which we will explore in a later chapter. America's wars and her conflict in general lie at the crux of this existentialism. Understanding how she came to be and the mythology surrounding that birth colors the way Americans have painted wars throughout the last two hundred and fifty years.

To understand the nature of service in America, it is critical to more fully understand the origin story of America's founding. Like the Bible's Genesis for Christians, America's birth gives the answer to both why and how she came into existence. Rooted in the myth of both religious liberty and economic freedom, American beginnings detail enlightenment values and a sense of destiny that has been hard to shake as she has evolved.

The idea that early Americans were constantly fighting, fighting first for the right to practice religion the way they preferred without interference from the state, and fighting next for their right to represent themselves in government, imbues every conflict in American history with a sort of existentialism. That is to say, the rhetoric surrounding the "why" of American wars focuses on the Anglo-American right to exist, the necessity of defending the white, Christian values, and the freedom to build a life without excessive interference from anyone else.

Much like Genesis, the revolutionary war era has been interpreted in different ways as it has drifted into the past. However, the idea that "this is what the Founders

would have wanted” holds and has held powerful sway in political rhetoric at various points through America’s development.

The ironic mix of new beginnings and traditionality is a crucial piece of the colonial period that influences how values referencing the founding fathers are interpreted by both political parties and their adherents today. Despite the founding father’s experimental nature, (doing new things and establishing new precedence for their time), their time and values are also often referred to by conservative politicians as the golden age,⁹⁰ where power structures benefitted certain groups and not others. This lends itself to a “traditional values” argument, which, in turn, often colors war rhetoric, as the nature of war (particularly American war) is defensive and preservative.⁹¹

This rhetoric has only increased in the last decade as the political environment in the United States has grown more partisan and adversarial. An example of this comes from the 2020 presidential elections, wherein candidate Rick Santorum asserted that he is “for overturning Roe versus Wade,” because he does not “believe that we have a right in this country, in the Constitution, to take a human life. I don’t think that’s — I don’t think our founders envisioned that. I don’t think the writing of the Constitution anywhere enables that.”⁹²

This is an echo of many other republican politicians, who employ interpretations of the founding father’s actions and words to further their platforms. Religion often rises as a topic (particularly in campaigns, which are inherently adversarial), and an example

⁹⁰ Steven Mufson, “GOP Presidential Candidates Bring Founding Fathers Back into Political Spotlight.” *Washington Post*, last modified February 19, 2012.

⁹¹ Mufson, “GOP Presidential Candidates.”

⁹² “Video Excerpt: Romney Quizzed on Contraception During Debate,” *KFF Health News*, last modified 9 Jan. 2012, <https://kffhealthnews.org/news/gop-debate-contraception/>.

of that is then candidate Newt Gingrich's declaration that "Literally, the Founding Fathers said . . . your rights come directly from God."

While this is factually questionable at best, historian Pauline Maier of MIT analyzes the additional ramifications of this rhetorical strategy: "It is interesting why so many politicians and even judges today want to show that their ideas had firm foundations among the founders. In some ways, I suppose that defines a new phase in the culture wars over 'who is most American.'"⁹³

When the power over the definition of America and what she, in turn, values, is at stake, political conflicts can often take on the flavor of war.

War is simply the last resort of diplomacy, or so says military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz. America's wars, as alluded to, have translated a deep need to exist into the conflict of settlement and outreach. After the Revolutionary War, into the War of 1812 and the subsequent Native American Wars, prosecutors of American conflict have both conveyed and understood the conflicts to be almost apocalyptic in their existence.⁹⁴ For those fighting these battles, to win meant the furthering of the American experiment, the values (Anglo, Christian, Patriarchal) that America had come to cherish. To lose meant that America, bright shining city on a hill,⁹⁵ would vanish, and all her potential would be lost.

This ideology permeates each conflict through World War II. Even though America was sending troops to aid on another continent, the implication was that failure to do so would be threatening the freedom and values of the West, and thus America as

⁹³ Mufson, "GOP Presidential Candidates."

⁹⁴ Ron Rosenbaum, "The Shocking Savagery of America's Early History," *Smithsonian Magazine*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-shocking-savagery-of-americas-early-history-22739301/>.

⁹⁵ John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," 1630, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

free cities fell. Indeed, after World War II, the American conflict moved exclusively overseas, denoting a nearly de facto imperialist project to promote the promulgation of American values elsewhere. This modernized manifest destiny also allowed for the permeation of righteous rhetoric to justify the conflict, if not motivate the actual warfighters. One of these rhetorical tools is the introduction of the "Judeo-Christian Value System." Of note, and this will be covered in a later chapter, it was only after World War II that America coined the "Judeo" piece of "Judeo-Christian Heritage" when discussing traditional values embedded within the American identity.⁹⁶

It is important to denote World War II as a significant turning point in the evolution of the American martial identity. This is partly because the connotation of World War II is tied closely with the mythology of the "Greatest Generation" and the mythological prosperity of the 1950s. This prosperity is noted as mythological here, because such economic and social opportunities that led to prosperity and the rise of the middle class were heavily skewed towards the white, male, Christian nuclear family.⁹⁷ Not every American felt the positive impacts of World War II, but the story that has traversed through the last seventy years implied that the 1950s were a pinnacle from which America fell into social chaos and progressive whims.

This narrative was only exacerbated with the loss in Vietnam, as discussed in chapter one. While the rhetoric surrounding the war and America's entrance into the conflict echoes the same existential cries of wars before (communism, if allowed to

⁹⁶ "Once, the 'Judeo-Christian Tradition' United Americans. Now It Divides Them." *Washington Post*, last modified 17 April 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/17/once-judeo-christian-tradition-united-americans-now-it-divides-them/>.

⁹⁷ K. Dunak, "Teaching the Many Americas of the 1950s," *OAH Magazine of History* 26, no. 4 (Oct. 2012): 14.

spread unchecked, will spread to America and ruin her way of life⁹⁸), the conflict itself looked and felt differently, particularly to those prosecuting it. In this, the echoes of value-imperialism, an aggressive value system that is purported to be dissimilar to the “American Value System,” hung in the air: instead of the call to eradicate or keep communism off the American shores, GWOT’s ideology that threatened to encroach on American liberties was “Radical Islam.”

This, as discussed, was the first time soldiers had to figure out who they were in relation to a war wherein service was not vaunted as heroism. The Gulf War, quick and relatively painless, was a nice clean win, but it was also almost purely incentive based. It was about resources, not the threat to American values and way of life.⁹⁹

When the towers fell on September 11, 2001, the myth that Americanism was under attack once more reared back to life like a phoenix returning from the ashes of the 20th century. Comparisons to Pearl Harbor as well as a clear (if politicized) religious split from the majority of Americans allowed the country to support an invasion into Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ The invasion into Iraq was more contested, not as universally supported, but the rhetoric was similar. America was under attack, perpetual attack, from people who wished to change, ruin, and raze her way of life. “They” did not understand American values, did not value her traditions, and were willing to kill for it.

In a speech to the first class graduating the U.S. Military Academy at West Point after 9/11, President Bush spoke about the nation’s cause.

⁹⁸ “From Korea to Vietnam: The Origins and Mindset of Postwar U.S. Interventionism,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, <https://apjif.org/-Mel-Gurtov/3428/article.html>.

⁹⁹ “Americans Believe U.S. Participation in Gulf War a Decade Ago Worthwhile,” *Gallup.Com*, last modified 26 February 2001, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1963/Americans-Believe-US-Participation-Gulf-War-Decade-Ago-Worthwhile.aspx>.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Aitken, “9/11 Had the Biggest Effect on Military Recruiting since Pearl Harbor,” *Fox News*, last modified 28 August 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/9-11-military-recruiting>.

Our nation's cause has always been larger than our nation's defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace — a peace that favors human liberty...The dangers have not passed. This government and the American people are on watch, we are ready, because we know the terrorists have more money and more men and more plans. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.¹⁰¹

This is an effective message for someone whose national identity already flirts with the ubiquitous understanding that America has fought for every right she has gained, every piece of land she has conquered, and she must fight again (right or wrong).

9/11 invited back into public consciousness the Revolutionary War mythology and the Greatest Generation patriotism. This attack, particularly as it was represented in modern media, reminded Americans repeatedly that citizens were under threat from an onslaught of people who did not value the same things they did (often implied as the straight, white, Christian, familial tradition of the 1950s). With this identity under attack, citizens signed up in droves to defend their homeland.¹⁰²

Recruiting commercials for the U.S Army, from National Guard to Active Duty, spoke about the “awesome responsibility” that soldiers would shoulder in the coming days, noting the military as a “symbol of America’s resiliency and strength.”¹⁰³ Recruiting commercials perpetually highlighted the strength of the military, as noted in the “Army Strong”¹⁰⁴ commercials, challenging citizens to test themselves to see if they had what it takes to defend the country. This emphasis on strength, bravery, comradery,

¹⁰¹ “The Bush Record.”

¹⁰² Steve Beynon, “The 9/11 Terror Attacks Are Losing Recruiting Power with Today’s Troops,” *Military.Com*, last modified 10 Sept. 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/09/10/9-11-terror-attacks-are-losing-recruiting-power-todays-troops.html>.

¹⁰³ “Army National Guard Television Commercial,” last modified 2002, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHnabvyssXQ>.

¹⁰⁴ “Army National Guard Television Commercial.”

and patriotism, only served to heroize the volunteer service members and provide them with another facet of their individual and group identity.

Further, in this particular conflict, America would prosecute violence that had the greatest flavor of holy war perhaps since the Revolutionary War itself when the colonial forces believed they were upholding God's covenant with America.¹⁰⁵ Consistently framed as America against Islam and its adherents, the Global War on Terror inculcated a mental and emotional conditioning not just for the service members who would ship off to fight these wars abroad, but also for a citizenry who were told they could do their part by staying vigilant and looking for threats at home.¹⁰⁶

When President Bush addressed the 107th Congress, nine days after the terrorist attacks, he declared

Americans are asking: What is expected of us? I ask you to live your lives, and hug your children. I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat. I ask you to uphold the values of America, and remember why so many have come here. We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them.¹⁰⁷

Consistent communication like this that at once invited Americans to uphold undefined American values and fight for these principles invited each individual citizen into this war. Rhetoric like this that assumed every American listening would understand what American responsibilities are, what leaders mean when they call on her values, and it coalesced Americans in a way that brought the country together in that moment of

¹⁰⁵ "Religion and the American Revolution, Divining America, TeacherServe®," *National Humanities Center*, last accessed 7 August 2023, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/erelrev.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ Muneer I. Ahmad, "A Rage Shared by Law: Post-September 11 Racial Violence as Crimes of Passion," *California Law Review* 92, no. 5 (Oct. 2004): 1259.

¹⁰⁷ "The Bush Record."

shared suffering. It brought them along for the avenging their military would do, by being good citizens with good values at home.

This inherently built into and added onto the martial piece of the American identity, whether soldier or civilian. When persons in leadership positions exclaim repeatedly that the threat to you and yours could be around every corner, a paranoia, a certain acceptance of direct and structural violence begins to permeate the identity of the majority. This direct violence often manifested in hate crimes against American Muslims, whereas structural violence manifested in rhetoric that legitimized, and indeed often codified, disruptions to the lives of American Muslims or those who “looked” threatening. An example of this was TSA’s policy of random searches, wherein anyone at security could be taken and questioned randomly. Acceptance of policies, behaviors, and rhetoric akin to these examples only normalized the violence and potential violence against those whom politicians, individuals with access to offer this opinion (modern media), and then ordinary Americans accepted as enemies. This normalization instilled a readiness to jump into cultural violence as a worldview, a lifestyle, for many young Americans who were not a part of this marginalized community and who felt the threat from this community affected their day to day lives. This widespread legitimacy of cultural violence also fostered an environment out of which a new, pre-conditioned group of young men and women grew, ready to sign up for war to defend their country. These early years of the GWOT saw recruiting increase significantly from the late 90s, and their service, at least for the early years of the war was communicated as the only thing standing between American liberty and the downfall of the West.

Citizen Soldiers: Volunteering for the Crusades

American soldiers who volunteered for the Global War on Terror endured the most efficient conditioning of any fighting force in the history of the standing army. Between media inundation, the perpetual imagery of the actual attacks,¹⁰⁸ the biblical rhetoric surrounding the attacks as external factors and the drills, technology, and teaching methods within the military,¹⁰⁹ service members were uniquely equipped to both see and kill enemies in this new war.

Humans are not inherently imbued with a desire to kill others.¹¹⁰ Retired Army Officer Dave Grossman's *On Killing*'s seminal insights into why and how soldiers kill explain that "there is within most men an intense resistance to killing their fellow man. A resistance so strong that, in many circumstances, soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it."¹¹¹

Grossman delineates between pre- and post-Vietnam War soldiers. The service members involved in wars before Vietnam displayed an intense antipathy for killing their fellow man. Indeed, Grossman narrates General S. L. A. Marshall's studies on the way soldiers could avoid killing in war.

In the Civil War, 27,574 muskets were recovered from the Gettysburg battlefield after the fight; 90% of these were loaded. Twelve-thousand of the loaded muskets were loaded with more than one shot, and about half of these muskets had three to ten rounds in the barrel. A loaded weapon, as Grossman correctly asserts, was a precious

¹⁰⁸ "The Press and Public Misperceptions About the Iraq War," *Nieman Reports*, last modified 11 June 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110611121300/http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100831/The-Press-and-Public-Misperceptions-About-the-Iraq-War.aspx>.

¹⁰⁹ ADP 3-90, last accessed 7 August 2023, <https://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/index.html>.

¹¹⁰ Grossman, *On Killing*, 14.

¹¹¹ Grossman, 39.

commodity on a battlefield. If most soldiers were desperately attempting to kill as quickly and efficiently as they could, then 95 percent should have been shot with an empty weapon in their hand, and any loaded, cocked, and primed weapon dropped on the battlefield would have been snatched up from wounded or dead comrades and fired. They were not. Likewise, in World War II, most men busied themselves with the tasks of supporting the trigger pullers, but only a few men actually fired at the enemy, “while others gather and prepare ammo, load weapons, pass weapons, or fall back into the obscurity and anonymity of cover. The process of some men electing to load and provide support for those who are willing to shoot at the enemy appears to have been the norm rather than the exception.”¹¹²

This is significant for two reasons. The first has to do with one’s own identity in relation to his exercise as a soldier. Grossman articulates:

If a professional soldier were to see through the fog of his own self-deception, and if he were to face the cold reality that he can’t do what he has dedicated his life to, or that many of his soldiers would rather die than do their duty, it would make his life a lie. Such a man would be apt to deny his weakness with all the energy he could muster. No, the soldiers are not apt to write of their failures or the failures of their men; with few exceptions, it is only the heroes and the glory that make their way into print.

Service members occupy a specific place in cultural zeitgeist: they are supposed to be heroic, willing to sacrifice, brave, and unrepenting. For those who embodied this in order to go to war, notwithstanding what actually happens on the battlefield, to challenge this in retrospect with the truth of actions played out would, indeed, cause an instability within one’s own self-understanding and a group identity as well. And so, these findings were only recently acknowledged, and even then, they were not broadcasted. This is a

¹¹² Grossman, 59.

relatively new revelation, acknowledged only recently as to do so earlier would have challenged ubiquitous conception of the soldier and his heroism.

Combat is, as Grossman says, “laden with a baggage of expectations and myth. A belief that most soldiers will not kill the enemy in close combat is contrary to what we want to believe about ourselves, and it is contrary to what thousands of years of military history and culture have told us.”¹¹³ This group identity, for soldiers and for a society that venerates the soldier, is difficult to escape, for it requires two separate self-analyses. The soldier himself would have to consciously come to terms with his decision to kill, or his decision not to kill. This can threaten a conglomerated individual identity, often built on stories, not truth. Secondly, a community or nation and those who elect to join a war, would have to reevaluate its history, narrative, and identity as it relates to conflict and soldiering as a whole. Military Historian Alfred Vagts asserts that military history itself militarizes those who consume it. He argues military history is written “with polemic purpose for the justification of individuals or armies and with small regard for socially relevant facts.”¹¹⁴ He goes on to imply that institutions, both military and historical have

reinforced and supported each other in a process of mutual glorification and aggrandizement. To a certain extent, this is probably because those who are good at killing in war are quite often those who throughout history have hacked their way to power. The military and the politicians have been the same people for all but the most recent part of human history, and we know that the victor writes the history books.¹¹⁵

This too is significant as history moved beyond the early 20th century and American military leaders, if not academics, began to take note of and incorporate the lessons from Marshall’s observations of the combat soldier. “According to studies by

¹¹³ Grossman, 72.

¹¹⁴ Grossman, 72.

¹¹⁵ Grossman, 72.

Marshall, these changes resulted in a firing rate of 55 percent in Korea and, according to a study by R. W. Glenn, a 90 to 95 percent firing rate was attained in Vietnam.”¹¹⁶

This shift in efficacy came from multiple changes in the American Military training regimen: using man-shaped targets instead of bullseye targets in marksmanship, practicing and drilling how soldiers actually fight, dispersing responsibility for killing throughout the group, and displacing responsibility for the killing onto an authority figure.¹¹⁷ All of these helped soldiers realign their resistance towards killing, and, more significantly, helped realign their perspectives towards the enemy as a whole and their own relationship with the American enemy.

While the first two enhancements make the service member more physically capable of violence, the latter two are significant in that they allowed a psychological shift from an aversion to an efficacy in killing. This inherently suggests that the service member is both invited and compelled to understand his relationship with other humans differently than before he became a service member.

Binaries play a large part in this conditioning. Understanding good and bad, American and not (the latter being bad), and understanding one’s right and responsibility to defend the former offers service members a way to accomplish their mission without having to too closely consider what they are doing and how that squares with any other moral values. American war gifts its service members with a belief in its own inherent goodness, purity, and righteousness that then allows the service member to operate more effectively on the battlefield.

¹¹⁶ Grossman, 74.

¹¹⁷ Grossman, 124.

This belief in America's need for protection, America first, does not evaporate when service members return from the battlefields on which they were pulling the trigger. Indeed, within the martial context of American identity, we have established that Americans often feel as though there is a constant threat to America herself, her "values," and her identity. The service member's perception that an anti-American enemy is an existential threat to the America he has spent time, blood, and often brothers defending allows him to understand the terrain at home the same way he would see the battlefield abroad. In the early years of the post 9/11 wars, this enmity focused on Islam and more broadly, the Arab-Americans who received the brunt of this binary hatred.¹¹⁸

The immediacy and irrevocability of this training and execution resulted in soldiers who were unable to separate themselves from the fight, even when they returned home. An excellent example of this is detailed in the New Yorker's short documentary, *Soldier at the Gate*.¹¹⁹ This narrative depicts the true story of a former marine who returned home from the Global War on Terror to Indiana, where his inability to separate the war from the home front made him decide to blow up the Islamic Center in his town. Fortunately, the story has a happy ending; in his first reconnaissance, the marine discovered the humanity of those he was intent on destroying.

During his testimony, the marine explained how his military training allowed him to kill more effectively. "As long as you can look at them in any way that's not human, you'll be ok"¹²⁰ he said, quoting his leadership. With this in mind, he returned home and

¹¹⁸ Liz Mineo, "Muslim Americans Reflect on the Impact of 9/11," *Harvard Gazette*, last modified 9 Sept. 2021, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/09/muslim-americans-reflect-on-the-impact-of-9-11/>.

¹¹⁹ "Stranger at the Gate," last accessed 7 August 2023, <https://www.strangeratthegate.com>.

¹²⁰ "Stranger at the Gate."

everyday was “forced to see people [he] thought of as enemies.”¹²¹ It got to a point, he admitted, “where [he] just wanted to do harm to them.”¹²² Perhaps he would not have reached this decision point if he hadn’t also felt his daughter was threatened, but a Muslim classmate of his daughter’s triggered him simply by existing in close proximity to her. In his words, “a future terrorist sat across from [his] daughter. [He] let these people get close to [his family].”¹²³ The visceral need to protect one’s family at all costs is not lost in the conditioning of service members; shared suffering and pain create the band of brothers so poignantly written about in many war narratives. The flip side of this loyalty is absolute willingness to save and protect those you love from those you understand to be a threat to their lives and freedoms. This former marine perceived that his American neighbors were not quite American enough; in fact, to him, they were an insidious extension of the men and women with whom he had been battling across the world. So, he devised a plan to hurt them, to safeguard his family, his town, and his country.

When the marine finally met his Muslim neighbors, engaged with them, got to know them, his entire perception shifted. He realized their empathy, their community, their goodwill. They took him in when he needed sanctuary (even if he did not recognize it). The marine ended up converting and leading the center for three years.¹²⁴

This is a significant story to recount as it demonstrates the depth of the American service member’s psychological conditioning. This individual was so invested in defending his country, what he perceived his country stood for, that he was willing to

¹²¹ “Stranger at the Gate.”

¹²² “Stranger at the Gate.”

¹²³ “Stranger at the Gate.”

¹²⁴ “Stranger at the Gate.”

sacrifice his life and the lives of other Americans who did not align with those values he had been conditioned to defend at all costs.

This psychology allows for the perception of anyone who a service member perceives as anti-American to become a threat. In the early years of the 9/11 wars, it was Arab-Americans. As time has continued, American political parties have come to use stringently different rhetoric and articulate different values. For those in the military whose values align more with one political party than the other, this invites the same perception challenge that service members like the former marine experienced with Arab-American neighbors. For those who do not agree with one's values, the ones each service member believes he is fighting for with his life, those that do not agree begin to look a lot like enemies. And enemies are allowed to be dispatched.

Right or Left: A Politicized Military is a Problem

Since the volunteer force grew into existence after 1973, the political association of service members has trended towards the Republican Party, or conservative values.¹²⁵ Indeed, in his 1957 work on civil-military relations, political scientist Samuel Huntington “characterized the ‘military mind’ as fundamentally ‘conservative.’”¹²⁶ This is due to a number of reasons: socioeconomic backgrounds, location of recruitment efforts, and a difference in communication of values between parties.

A 2020 study considering public perception of the choice to serve in the armed forces details the relationship between the institution of the military and political parties.

¹²⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 79.

¹²⁶ Ronald R. Krebs, and Robert Ralston, “Patriotism or Paychecks: Who Believes What About Why Soldiers Serve,” *Armed Forces & Society* 48, no. 1 (Jan. 2022): 31.

An early observation in the study, which drives additional assertions, details that “many Americans...continue to be in thrall to the myth of the patriotic citizen-soldier.”¹²⁷ This is significant as policy makers seem “more comfortable sending soldiers into danger if they believe soldiers support the mission—which they presume is the case when soldiers are moved to join by patriotism and good-citizenship, not lured by material gain or compelled by poverty.”¹²⁸ Indeed, these two perceptions of service motivations, patriotism vs. personal gain, align with the political parties Republican and Democrats respectively.

Before continuing, it’s worth highlighting the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) which details divides between conservative and liberal worldviews.¹²⁹

According to MFT (moral foundations theory), political conservatives cherish in-group loyalty and integrity, self-sacrifice, and obedience to authority—“binding” foundations (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1033). They place the community with which they identify at the center of their values. It follows that conservatives would see the military as an exemplary institution, epitomizing the ideals they cherish.¹³⁰

Liberals, in contrast,

place little weight on in-group loyalty and obedience to authority, emphasizing instead fairness and care. Given these “individualizing” foundations, liberals are particularly sensitive to socioeconomic inequality, to the limited choices that individuals from disadvantaged circumstances face, and to the blurry line between constrained choice and compulsion.¹³¹

It is not overly surprising then to extrapolate the positive relationship between conservative policy makers with the military and the less-trusting relationship between

¹²⁷ Krebs and Ralston, 29.

¹²⁸ Krebs and Ralston, 27.

¹²⁹ Martin V. Day et al, “Shifting Liberal and Conservative Attitudes Using Moral Foundations Theory,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 12 (Dec. 2014): 1559.

¹³⁰ Krebs and Ralston, “Patriotism,” 31.

¹³¹ Krebs and Ralston, 31.

liberals and the armed forces. Indeed, “Conservatives are especially motivated to associate the military institution with the values they cherish— honor, loyalty, patriotism—and to then attribute those values to individual military service members.”¹³²

The study itself discovered that belief in service as a patriotic duty is most “heavily concentrated among politically conservative and less educated Americans, who believe that service members primarily join the military for intrinsic reasons.”¹³³ This mentality partners well with the conditioning discussed above; for those who ally military service with “saviorship,” the conditioning to see enemies as inhuman, anti-American and evil is much more easily swallowed.

Thus, there exists a population within the U.S. Military for whom the conditioning and inherent perception of their own patriotism lends itself to extreme perspectives of conflict and reasoning. “If you are not with us, you are against us, as Americans with *my* set of values.” These norms in and of themselves become a dividing line between “us” and “them.” Inherent in this worldview is an impossibility for the “live and let live” mentality to flourish. This is true for the distant other, but when the conflict feels near, and thus the threat also feels much closer, more immanent, the sacralization of “Our” values only deepens, this rendering “Their” values even more worth defending against. If war is an all or nothing engagement, those who prosecute it are inclined to incorporate this sense of duty, defense, and protectionism into their own identity, which, when challenged, is grounds to fight once more.

Another piece of significance to consider when analyzing the political mind of the service member is to consider recruitment and how the institution markets itself to its

¹³² Krebs and Ralston, 31.

¹³³ Krebs and Ralston, 42.

potential employees. That is to say, “If partisans adhere to different beliefs about the chief reasons that people join the military, different recruitment strategies and messages will resonate to different degrees with these audiences depending on their fit with the audiences’ political values and service narratives.”¹³⁴ Given the nature of the conflict, the political values of those in charge of the military in the early 2000s, as well as the ubiquitous rhetoric surrounding the early 9/11 wars, it is no surprise that the recruiting market tipped towards those inclined towards patriotism, and thus to see themselves as patriots signing up to defend their country and their values. The bulk of the military, thus, would inherently skew more conservative. Examples of this recruiting can be seen in early 2000s recruiting efforts. Images of 9/11 and the responders could often be seen, and the voice over called to the patriotism and duty of citizens.¹³⁵ This heavily patriotic, duty to country rhetoric has disappeared in the recruiting videos in the latter half of the war. Now the Army’s motto, as an example, has shifted from a focus on winning the GWOT to “people first” and most recently to “be all you can be” – a throwback to the 1980s’ recruiting efforts that prioritized individual accomplishment over the nationalistic martial mission.

As we have discovered with the rise of the religious right, the Republican Party’s articulated and communicated values are often situated on a foundation of Christian ethics and the vaunted Judeo-Christian heritage that legitimizes their political goals. When a service member’s political values begin to blend with their religious dedication, it becomes even harder to separate from the conflict they are asked to prosecute on behalf of their country. The country a service member defends out of patriotism would, in

¹³⁴ Krebs and Ralston, 43.

¹³⁵ “Army National Guard Television Commercial.”

theory, have and promote the same values the individual service member herself is fighting for. When a service member's individual values, (that which one believes she is fighting for), do not seem to align with the rhetoric of the country's leaders (who have asked the service member to potentially sacrifice her life for them), disillusionment usually follows, and quite quickly.

A politicized military is a modern phenomenon, rising from the all-volunteer force. In the wake of the draft, the volunteer service member garnered special hero-status for the sacrifice he's offering his country. His choice to join was also a demonstration of faith in the American values and identity for which he and his fellow service members would be asked to sacrifice. When the values and identity of a country, that which the service members believe in so ardently that they would die for it, become unclear and even contradictory at home, it is unsurprising that a service member falls to his own politics, his group identity not as an American, but as a conservative American trying to defend an America he joined up to save in the first place.

When a political group identity feels threatened, they will reduce what could be a profitable conflict that would further both sides' argument to a battle. A battle is binary, and in this reduction- the "other" becomes the enemy, a threat to their power and requiring elimination. For individuals whose worldviews have been irrevocably steeped in the rhetoric of soldiering and the patriotism of sacrifice- violence on behalf of the threatened party, with whom they share sacred values, is a small leap.

Interest or Incentive: Service as a Faith in American Values

A volunteer Service Member, as studied in the highlighted work above, requires either an interest or an incentive to fight. Here, we will define an interest as defending something greater than oneself, the patriotism or duty one feels in relation to one's identity. An incentive, by contrast, is the potential social mobility or monetary compensation of the soldier's service. The first is much more powerful, and this is part of the glue that binds the Revolutionary War to its mythos. The disparate colonies were able to fight against a power much bigger than they because they harbored such a faith in their new republic,¹³⁶ they found worth in fighting to oblivion. The British were more concerned with natural resources and the financial benefit of having colonies.¹³⁷ Much of the rhetoric surrounding America's volunteer army harkens to this fit of patriotism in the country's history, likening service with heroism. And indeed, this choice does require sacrifice, but it also imbues a service member with a mindset that builds this heroism into one's own identity.

These individuals who joined the service under interest, not incentive, are much more likely to bear an inflexible mindset when it comes to conflict on behalf of America. When a soldier chooses to defend his country, the implication is that he has a certain understanding of what his country stands for, her values, her identity, and he agrees these things are worth fighting for. This makes losing a conflict existential, as exhibited above. To lose a war compromises more than a paycheck, it even compromises more than one's own life: losing a conflict to defend the America the service member knows to be worthy

¹³⁶ Benjamin L. Carp, "Nations of American Rebels: Understanding Nationalism in Revolutionary North America and the Civil War South," *Civil War History* 48, no. 1 (Mar. 2002): 16.

¹³⁷ Ken Owen, "National Identity and the American Revolution," *The Junto*, 27 Dec. 2012, <https://earlyamericanists.com/2012/12/27/national-identity-and-the-american-revolution/>.

means losing a way of life, a value system, and, most importantly, it means losing this for one's community and one's children.

Thus, service members who choose to fight for America's values *must* believe in their righteousness. They must believe in the purity of the American spirit, that she, as a whole, as a people more than those within a community from which the service member comes, bears the same values as the volunteer, or it would be nearly impossible to offer one's life for such a people and cause.

In this way, in the belief in things unseen, unproven in the American identity, the service member actually delves into a deep faith in her country and that which her country stands for. This makes considering the "unamerican" an enemy much easier. This makes conflict intractable and retreat unacceptable, both on battlefields abroad and on the home front in political skirmishes. As we move forward, we'll explore the way this faith has come to define the service member, and particularly her exit from service, and why such a faith lends itself to political engagement that culminated in the attack at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The American Way of Life: What Is Worth Defending?

Before going any further, it is imperative to describe and define what exactly is "the American Way of Life." The mythology and potential of this phrase cannot be overstated. As we have discussed, it is the primary motivator for American conflict for the last two hundred and fifty years, informing both the Revolutionary War and World War II, America's greatest wins.

Up until the 1960s, the “American Way of Life” would most often have been described as white, patriarchal, and Christian.¹³⁸ This is also because up until the 1950s, individuals and groups with this identity were the primary stakeholders in American identity.¹³⁹ After World War II, the social fabric began to shift, and those who had been historically marginalized began to seek spaces in which to voice their own value and alter the previous power structure in the states. Despite this ongoing social revolution, the mythology is hard to break, particularly for those who share the identity that previously held power and thus would have inherited it as well.

This way of life is often conflated with traditional, or conservative, and indeed has become the bedrock of the American Republican Party’s social platform.¹⁴⁰ It is a restorative ideology, one that draws on the mythologized simpler way of life where things “made sense” and American values often aligned with Christian (often Protestant) values.

This is the Way of Life that service members are either tacitly or overtly told they are defending. Again, we can reference the Commander in Chief’s early 2000s rhetoric in his speeches to grasp that leadership at the highest level understood the “American Way of Life” not to need any definition or clarity.¹⁴¹ It is absolutely critical to have an understanding of what one is defending, because service members are asked both to kill and die for this reason. Thus, when one truly believes that this Way of Life, this value system, is worth dying for, it becomes easier to prosecute a conflict. It becomes a faith in things unseen, in one’s neighbor that they value and believe in the same mythology.

¹³⁸ Lauren R. Kerby, *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation’s Capital and Redeem a Christian America*, (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 26.

¹³⁹ Fraser, *Between Church and State*, 41.

¹⁴⁰ Mufson, “GOP Presidential Candidates.”

¹⁴¹ “The Bush Record.”

When those who are fighting for this way of life discover that said Way of Life, the values that they have been defending, are shifting on the home front, it is easy to develop a resentment towards one's own countrymen. It is incredibly challenging, if not impossible, to prosecute a conflict next to those one does not trust to defend the same values. Without this shared understanding of what the service member is supposed to protect, what America is supposed to be, look like, vaunt, be a symbol of, an erosion of trust will begin to trickle between troops, between civilian and military, and even between the institutions that are supposed to uphold this way of life and those sworn to defend them. The question, unanswered and worth additional scrutiny, then becomes, can a shared understanding that centers on pluralism as a necessary value for American existence and even the acceptance of pluralism as a sacred value, be a sufficiently motivating value framework for war when war in defense of one's country seems necessary?

A shared narrative seems, based on precedent, the best way to combat an assigned enemy. As such, it is vitally important for the service member to understand a reason, a faith in the values she defends evinces a greater desire to close with and destroy the enemy—an entity, state people, or person usually assigned values and identity different from that which the soldier understand she is defending and protecting. Thus, the concept of pluralism as a value within which to invest faith becomes a challenging motivator for a service member asked to destroy on behalf of her country. War and conflict legitimize the structure of the singular, the unified, which can present challenges to embodying pluralism as a value around which to rally.

Chapter IV.

Identity and Faith: Choosing What It Means to Be “American”

The previous chapter partially explored the American origin story, and the identity that evolved from this creation myth. As America has grown into herself as a country on the world stage, her values, espoused by the Founding Fathers in various documents from that era, have also developed. This is evident in the way political parties choose to highlight specific values, traits, and policies in American government. Loosely, the conservative, Republican Party places worth in freedom, loyalty, and tradition whereas the liberal, Democratic Party articulates a value for equality, safety for the minority and underrepresented, and individuality.¹⁴² This translates differently to each American, who in turn has the responsibility to vote for a representative in state and federal government. This chapter will consider what it means to “be an American,” what “American values” are, and how faith in these values shapes the choice to defend and protect America at any cost.

Values as Scripture: Interpretation of What Is “American”

America requires a faith to exist. This does not imply an institutional religiosity, but rather a complete mental and emotional commitment to a cause or way of being established on things not seen or proven. This is not to be confused with a Christian or

¹⁴² Jesse Graham et al, “Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (May 2009): 1029.

Abrahamic faith, which, as established, favors conservative political sentiments.

America's entire existence is an experiment, relying on her citizens' goodwill and faith that humans can aspire to more, to representative government, fairness, justice, and many other enlightenment values.¹⁴³ It was the first country to articulate that "all men are created equal"¹⁴⁴ (at the time, considered all white men). It was the first country to derive its power "from the consent of the governed" and raise a government "of the people, by the people, for the people."¹⁴⁵ This is utterly significant as it would have been so much easier, the precedent already existed in every country previously, to devolve into an authoritarian government, likely a monarchy, with hereditary succession or strongman at the helm.

America is thus a faith-based nation. Again, this is not to say that she is steeped or founded on one set of religiously espoused values, but rather that her entire existence relies on the idea that her citizens believe in the potential of her democracy to better the lives of her citizens. America in and of herself is an existing myth, continued every day with the goodwill and strength of belief of her citizens on both sides of the political divide. As time distances Americans from their founding, the legacy of freedom, opportunity, equality, justice, and stability (among other fundamental values) begin to evolve almost into scripture. The historical conflicts and hard-won lessons in American history serve as epistemological examples for the way political parties communicate the country *should* look, behave, and choose to emulate.

¹⁴³ Alexis de Tocqueville et al, *Democracy in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 47, 189.

¹⁴⁴ "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." *National Archives*, 1 Nov. 2015, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

¹⁴⁵ "The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription." *National Archives*, 4 Nov. 2015, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

These values and their stories are just as deeply respected on both sides of America's political strata, but her two political parties have espoused different interpretations of these (and other) American values throughout the years, with each value used to appeal to citizens for votes. As such, both the Republican and the Democratic Parties appeal to the faith of the American in what it means to be American, but with both sides deeply entrenched in their own belief system, the conflict between the two perspectives becomes nearly intractable.

Some expressions of religion imply potential for intractability, an unwillingness to compromise on the sacred. Some expressions of religion are more open than others. Regardless, sacred values bear an intrinsic inviolability based on their significance to the identity and purpose of the religion which they represent, whether an adherent chooses to shift her perspective on their power or not. Sacred values are those tenets of life and identity that define one's sense of self, one's sense of truth in the world, and, if crossed, imply the need for punishment, the threat of corroding one's identity and morality, and are impossible to regain. This is the worth that both political parties have begun to ascribe to their party's espoused value systems. When considered in the light of institutional religion, it is easy to grasp: "If religious discourse can recode the same restrictions as transcendent principles and divine commands, it can quash—or disarm—much of this resistance."¹⁴⁶ However, when these values are not connected to a higher being, but rather centered in an earthly sphere and based on one's own belief in the righteousness of their *own* interpretation of moral justice, the differing value systems and worldviews can clash just the same and with the same vigor as previous holy wars backed

¹⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 56.

by the variety of transcendent holy beings believed to support each side. Indeed, when we consider “routinized practices mandated and supported by religious discourse, a community’s characteristic preferences are experienced as sacred duties, not simply human choices.”¹⁴⁷ While this was taken from an Abrahamic perspective, the point remains: a collective understanding of sacred values (values not to be crossed for fear of losing identity, way of life, etc.) bind individuals to a group and offer legitimacy in unity against a group that feels threatening to their collective understanding of the world and the way they should be living. This is faith. When understood in such a light, it’s easier to understand why conflict has become so bruising: “the rival parties now fight not only for their styles of dress, recreation, sexual or commercial morality, but for their faith, and with correspondingly increased ferocity and determination.”¹⁴⁸

Now, in the shadow of the Global War on Terror, the surrounding rhetoric that offered so much attention to the defense of the American values, the defense of American identity, the defense of American tradition, custom, and way of life, invited service members to conflict. The next logical step for those who imbibe this rhetoric regularly would be to clash with citizens who are working for progressive social change, change that is communicated as an attack on that which they believe they have been defending for so long.

An excellent depiction of this shift can be seen in the evolution of the Army recruiting strategy from 2001 to 2023. We’ve already seen some examples of more patriotism-based recruiting in the early 2000s. More contemporarily, the Army has changed their slogan to “be all you can be,” an echo of the 1980s and a signal of the

¹⁴⁷ Lincoln, 56.

¹⁴⁸ Lincoln, 56.

shifting recruiting landscape. The military as an institution is vaunting individual betterment and less about the integrity of the squad. Recent campaigns to recruit individuals across all identity groups (to include previously excluded groups such as women and people of color) have met with backlash from conservative politicians, media outlets, and in some cases from those with military background themselves. For some, this drive to recruit a broad swath of Americans feels like a betrayal of what they know the service to be, and an alignment with political values that do not match their own. Senator Ted Cruz's comments on a recruiting effort in 2021, wherein his social media platform twitter read "Holy Crap. Perhaps a woke, emasculated military is not the best idea..."¹⁴⁹ linked an American ad to a Russian ad in attempts to compare the two efforts to invite citizens to serve. Like previous rhetoric that based service in a fear of an encroaching other, this response to the military's effort to appeal to service members of diverse identities normalized a delegitimizing of troops who were not members of that "traditional" soldier group, that is to say, white, male, straight, often Protestant. For service members who *do* identify with this traditional soldier identity and who perhaps do not feel valued or feel as though they are being villainized, political leaders' comments such as this only deepen their own belief system in the country they feel they are fighting for, namely, the traditional hegemony of a group they themselves belong to. Further, for these service members who believe both in their cause and in the values they are defending, the devotion to duty and to the legacy of their country can grow into a religion.

¹⁴⁹ Ted Cruz (@tedcruz), "Holy crap. Perhaps a woke, emasculated military is not the best idea....," *Twitter*, May 20, 2021, <https://twitter.com/tedcruz/status/1395394254969753601?s=20>.

It is imperative to understand that for the purposes of this paper, American military service is not specifically allied with any one religion. The comparison lies in the way service members behave towards and believe in a set of values espoused by authority figures. In this way, the service member's faith in things not seen as religious and the values she is defending sacred, and thus, unable to be compromised.

This sacralization means, for service members, the fight for "America" is never over. When political leaders who have been espousing the patriotism and American-faith-based rhetoric call for defense of the homeland, it is understandable that service members listen and even take up arms. This is what they were conditioned to do, fighting for America is their own crusade. If called to a cause they so ardently believe in, what would their conscience say if they did not heed this summons?

One can and should feel empathy about the way identity needs, faith, and the true desire to protect America, community, and family battle for supremacy within the minds of the conservative American service member.

Needs-Based Fighting: American Identity on Maslow's Hierarchy

Maslow's Hierarchy is composed of five levels. The lower needs, physiological (food, water, shelter) and safety (personal security, healthy) must be met before one can focus on attaining higher needs such as love, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.¹⁵⁰ Identity needs fall along this pyramid too, towards the higher levels. Maslow's Hierarchy is stitched tightly into the lining of the American Dream. The "American Dream," defined by the George W. Bush Institute "has come to be associated with upward

¹⁵⁰ "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Simply Psychology*, last modified 3 Nov. 2022, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

mobility and enough economic success to lead a comfortable life. Historically, however, the phrase represented the idealism of the great American experiment.”¹⁵¹ The American Dream, like the American Creation Myth, wraps the idea that to be an American means to be working with a specific set of values towards an end-goal of prosperity, typically health, wealth, and a whole family.

The effects of the American Dream are twofold. First, it offers and reaffirms the mythos that America, and by extension her citizens, are chosen, exceptional, and destined for opportunity and prosperity. This only reinforces the idea that America is something worth defending, fighting for at all costs. Secondly, and more contemporarily, the concept of the American Dream seems to have shifted so that the perception is that Americans have fulfilled the lower levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy, and they are focusing more solely on the higher psychological needs. This includes identity, both self and group.

The first twenty years of the 21st century saw media and politicians asserting and reaffirming that “Others” were coming for every level of American needs from physical safety to the American identity (read freedom, justice, white-Protestant values). This protracted perception of conflict allowed the separation from wartime and peacetime to collapse, inviting what would not have usually been acceptable, mainstream violence against a group into the quotidian. Rendering such structural and direct violence normal, even encouraged on behalf of the state and the greater cause of American freedom made mundane an Othering on behalf of some greater cause. As Galtung states, “one way

¹⁵¹ “A Brief History of the American Dream,” *George W. Bush Presidential Center*, last accessed 7 August 2023, <https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/state-of-the-american-dream/churchwell-history-of-the-american-dream/>.

cultural violence works is by changing an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least to yellow/acceptable.”¹⁵² His example, though rather on the nose for our discussion, is that murder on behalf of the country is right, on behalf of oneself is wrong.”¹⁵³ Indeed, inculcating cultural violence implies an altruism on behalf of a group for which the violence is being visited upon others. As it troops along, “this relationship between conflict experience and psychological commitment also blurs the line between victims and perpetrators of violence in situations of political conflict.”¹⁵⁴

Now, this paper focuses most heavily on the contingent of American service members who identify with right-wing ideologies and how they got to their faith in political identity. It is also important to highlight other group identities both within the American military and without. These are the groups and individuals who, throughout history, have often been marginalized for one reason or another, by the majority. Also important to acknowledge, the majority culture and identity in American history (noted as post-1776 colonies until today) has been white, protestant, and patriarchal.

As soldiers returned home from Vietnam, we observed the phenomenon of feeling left behind, feeling as though they were not fighting for a country that remembered, respected, or revered them in the face of great social change. This, as stated in chapter one, both acted as the impetus for many right-wing extremist groups to convene, and also allowed for many already existing groups to narrow their rhetoric and attract disillusioned service members who felt as though they had been “cut” in line by the previously marginalized. Several examples of individuals who used these recruiting tactics can be

¹⁵² Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” 292.

¹⁵³ Galtung, 292.

¹⁵⁴ Orla Muldoon, “The Psychological Impact of Protracted Campaigns of Political Violence on Societies,” in *Terrorists, Victims and Society*, ed. Andrew Silke (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2003), 165.

seen in Louis Beam and Richard Butler, to name a few, who valued the violence and emotion of some returning service members.

Over the last twenty years, America has seen a similar social upheaval to her 1960s and 70s. The repeal in 2011 of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” in the military, coupled with the right to marry same-sex partners, as well as the rise of Black Lives Matter movements and racial reckonings, police shootings, school shootings, politicizing the AR-15, transgender rights, critical race theory in schools, the right to parental oversight in schools (or lack thereof), and climate issues, among other progressive causes have invited social politics into every home and onto every phone. This, coupled with the invitation and access of the individual to participate in the conversation around these topics via social media opened the door to a perpetual engagement and characterization on both sides of the political spectrum of the other side with negative connotations and comments. This turbulence lends itself to defining a cultural zeitgeist based on social instability, or at least the ubiquitous perception of such instability. This, in turn, only exacerbates the same sentiments of returning conservative Vietnam veterans: the people and the norms of the country they thought they were defending look a lot different than that which the martial narrative has offered them in order to more effectively prosecute conflict.

Now, for many of the individuals, organizations, and groups who are exercising their own American right to articulate their values and where they feel the country can do better, the American Dream, the American Creation Myth, and the perpetuation of American exceptionalism can feel hollow. It is in their interest to explain how their own group identity is valuable, worthy, and also an integral part of the American identity as a

whole. They not only have the right but the investment to ensure their stories begin to permeate the mythology that they have felt left out of: that which made America “America” for so long. This inherently implies a different interpretation of values and perspective of American identity than that of the group this paper has been considering until now.

This can feel threatening both to groups and individuals who feel as though their own identity is defined with reference to an America they have lived and sacrificed for throughout their time both in service and on the outside. Indeed, when we acknowledge that “failure to establish or maintain a relatively secure identity produces severe psychological discomfort, or even a total personality breakdown, which may be experienced by the individual as a threat to survival,”¹⁵⁵ the potential for violent reaction becomes more understandable. When survival seems to be on the line, or even the perception that survival is on the line, conflicts can devolve quickly into entrenched sides, with little willingness to consider or reconsider values that have become sacred. Faith in such values only more deeply entrenches the individual and invites back into the consciousness the legitimacy of violence for the purpose of defending this identity.

The value system associated with the Judeo-Christian Heritage of Chapter 1 is a prime example. The straight, white, patriarchal, tradition of certain mythologies, acknowledged fairly ubiquitously as the American Way of Life, is what many, especially conservative, service members felt they were defending. They were defending not only their country, but their country’s identity and belief system, and, by extension, their own. This cultural mythos stemmed, as we have covered, from the rise of the religious right

¹⁵⁵ William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 54.

and the widely spread narrative that drove the development of the conservative party and its adherents.

This is a double kind of faith, a faith in an identity without evidence outside a history book and stories passed through generations and across communities. It is a faith nonetheless, and faith-based conflicts are often intractable because they represent something deep and sacred and inviolable. To offer any compromise within this identity implies a compromise of one's entire being, one's soul.

When liberal groups attempt to restructure pieces of American history to reflect their group's participation in these moments, reallocating power and interpreting values differently in the process, it can often feel, to conservative identity groups that they and their predecessors are being recast as the villains of history. It can feel as though the values that they cherish, and by which they have lived, are being attacked, and that, if they *do not* fight back, they are abandoning their people, their community, their history—that which makes them who they are. This is a dangerous relationship with which to move forward in a country whose continual existence is founded and maintained on goodwill and the power of the neighbor. This is particularly challenging in an environment that has coached the American service member to defend the constitution “against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”¹⁵⁶

Exacerbating this environment are conservative leaders both in politics and in the media. Two examples of this are Congressman Matt Gaetz publicly questioning General Milley, implying his “woke” leadership, and Tucker Carlson of Fox News asserting that the military is emasculated and impotent because of its work to clothe pregnant service

¹⁵⁶ “Oath of Enlistment,” last accessed August 7, 2023, <https://www.army.mil/values/oath.html>.

members. In an exchange on Capitol Hill after the insurrection, General Milley, Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the following in defense of studying different theories, including Critical Race Theory, at The Military Academy at West Point:

I want to understand white rage and I'm white, and I want to understand it. So what is it that cause thousands of people to assault this building and try to overturn the constitution of the United States of America? What caused that? I want to find that out. I want to maintain an open mind here, and I do want to analyze it. It's important that we understand that because our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and guardians, they come from the American people. So it is important that the leaders now and in the future do understand it.¹⁵⁷

Congressman Gaetz then tweeted "We must defend our patriotic military service members against their woke leadership,"¹⁵⁸ in reference to General Milley's own defense.

Similarly, then Fox News media mogul Tucker Carlson invited partisan politics into his opinion of the military asserting that "Pregnant women are going to fight our wars. It's a mockery of the U.S. military."¹⁵⁹ While military leaders refuted both of these men's comments, and publicly, their words are available for repeated consumption. Both castigate the military for its own social progression, making service accessible. Thus, as the military itself has become a politicized group at the highest levels of American politics, its leaders and their challenges are more visible to the soldier than they once were. The ubiquity of social media has allowed service members both to build and maintain connections with groups, individuals, and organizations that reflect their own

¹⁵⁷ "Dave Brown" (@dave_brown24), "Strong reaction from Joint Chiefs Chairman Milley on the issue of critical race theory before House Armed Services," *Twitter*, June 23, 2021, https://twitter.com/dave_brown24/status/1407745748909838343?s=20.

¹⁵⁸ Matt Gaetz (@mattgaetz), "We must defend our patriotic military service members against their woke leadership," *Twitter*, June 23, 2021, <https://twitter.com/mattgaetz/status/1407796912309342214?s=20>.

¹⁵⁹ Quint Forgy, "Military Leaders Thrash Tucker Carlson after Comments about Female Troops," *Politico*, last modified 11 March 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/11/military-tucker-carlson-female-troops-comments-475315>.

value systems.¹⁶⁰ In the last decade, conservative media has grown ever more entangled with the rise of former President Donald Trump's quest to "Make America Great Again."¹⁶¹ This ideology, built on the faith that America requires restoration to a golden age to remain relevant and powerful and beneficial to its citizens, aligns neatly with the messaging of the preceding ten years: American values are under attack and it is up to the average citizen to defend the mythologized "American way of life," white, Christian, and patriarchal.

This political rhetoric inherently fostered, and continues to inculcate, two very distinct worldviews on what it means to be American and what the "American Way of Life" means. If neither side can understand American values or the interpreted American Identity of the "Other" as legitimate and worth respecting, the only outcome is conflict. Now, it is worth asserting that conflict itself is not inherently negative. It is, however, inevitable, and it can be generative if processed well and constructively between the two groups between which there is friction. Identity groups each have factions within their own boundaries that push and pull from engaging in conflict, just like a car requires both gas and brake to function and maneuver around other vehicles. Too much gas, the car crashes into a truck and is totaled, too much brake, the car does not move. The significance of this analogy is understanding that a group requires tension to exist, both within and without. Without comparison, a group has no boundaries. Thus, tensions that lead to conflict will always be present within the human experience, and even more so when contemplating the soldier and war itself. Each group harbors different perspectives

¹⁶⁰ Christopher Wylie, *Mindf*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America*, (New York: Random House, 2019), 158.

¹⁶¹ "#MAGA, Make America Great Again and Social Media." *#MoveMe*, last accessed August 7 2023, <https://moveme.berkeley.edu/project/maga/>.

and different characteristics; this pluralism actually enriches the identity of a group, because it offers additional comparison and contrast, nuance by which to polish one's self-understanding and the self-understanding of a group. The challenge is to manage these comparisons so that they are constructively perceived, to understand pluralism not as a challenge to one's group identity but as a piece of its strength. Recently, and in this particular case study, society at large has failed to manage these dynamics that, when left uninterpreted and unarticulated, lend themselves to violence, which can also be a byproduct of conflict. Without compromise and accepting constructive criticism, there is no space for any perception except that of aggression, Othering, and eventually, direct violence.

When a society devolves to violence, it becomes even more important to feel as though one is part of a group. The platitude, "there's safety in numbers" exists for a reason, and often with association of a group develops a herd mentality. This is actually coached into the American Military mentality itself.¹⁶² The "this is my squad" campaign asks service members to value and defend their own unit above all else.¹⁶³

The irony here is that "this is my squad" was supposed to elevate diversity within the American Military. Today, however, highlighting diversity as a value instead of simply allowing service members to remain in their already diverse units, the military itself invited criticism from conservative lawmakers, media personalities, and the general public over its own re-interpretation of American values. Once again, service members

¹⁶² Paul K. Davis, *Aggregation, Disaggregation, and the 3:1 Rule in Ground Combat*, Washington D.C.: Rand, 1995, 4.

¹⁶³ "The Sinking Ship of Theseus: Adapting the U.S. Military to the Modern Family," *War on the Rocks*, last modified 22 March 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/the-sinking-ship-of-theseus-adapting-the-u-s-military-to-the-modern-family/>.

have access to these arguments, oral and written, through their social media, the traditional media they choose to consume, and the community groups both at home and within their units that can function as echo chambers for their own perception of efforts and change.

Group identity is “central to the project of achieving a secure and positively-valued sense of self. Individuals seek a secure sense of self by ‘striving to achieve or to maintain positive *social* identity.’”¹⁶⁴ It makes sense from a security and survival perspective, that those with no obvious incentive to change or to shift the hegemony they felt they were defending, would not seek out justification for the change others were trying to make. It would benefit their secure sense of self, their transcendent perspective in the righteousness of their identity, that they ignore or demonize outside perspectives that criticize their self-perception and the narrative they maintain therein.

Thus, slowly but surely, the conservative service member’s faith in America shifted their identity from volunteer soldier to conservative freedom fighter. They continue to fight for the American Way of Life, just like they have been conditioned to do, and are proud of it. Now they are fighting against a different enemy than that of the Global War on Terror. Now they are fighting against that which they perceive to be an insider threat to their country and their faith in the excellence of their nation: their liberal neighbors.

¹⁶⁴ Seul, “‘Ours Is the Way of God,’” 555.

Worldview: American excellence and the souring of excess faith

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, America struggled to come to terms with the religious motivations of the attackers. Pundits and politicians offered different perspectives on the faith of the attackers. Some used the faith of the terrorists to condemn Islam as a whole, while others argued that it wasn't the "whole" religion that inculcated such a hatred, it was just the interpretations of a few individuals. Some argued that it wasn't the "real religion of Islam."¹⁶⁵ In the same address to the 107th Congress after the attacks on 9/11, President Bush articulated this himself, stating:

[Islam] is practiced freely by many millions of Americans, and by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them.¹⁶⁶

While the intentions behind these justifications were inherently good (fear of Islam and its adherents spiked in the early 2000s, with sometimes brutal results), those who offer this perspective did a disservice to attempts to wrestle with the tragedy and aftermath of this attack. Justifying violent actions as "not a real part of Islam" or "not my Islam" allowed many to elide discussion about the potential interpretations of a faith that has the real power to motivate threatened adherents to violence.

A 2018 paper considering religious prosociality and conflict transformation notes that "scholars find that violent extremists' moral mission is not principally propelled by religion."¹⁶⁷ This is a significant contribution to this conversation, as "data show that

¹⁶⁵ Mineo, "Muslim Americans Reflect on the Impact of 9/11."

¹⁶⁶ "The Bush Record."

¹⁶⁷ Jeffrey Seul, "Treat the Stranger as Your Own: Religious Prosociality and Conflict Transformation," *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 24, (2018): 39.

[religiously affiliated militants] are generally idealistic young people seeking dreams of glory fighting for justice and fairness”¹⁶⁸ implying a righteous belief in their own actions. Again, while it can be important to separate the religious from the motivations of many who identify with the same faith as the militants, it is also imperative to grasp that this desire to protect, attack, or otherwise act in an aggressive and violent manner on the part of some greater purpose can be informed by a transcendent religiosity. The paper goes on to note that:

Most suicide attacks occur when the foreign military presence is from a country with a different predominant religion than the predominant religion of those in the place where the foreigners are present,¹⁶⁹ but this likely describes the vast majority of contemporary foreign military occupations. Religion is among the features of culture these actors wish to defend; it is one of the sources of shared meaning that binds them together; and they ground their actions, in part, in religious doctrines and passages from texts that justified violent defense of the group centuries or millennia ago.¹⁷⁰

It is critically important, thus, to consider multiple motivations as well as the way religion, culture, and those within a wide group identity might and have rebelled or acted in such a way as to defend that which they perceive is under attack.

Similarly, when Americans address those who would do violence against their own Capitol and the elected lawmakers and democratic institutions as anomalies and following an extremist view of a conservative value system, we fail to take accountability for this result of American exceptionalism. While not all Americans chose to attack the Capitol, and indeed not all conservative Americans either, failing to attempt to

¹⁶⁸ Marc Sageman. *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 35.

¹⁶⁹ Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 10.

¹⁷⁰ Seul, “Stranger,” 38.

understand the way these people perceive themselves, the threat they feel from change and ubiquitous apocalyptic rhetoric, and how they justify their actions also does a disservice to the faith in America that many feel and want to defend. Echoing Dr. Seul's 2018 assertion above, the perception of an occupation drives those who feel their sacred values are being persecuted to violence.

Without education, empathy, and critical thinking to fairly and dispassionately critique where we are and where we can compromise on both sides, extremism is an easy way forward. Worldviews inherently clash when their sacred foundations do not align. But there's hope for communities moving forward.

Chapter V.

Narrativizing the Other in the Structure of a Belief System

The way we come to understand ourselves and our neighbors in the context of our lives and our history is most powerfully conveyed through story.¹⁷¹ Storytelling allows individuals to cast themselves and others as they themselves perceive the truth. This is a compelling method to create shared understanding of a situation, veracity notwithstanding. Narrativizing history, identity, and community has been a tool of civilization since its dawn and found particular use in faith-based communities.¹⁷² Indeed, America itself is a set of stories, told and retold and mythologized, as we have discussed, about the potential of the country and its people and the sacrifices and glory of its past. This chapter will discuss the ways in which narrative allows Americans, and, more specifically, conservative service members, to self-actualize, to relate to contemporary issues, and to affirm their faith in their national identity. Further, it will consider the way in which media, and, more specifically, social media, has come to shape and influence storytelling and the way it provides information that in turn lends itself to severe echo chambers. Lastly, this chapter will briefly consider how to move forward and what effects, if any, empathy might have on recapturing a national identity and faith in America that has a denomination for all citizens.

¹⁷¹ Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories." *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (June 2001): 112.

¹⁷² Kerby, *Saving History*, 5.

The Way Forward: How narrative plays a significant part in faith and self-understanding

Storytelling can function, and often does, as a way to understand one's own identity and, particularly, the identity of a group. As such, specific narratives that have come to define an identity more so than others can accumulate sacred aspects, and questioning them can be perceived as a threat to self-understanding and the relationship that an individual and groups have with their surroundings and their neighbors. This is unsettling, and it makes logical sense that those feeling threatened would try to avoid considering the potential of someone else's truth and narrative, particularly if they feel it challenges their own, or worse, casts them as the villain in a shared history.

The sect of Americans that we have been considering here, post 9/11 conservative service members, have a very specific narrative that we have discussed in previous chapters. For the last forty years, this story has developed through the jungles of Vietnam, on the televisions of the religious right, the rise of rhetoric surrounding Judeo-Christian heritage and republican efforts to restore a traditional, Christian country. The story has wound its way through the rubble of ground zero in New York and the pentagon in Arlington, penetrated the speeches of politicians, grown into public school curriculum, and sprayed out of the mouths of drill sergeants teaching recruits how to fight and win America's Global War on Terror. This story became the identity foundation for those who joined out of patriotism, stayed because they understood themselves to be America's defenders, found a faith in the righteous belief in their understanding of America's unspoken values, and returned home to their beloved country and perceived a ruined landscape.

A protector needs an enemy. A country bedeviled by a perpetual fear of apocalypse and terror attacks does not need much heat to light a fuse to fight new battles in the shadows of old wars. For those who felt left behind, politicians rose to reaffirm this story, casting political adversaries as threats to this narrative and its “truth.” For service members and veterans whose lives had been shaped by politicians and leaders in government, it likely gave them a sense of community, of direction, of purpose, to begin engaging in the landscape they didn’t understand or didn’t approve of.

The way humans communicate and find community also entrenches an identity and a value system. Perpetual inundation of values, information that matches what one believes, and groups that echo one’s own faith and “right” way of life only serves to deepen the divide and thus highlight the threat of the Other. In the last ten years, the rise of social media has commanded this narrative more so than any other communication methodology in the history of America. It has only served to solidify the faith in one’s own perspective, one’s own story, one’s own identity. It also serves to deepen the threat, or perception of the threat, of the Other.

Social Media: The Pocket Storyteller

Jerry Falwell was by no means the first to understand the power of shared mythology. However, his televangelism was the first widespread effort to share a very specific ideology with as many people as possible.¹⁷³ He combined the tenets of commercial capitalism with the community-based nature of Christianity and offered adherents a way to connect with many more people than they previously could have

¹⁷³ Dennis Bekkering, *American Televangelism and Participatory Cultures* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 92.

attending a brick and mortar church on Sundays. As such, he brought together huge numbers of viewers who, if they didn't already believe many of the same things as did Jerry Falwell, were then exposed to his perspective, his story, his narrative of what was true and righteous Christianity. This allowed a ubiquitous *mélange* of political ideology with protestant,¹⁷⁴ Christian ideology that fostered and fomented the mythology in American values and modern identity that previous chapters have discussed. Falwell's empire was vast for its time, but it missed a couple aspects of persuasion and perpetual inundation that we see today with social media. First, his sermons couldn't be rewatched immediately, so there was some space, if small, for adherents to reflect on their own. Secondly, his sermons weren't necessarily accessible to everyone. One had to have a television or a radio, and the consumer had to be able to sit and consume the programming.

These are not problems faced in the social media age. With the rise of Facebook, and more recently the development of The Algorithm, information consumers can watch, rewatch, read, and reread publications and posts from individuals who often believe the same thing they do. For our purposes, we will define "The Algorithm" as the way in which media consumers are invited to peruse and click and follow certain content that is suggested for them based on previous media choices informing the data that The Algorithm then utilizes to find additional similar content.

Within the GWOT military community- this had two separate developments that were perhaps different than their civilian neighbors. While civilians often used Facebook and social media to reconnect with long lost friends, service members could keep up with

¹⁷⁴ Bell, "Rebels," 14.

activities on the home front through Facebook in the early 2000s. This only escalated as different platforms popped into existence. Service members were also able to keep in touch with their unit-mates when they changed units, the turnover of which can be quite steady in the military.

This leads to the second development: when service members joined, and particularly more recently, they are not escaping the intellectual environments from which they came, in which they developed. Prior to social media, recruits could use the military as a way to distance themselves from the environment in which they grew up. Soldiers with troubled backgrounds who were posted near their hometowns were just as likely to get caught up with their former associates as they would have been if they had stayed:¹⁷⁵ this proximity was a challenge for the military. Similarly, though slightly different in form, social media recreated this “proximity problem” for many individuals who, despite their first post, were still radically connected to their previous community and their ideology. This, in turn, for service members who already leaned in a particular political direction, only exacerbated the mythology, the group identity, and the faith their America.

Now, instead of listening to President Bush’s speech once, which was powerful and symbolic at the time, service members can watch and listen to political leaders and media moguls on repeat, accompanied by the punditry of the average citizen, punditry that does not require fact checking or source citation. This functions as its own form of social conditioning, which, while different than that which the military employs to create effective soldiers, nonetheless partners well with the intent and methodology of the

¹⁷⁵ J. Dawson, “Microtargeting as Information Warfare,” *Cyber Defense Review* 6, no 1. (2020): 52.

service member to alienate opponents. For service members who have built an identity around the defense of a nation and her values, listening to rhetoric that names new enemies of their identity and the identity that they have been defending invites a return to their own original training: understanding the “Other” as a group to be subdued or even eliminated to neutralize the threat. Thus, while pundits and politicians might not overtly be calling for structural and direct violence against their political opponents, it nonetheless normalizes violence against those who are being publicly represented as enemies of America. Conditioning towards Othering can have unforeseen consequences, and with the perpetual inundation of information, opinion, and expression of group identity through social media outlets, it becomes ever easier to understand those with different opinions as enemies, threatening, and justified in fighting against. More contemporarily, this fighting has been online, however, on January 6th, this battle for the heart of America spilled into the streets of Washington D.C. and into the Capitol building.

Americanism, despite or perhaps because of our pluralism, allows individuals and groups to vaunt certain American identities and values over others, and in the social media age, he who shouts the loudest often wins, or perhaps, he who solicits the most clicks and attention, often wins worth. This environment has lent itself to a steep narrativization crisis, wherein for those who seek evidence of the legitimacy of their identity, there exists a plethora online. The evidence does not require facts, veracity, or good intention: it must simply exist and be available to she who seeks to explain some facet of her perspective or her faith.

This is dangerous, and this undoubtedly lends itself to the service member's mentality, returning home to like-minded communities, rife with the belief in the winningness of America and the threat of social upheaval to that which they were told and believed they were defending. Thus, the fight for "America" has evolved from war into daily life, and now more than just service members feel as though they have a responsibility to defend a certain set of values.

An example of this militarized nationalism comes in the form of the Proud Boys. In closing comments at their trial for seditious conspiracy, prosecutors asserted that five members of the Proud Boys "believed they were soldiers waging war under the direction of Donald Trump when they violently stormed the Capitol."¹⁷⁶ They were not the only ones who believed this. As the country grappled with the choices of Americans on January 6, 2021, additional media outlets attempted to contend with the identities and motivations of the insurrectionists. An Atlantic Article noted that "the overwhelming reason for action, cited again and again in court documents, was that arrestees were following Trump's orders to keep Congress from certifying Joe Biden as the presidential-election winner."¹⁷⁷ This psychology is significant as it reflects the manifestation of a militarized population, as well as the martial power a commander in chief has to mobilize the mythologized "citizen soldier" on behalf of a threatened nation. Informed, influenced, perhaps tacitly ordered, members of right-wing groups as well as citizens with no attachment to the military, *also* entered the Capitol building with the intent of defending the American identity and value system they felt was under attack from those

¹⁷⁶ Hsu, "Proud Boys Saw Themselves as 'Trump's Army,' U.S. Says in Trial Closings."

¹⁷⁷ Robert A. Ruby and Keven Pape, "The Capitol Rioters Aren't Like Other Extremists," *The Atlantic*, last modified 2 Feb. 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/the-capitol-rioters-arent-like-other-extremists/617895/>.

who were threatening institutions inherent to the American experiment. This faith in one interpretation of American values only serves to reinforce the need for their defense.

While it is much easier for the conservative, and perhaps radicalized, veteran and service member to translate this civilian defense into aggression and a new enemy, their own stories fit into the overall narrative of the right-wing political force in the last decade as well. For those who feel they were and are trying to defend the “American Way of Life,” they both perpetuate what they have been told to believe and continue to refine its definition so that it fits their evolving identity. This definition, once challenged, reawakens the cognitive dissonance of what it means to be an American fighting for one’s country (a large piece of the martial identity, as discussed), and makes citizens appear as enemies. Fearing the loss of something sacred (their understanding of American identity) drives them to extremes, and the only way to counter this is compassion, acknowledging these sacred values, and finding a way to compromise.

Middle Way: Moving Forward

Starting with the sacred is incredibly important in any conversation that requires compromise. Acknowledging the significance of someone else’s worldview, their holistic sense of self, and why what they believe to be immovable and inviolable allows them to understand that the abutting group with which they are engaging are empathetic and worth the interaction. Beginning with material compromise only invites insult, as it disregards the criticality and weight a group feels their values hold. First worth re-articulating are sacred values, or “moral imperatives that seem to drive behavior

independently of any concrete material goal.”¹⁷⁸ Once this is universally understood, negotiations may begin. As discussed, political leaders can and have appealed to sacred values “as a way of mobilizing their constituents to action and as a least cost method of enforcing policy goals.”¹⁷⁹ As also previously discussed, this can have dangerous consequences when these sacred values form a faith and thus an unwillingness to bridge worldviews.

Sometimes, when “some speak of a given ideology, they may be deploying a reductionist, objectifying descriptor that purportedly ‘sums up’ what is essential to know from one’s own perspective about a person or group and its way of life, rather than making a sympathetic attempt to understand the other’s perspective.”¹⁸⁰ Without beginning to delve into why and how people developed who they are (both to themselves and how they choose to project), it will be nearly impossible to rekindle compassion and condition empathy into individuals who are dead set on defending that which they know to be good and righteous and true and worth sacrifice.

In a lecture titled *The Dying Art of Disagreement*, author Brett Stephens considers a political movement for same-sex marriage in Australia. He says:

The case for same-sex marriage is too often advanced not by reason, but merely by branding every opponent of it as a “bigot” — just because they are sticking to an opinion that was shared across the entire political spectrum only a few years ago. Few people like outing themselves as someone’s idea of a bigot, so they keep their opinions to themselves even when speaking to pollsters. That’s just what happened last year in the Brexit vote and the U.S. presidential election, and look where we are now.

If you want to make a winning argument for same-sex marriage, particularly against conservative opponents, make it on a conservative

¹⁷⁸ Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, “Reframing Sacred Values,” *Negotiation Journal* 24, no. 3 (July 2008): 227.

¹⁷⁹ Atran and Axelrod, “Reframing,” 227.

¹⁸⁰ Seul, “Building Blocks,” 410.

foundation: As a matter of individual freedom, and as an avenue toward moral responsibility and social respectability. The No's will have a hard time arguing with that. But if you call them morons and Neanderthals, all you'll get in return is their middle finger or their clenched fist.¹⁸¹

This is an excellent real-world account of the theory of worldviews, wherein without a conscious matching of moral convictions and reframing the “enemy” (she with a different worldview), there is little ground to be gained on either ideological side. When a group’s intrinsic narrative understanding of a situation does not situate in parallel with that of another group, conflict arises. Part of the process by which one avoids violence requires, in Seul’s words, “incompatible narratives [that] generate conflict, and the parties’ existing narratives must be spoken, heard, and potentially destabilized, with a new narrative emerging, to resolve conflict,”¹⁸² also known as conflict resolution theory. In other words, it is not enough to acquiesce to some of one side’s requests and some of another’s. The point of moral reframing, and indeed, the necessity driving such a shift across identities centers on inviting a new identity narrative that both incorporates sacred values of both groups and allows each to understand the others’ humanity. Relatability and the shared respect of certain values function as a good place to start rebuilding a new story. This does not, however, require a shared narrative as a necessary outcome, nor is it always possible. Indeed, as the next chapter will discuss at length, conflict resolution requires an empathy for another’s understanding of reality. It does not require one group to share the other’s reality, simply that the other has a right and a reason to process its own understanding of reality the way it does. Active reflection while respecting an Other’s humanity, is, rather, the goal.

¹⁸¹ Bret Stephens, “The Dying Art of Disagreement,” *The New York Times*, last modified 24 Sept. 2017, NYTimes.com, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/opinion/dying-art-of-disagreement.html>.

¹⁸² Seul, “Building Blocks,” 415.

Retraining service members to understand the ubiquity of humanity, allowing them the space to return from conflict (both at home and abroad) and to learn about the potentiality of differing value interpretations is a first step. Re-educating and reinvigorating the worth of public and private disagreement, over the sacred as well as the mundane, without legitimizing the boundaries that in turn foment cultural violence and limit identity is also important. Without acknowledging the legitimacy and sacredness individuals feel about their version of America, there is little way to bring these individuals into a worthwhile discussion about compromise, let alone a negotiation. Moving forward and asking for identities to change, does, as we have duly noted, imply a loss. But allowing individuals the space and time and legitimacy to mourn such a loss, even if competing identities do not necessarily understand or sympathize with this loss, is critical to shifting identities and introducing new aspects of faith in America's values and their interpretations. The ability to reimagine mythology in such a way that does not recast previous power holders as villains is also significant in returning to neighbors. Citizen engagement with positive and respectful communication that allows people with differing identities, different sacred values, and differing perspectives on the expectation of American virtues and values allows both sides to stand down from defending America and what she stands for and what she could be. Finding value in diverse thought as well as diverse background allows different interpretations and different perspectives of history without villainizing people who had their flaws but also contributed to civilization. In fact, this is exactly what the framers had to accomplish in order to ratify the Constitution. Compromise is an inherent part of the American history and identity, though rarely acknowledged in our "take no prisoners" mythologized beginnings.

America's end-state has never been that everyone agrees. It was and remains a place for disagreement without the influx of violence. America from its inception has been a place of plural identities. This fell out of some people's mythology. America and her defenders are able, if not excellent at creating new narratives, new perspectives, and new hope.

Chapter VI.

Coming Home

Humans need to maintain a positive self-conception. We are inclined to think well of ourselves, that the values we embody (chosen or inherited) and the actions we take on their behalf speak well of us and our intentions. This invests us in our commitments to our own values; we see them as self-evidently right and self-validating. When someone else challenges these values, it can feel very much like a threat against our very beings. This innate reaction to defend that which we feel is right and good can blind us to the way those with different values are affected when one group pursues the perpetuation and in many cases proliferation of their own values. Sacred values can be a totalizing project for their holders, sometimes employed in efforts to promote others to believe or behave in ways that align with the worldview these sacred values comprise. When a self-evidently true, sacred value is challenged by another's self-evidently true, sacred value, there germinates a conflict, particularly if the value difference has practical implications. This, in turn, can lead to an intractable perspective on both sides and subsequently, violence. Sans empathy or a desire to understand the other sacred value as inherently worth reflection, dynamics sour quickly, particularly if one group perceives the valorizing of another's sacred value as a threat to one's own power and position. It is difficult, though not impossible, to think critically about one's own values, or indeed the values of one's group, because to do so would be to acknowledge the potential for their malleability, and thus destabilize one's own worldview. This need to self-validate and to

find external validation is not inherently wrong. Rather, it is simply a rationalization of one's choices, and that need to think positively about oneself. It is an absence of perspective. On the plus side, this is a crack in the door to re-neighbor, to begin migrating those with vastly different values, vastly different perspectives about American identity and American values into an intellectual and emotional space where they can think critically about themselves, their neighbors, their leaders, and the point of their actions, in peacetime or in wartime. This chapter considers the way in which service members who have effectively "Othered" those within the overarching American Identity can begin to reflect on the last twenty years, how they sacralized their own values and rationalized the choices they made to defend what they knew to be the American Identity, and how a hermeneutical approach might allow for an introduction of perspective into one's own self-perception.

Hermeneutical Dialogue: Reframing Faith in One's Values

More popularly applied to the study of Biblical interpretation, hermeneutics offers an intellectual structure to understand different truths and values of those who have chosen a specific faith. Hermeneutics "presupposes that human expressions contain a meaningful component, which has to be recognized as such by a subject and transposed into her own system of values and meanings."¹⁸³ In the same way that this study has been applied to Christianity, it can be used to open a dialogue about the truths and values of those whose faith in America has resulted in different interpretations. In this way, hermeneutical negotiation, and indeed perhaps compromise, recognizes the significance

¹⁸³ Väyrynen, "Gadamer," 347.

of the different values and can respectfully open a door to discuss why and how this significance came to be for many individuals.

We have already discussed the challenges of faith-based identity conflicts. For those who served in the Global War on Terror and then chose to attack the Capitol building, much of their identity is built on the way they perceive their actions to be good and in the tradition of national defense. Treating their devotion to their value system as a faith, as we have discussed in previous chapters, allows these individuals the space to explain their interpretations as sacred values, how the values sacralized to them in the first place, and then perhaps, find common ground on the basis of additional, differing interpretations. When faced with moral pluralism at their homecoming, some service members can find this profoundly destabilizing as what they knew to be good and true seems to have shifted publicly. It threatens the identity that they know to be inherently positive (again, humans are inclined to think of themselves positively), and they rebel against this force, finding, or more deeply embedding in groups that solidify their original perspective. We have already discussed how social media enables this more effectively in this day and age. It also fails to offer any different perspectives in a way that does not immediately demonize the messenger or the message itself.

Shifting into hermeneutical dialogue requires an exit from the social media bubble, finding ways to both reinvent and reimagine meaning in the values that these individuals have been drawn to and have believed in righteously for so long. It likely requires a face-to-face engagement to effectively honor the hermeneutical reconfiguration of sacred values and balance new normative value orientations. This also requires support in communities, both online and in person, that both acknowledges the changes

and invitation to shift perspectives, as well as building on values and the interpretation of values that can serve as bridges to the new, developed perspectives. Hermeneutical dialogue invites a moral refining. That is to say, this discussion requires a willingness to begin the process to understand oneself, one's own identity, and how and why this individual developed the values and interpretation of these values that then became sacred and immovable.

In chapter 3, we noted that the group of individuals who attacked the Capitol with military backgrounds had sacralized the "American Values" they had sworn to defend to a point wherein what it means to be an American, or Americanism, is a religion in and of itself. Thus, it became impossible to separate behavior associated with and founded upon these values from one's own identity, and in many cases, a group identity as well. When one's identity is based in a faith, opening the lens to self-analyze requires an acknowledgement that the transcendence behind this faith must also be separated from the transcendence and "chosenness" one feels at being a part of this faith. The only way to do this without driving individuals farther into their own understanding of their righteousness is to begin discussing their truths and the values that inform these truths through a hermeneutical lens wherein the interlocutors can begin to separate perspectives from their worldview and think critically about the parts of their identity before, ideally, rebuilding a meaningful whole with a different set of perspectives. This does not inherently shift the identity or values of these individuals. The goal, rather, is to allow for individuals to relate to others with differing sacred interpretations of American values in a way that not only stigmatizes the previous cultural, normalized violence, but it also allows for a re-building of community from diverse perspectives without the threat of

losing one's identity or one's place in the world. The intent is to re-humanize those who evolved into the "Other" or even enemies over the last twenty years for the myriad reasons discussed in previous chapters.

In returning to theologian Hans George Gadamer's approach to hermeneutical resolution, scholar Tarja Värynen notes that

Relational empathy is seen to be a 'series of successive approximations to the other's point of view during social interaction.'¹⁸⁴ Through these approximations, understanding emerges: individual interpretative horizons expand to include the horizon of the other.¹⁸⁵

As noted previously, the intent behind conflict resolution, and indeed the solution sought within this framework of hermeneutical negotiation, does not imply an entire shifting of worldview frameworks. Rather, the intent behind employing hermeneutical dialogue is to invite group identity holders to grasp the Other's meaning and understanding of their own values, not necessarily to adopt these values as their own. Hermeneutics allows practitioners of it to approach a text, in this case another's frame of reality based on sacred values, and understand how and why this text came to exist in the way it does. That is to say, for this group of conservative service members and veterans who have sacralized right-wing values and shaped their own worldviews around these tenets, hermeneutical dialogue would invite them to understand the values of those they perceive as "enemies," in this case their neighbors and institutions that have liberal values, as a text worth analyzing. Hermeneutical engagement would invite this group to try and learn about the sacred values of the Other not as an enemy with which to engage

¹⁸⁴ Benjamin Broome, "Managing Differences in Conflict Resolution: The Role of Relational Empathy," in *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application*, Dennis Sandole & Hugo van der Merwe, eds., (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press), 93.

¹⁸⁵ Värynen, "Gadamer," 348.

directly, but instead as another group offering a sacred text in their own image, based on their own frames of reality. This offers some emotional distance between fear and empathy, allowing a group to practice compassion and analysis without perceiving an immanent enemy ready to replace their own sacred values. Hermeneutical discussion and dialogue in this particular case, with these particular individuals, would invite them to stop defending themselves and the country against other citizens who have been interpreted as enemies: it would be an invitation to leave the war behind them. Further, “those at home” with perhaps more progressive, left leaning views, would also need to be open to engaging in hermeneutical dialogue to build a bridge on which members of both identity groups would feel safe, heard, and dignified in meeting. For an open dialogue to come to fruition, even in the smallest of ways, both sides must be open to considering whether there might be something worth preserving and embracing in each other’s values. This is acknowledging that there is, in fact, something worth preserving and embracing in the more conservatively interpreted values of freedom, responsibility, and tradition that veterans have seen themselves defending.

Conclusion: Where to Next?

This paper has been dedicated to the discovery of how and why the insurrectionists with military backgrounds chose to attack an institution in American democracy after twenty years of armed conflict on behalf of a free nation they raised their right hand to defend. Much of the discussion centered on identity and how interpretations of values can inform conflict and perpetuate and normalize violence against groups and individuals that seem to express a different identity and thus challenge

the identity of the conservative service member who volunteered to serve to defend a specific set of interpreted values.

What this paper failed to discuss was the irony, paradox, and complexities in the purpose of a soldier, and indeed, war itself. This chapter centers around the way we bring peace to those who chose to embody soldiering in their identity. We do not contend with, however, the way in which soldiers need to be immune to violence in many ways, the way in which “Othering” allows service members to do their jobs and close with and destroy the enemy of the United States. Soldiers pay the embodied cost of our calcified perspectives on war and peace, and as such society often places them on pedestals as heroes for this choice. This is not inherently wrong or right, it is simply a result of political rhetoric through the last fifty years of an all-volunteer force, as well as the aftermath of a war that treated returning soldiers (many if not most of them drafted) as villains. This civilian-military relationship has, however, effectively obfuscated the necessary nature of soldiers and the purpose of warfare entirely. What are the values we want a service member to possess? What is the appropriate way to comport oneself in war if a service member does not inherently identify the identified enemy as a threat against America? Do we want a diversity of thought in the service member population? This paper only contends with the small population that has already undergone an identity evolution over the last twenty (or in some cases longer), years. Moving forward, studying the nature of soldiering and American warfare at the intersection of American identity and faith in American values would be an excellent way to develop our standing forces and determine for what we should and are willing to fight.

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