

Spring 2016

# Frames of Military Veterans in Letters to the Editor in US Newspapers

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FRAMES OF MILITARY VETERANS IN LETTERS TO THE EDITOR IN US  
NEWSPAPERS

by

MATTHEW AARON KLEINSORGE

(Under the Direction of Eric Orion Silva)

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic content analysis of veterans in letters to the editor builds on the existing literature in two ways. First it examines the new time frame of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second it deals with new data—letters to the Editor and Op-Eds. The new timeframe allows me to address the following questions. (1) What types of frames are currently associated with veterans after over eleven years of continuous combat? (2) Does the amount of sympathy in framings of veterans found by this research seem to differ from the amount of sympathy found in the framings of veterans in the literature? The literature covering the social construction of veterans largely deals with media frames of veterans and with how elites, such as policy makers framed veterans. Researching letters to the editor allows the chance to see how non-elites frame veterans. This study uncovered the following frames of veterans: deserving/undeserving, unwell/well, competent/incompetent, forgotten/remembered, mainstream/out of the mainstream, and trustworthy/untrustworthy. Veterans were more often framed as deserving than undeserving, as unwell than well, as competent than incompetent, as forgotten than remembered, as mainstream than out of the mainstream, and as trustworthy than untrustworthy. The unwell and forgotten frames point to the public viewing veterans as undergoing hardships. The deserving, competent, mainstream, and trustworthy frames point to

the public as viewing veterans as good or unimpeachable. One of the main takeaways from the data seems to be that veterans are generally seen as unwell, but also as deserving—in some cases very deserving.

INDEX WORDS: veteran, frame, letter to the editor, social construction, symbolic interaction

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B.A., Truman State University, 2002

M.A., Georgia Southern University, 2016

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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May 2016

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

After a decade of war the US government needs to make numerous policy decisions regarding veterans—for example: (1) Will Congress use the chained CPI to calculate cost of living adjustments (COLA's) for federal programs that are adjusted for inflation, such as those administered by the Veterans Administration (V.A.)? (2) Will Congress prioritize funding the V.A. during lean fiscal years? (3) Will Congress put the Veterans Benefits Administration on a two-year budget as has been done with the Veterans Health Administration? (4) How will the V.A. choose to allocate the scarce economic resources that they receive from Congress? (5) Which veterans will be eligible for healthcare? (6) Will the V.A. continue to use the average impairments of earnings capacity standard in order to determine service-connected compensation? The public construction of veterans will impact these policy debates.

This study will explore how veterans are framed in the “public sphere” (Habermas 1996). A “frame” (Goffman 1974, Benford and Snow 2000, Young 2004, Small et al. 2010) is a slice of culture, or alternately, an interpretation of the world that highlights particular perceptions and conceptions. More specifically, I ask: (1) What types of frames are associated with veterans after eleven continuous years of combat? (2) Does the amount of sympathy in framings of veterans found by this research seem to differ from the quantity of sympathy found in earlier studies? Letters to the editor and Op-Ed's in U.S.A. newspapers will be used as a microcosm of public discourse. I will examine these frames through an ethnographic content analysis of letters to the editor and op-eds. The resulting analysis will show us the acceptable ways of



discussing veterans. This research is important because the literature on the social construction of veterans has not dealt with letters to the editor about veterans. Also, research covering the social construction of veterans has dealt mainly with the social construction of Vietnam veterans and veterans of the first Gulf War (Operation Dessert Shield and Operation Dessert Storm), but not with veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan (Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom).

By addressing this blind spot, my analysis will have the potential to yield several benefits; first, it will update the scholarly literature on the social construction of veterans. Second, the framing of a group can affect how others treat them. Specific framings of veterans and specific problematizations of their situations will tend to make certain solutions seem both more palatable and more conceivable than others. For instance, a mental health frame would suggest mental health treatment as one of the best solutions. However, an unemployment frame would point to workforce development as one of the most viable solutions.

In what follows, I will give an update on the challenges faced by veterans. Next I will delve deeper into the existing literature that concerns the social construction of veterans. By doing so, I hope to allow the reader to see the frames of veterans that exist today in light of the frames of veterans that existed in the recent past. Then I will explain why letters to the editor and Op-Ed's are a germane source of frames. I will relate processes by which I gleaned frames from the letters. I will specify the frames found, provide examples of each, and analyze the frames found. I will compare and contrast those frames found in reviewing conversation about today's veterans with those found in the literature on Vietnam Veterans.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND ON A VULNERABLE POPULATION- VETERANS OF IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Veterans are a vulnerable population for several reasons, to include family problems, mental health issues, trouble readjusting to civilian life, and disproportionate numbers of homeless veterans. Over 1.64 million military service personnel have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (Brenner et al. 2009), and according to Hoge and colleagues (2004), most have experienced a traumatic event during their deployment(s). Additional deployment related burdens include cultural dissonance, extreme climates, physical fatigue, and sleep deprivation (Mastroianni et al., 2008). Combat veterans often encounter legal problems and family strife as a result of issues unaddressed between deployments (Gottman et al., 2011: 52) and tend to have high likelihood of marital instability (Kessler, 2000).

According to Hoge and colleagues (2006), soldiers and marines returning from Iraq were almost twice as likely to screen positive for PTSD, generalized anxiety, or depression, as they were before deployment (Hoge et al., 2006: 1023). In a study utilizing a national stratified sample, Sayer and colleagues report that “96% expressed interest in services to help readjust to civilian life” (2010: 589), and Fargo and colleagues found that veterans were overrepresented in the homeless population (2011: 3). While many of the hardships faced by veterans may be well known, the social construction of veterans will inform the creation of veterans policy.

## CHAPTER 3

## A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF VETERANS

The constructionist paradigm looks at how people collectively and actively define reality through conversation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). A frame is a conceptual tool for analyzing how reality is socially constructed. According to Entman, the process of creating frames involves choosing parts of reality and making “them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993: 52).

Per the Thomas Theorem, framing shapes the real world. Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) have shown through a series of experiments that metaphorical framing of a negative social issue, down to the single word, can have a measurable and strong effect on the types of solutions that individuals suggest for that ill. McCammon (2009) found that lawmakers were more easily swayed by frames that showcased the seriousness and broad implications of a social problem and by frames that were more “articulate” and “empirically credible” (2009: 59). Loseke (2003) observes that people characterize social actors as sympathetic or unsympathetic. Actors characterized as sympathetic tend to be seen as both undergoing hardship or adversity and as good or unimpeachable. It is reasonable to expect that sympathetic individuals would be more likely to receive favorable treatment compared to those who are not sympathetic. In this project, I explore the extent to which people construct veterans as sympathetic or unsympathetic.

Before talking about the frames of veterans found in letters to the editor, it will be necessary to know what frames of veterans are in the literature on the social construction of veterans. The social construction of veterans has been addressed in scholarly articles on collective memory (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991; Beamish et al., 1995; Lembcke, 1998), in the in the literature on social movements (Leitz, 2011), and in articles on media and communications (Griffin and Sen, 1995; Price, 2005; and McClancy, 2013).

Much of this work examines how people construct Vietnam Veterans as data. Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991), Griffin and Sen (1995), Lembcke (1998), and McClancy (2013) all looked at the social construction of Vietnam veterans. Beamish and colleagues (1995) compared the social construction of interactions between Vietnam Veterans and anti-war protestors to the social construction of interactions between Gulf War veterans and anti-war protestors. Leitz (2011) looks at the social construction of veterans protesting Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Papers covering the social construction of veterans largely deal with media frames of veterans and with how elites, such as policy makers framed veterans. Looking at letters to the editor and OpEd's about veterans will give us a chance to see how a broader cross section of the public frames veterans and how veterans exist in the public sphere. Looking at *recent* letters to editor and OpEd's about veterans will give us a contemporary account of the social construction of veterans and will tell us about the types frames associated with veterans after over eleven years of continuous combat.

### *The Vietnam War*

Sociologists Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz (1991) studied a commemorative object that did not seem to have a sense of shared significance amongst its intended audience. The commemorative object that they studied was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and their paper is replete with examples of citizens' ambivalence toward the Vietnam War. Part of their method was a discourse analysis of texts including, "the Congressional Record, dedication speeches, Veterans Day oratory, and commentaries appearing in newspapers and magazines" (Wagner Pacifci and Schwartz, 1991: 384). Their analysis of the Congressional Record leading up to the initiation of the process that would create the Vietnam Veterans Memorial included the sentiment among legislators that the country needed to help Vietnam Veterans with the problems they were facing, but was also dominated by "... an idiom more relevant to social deviants than to returning soldiers..." (Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, 1991: 387).

Lembcke is a critical sociologist who gives "... a social constructionist account of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" from the days of the Nixon Administration through the inclusion of PTSD in the DSM—III in 1980 (1998: 37). Lembcke looks at history; he then relates that anti-war protests, the voices of anti-war veterans, and media coverage of the My Lai massacre were troubling both for the Nixon Administration and for anyone trying to argue for the pros of Vietnam War. Lembcke makes the case that these troubles, the portrayal of veterans as drifters in motorcycle films of the time (1998: 48), and the mental health field's appropriation of the film term *flashback* (1998: 53), all played roles in the social construction of PTSD (1998: 55). According to Lembcke, this hodgepodge of contextual factors led to some frames of

veterans that must be viewed with some degree of skepticism. The frames that Lembcke is skeptical of include: alienated veteran (1998: 47), the drifter veteran (1998: 48), and the mentally ill veteran more generally. With the Nixon Administration's anti-war problems in mind, Lembcke states, "the inferential effect of framing veterans' protest within a mental health discourse was to pathologize their legitimate political behavior..." (1998: 43).

Griffin and Sen (1995), Price (2005), and McClancy (2013) consider the media's role in the social construction of veterans. Griffin and Sen, as well as Price, focus on frames intentionally created by narrative filmmakers. McClancy talks about the organic development of framings of Vietnam veterans as the result of the new medium of television. Griffin and Sen are journalism and mass communications scholars who tried to determine what, if any, impact watching certain types of narrative films about the Vietnam War would have on "... attributions audiences made for readjustment problems facing some Vietnam veterans..." (1995: 511). Griffin and Sen (1995) then considered what if any impact internal or external audience attributions for these readjustment problems would have on audience attitudes about government assistance to Vietnam veterans. Films included in their study were divided into two categories—those in which "external forces dominate the character..." and those in which "the character controls more of his or her own fate" (Griffin and Sen, 1995: 516). Griffin and Sen accomplished the division of the nine Vietnam War films considered into categories by a simple content analysis of the motion pictures. They conducted a telephone survey to test the relationship between exposures to the films and the types of attributions that people made concerning Vietnam veterans' problems. They also utilized the survey to test the relationship between these attributions and people's attitudes about government aid for Vietnam veterans.

After controlling for factors such as social class, political liberalism, exposure to friends and family involved in the war, and exposure to print and television news coverage of the war, Griffin and Sen found a correlation between exposure to films in which “external forces dominate the character” (1995: 516) and external attributions for Vietnam Veterans problems. Moreover, they also found a correlation between these external attributions and favorable attitudes towards government aid for Vietnam veterans. That is to say, the social construction of veterans influences policy attitudes.

Price (2005) is a critical media scholar who investigates “the authentic veteran in mainstream Hollywood narrative” (2005: 83). Price references mostly contemporary films with characters that are veterans, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1982), *Glory* (1989), *Windtalkers* (2002), and *The Last Samurai* (2003). Price does not focus on veterans of a particular military conflict, as is clear from the previous list of films, but instead concentrates on what he sees as the dominant representations of the ‘real’ veteran in mainstream American movies. That is to say that Price finds that in the mainstream Hollywood narrative, only certain types of veterans are held up as authentic veterans. The two major representations of authentic veterans in contemporary film found by Price were (1) the empathetic veteran, who must be divorced from politics and a victim of circumstance (2005: 90) and (2) the damaged soldier-hero undergoing a quest for the resurrection of his honor and the validation of his masculine purpose (2005: 90).

McClancy’s (2013) areas of specialization include film and media studies. McClancy delineates the organic development of framings of Vietnam veterans. This development is the result of the new medium of television, rather than the result of the content of television news

coverage. Television was a relatively new medium during the time of the Vietnam War. Film reels with heroic soundtracks, wide, long shots, and dramatic narrative threads were the previous visual medium used to document wars. Television, viewed in the home, shot in a disjointed, single-camera format, with talking head commentary, close-ups, and short, mundane, non-narrative segments, was the visual medium used to document the Vietnam War (McClancy, 2013). McClancy found that the usage of satellites for television coverage was expensive and seldom used. As a result television networks often filmed news content and shipped it stateside. So the general unavailability of live coverage often made non-time-sensitive coverage of the everyday tasks of soldiers the preferred news content. Therefore, television coverage of the Vietnam War led the public to perceptions of mundanity and arduousness (McClancy, 2013: 51) and routine-ness (McClancy, 2013: 56). McClancy states that the television coverage of Vietnam did not contain that many instances of violence. There were exceptions, however. In 1965, a memorable bit of CBS coverage showed soldiers burning down huts “with the same emotional content displayed by a plumber unclogging a sink” (2013: 58). Though McClancy found that television producers and newscasters did not bias their coverage against the war, the effect of the medium was to remove the heroism and epic nature that had pervaded news coverage of previous wars. McClancy found that in past wars, characterizations of combat veterans included the agentic soldier-hero on a quest to create “American cultural primacy” through “heroic masculine violence” (McClancy, 2013: 51). However, he found that during Vietnam characterizations of combat veterans included the psychotic and “violently insane” (McClancy, 2013: 51); the “desperate revolutionary” (McClancy, 2013: 64); and the “fascist war machine” (McClancy, 2013: 64).



### *The First Gulf War*

Beamish and colleagues (1995) noted that Gulf War period discourse, concerning the treatment of Vietnam veterans by Vietnam anti-war protestors, presumed that protestors had often abused veterans. Beamish and colleagues did an extensive ethnographic content analysis of newspaper articles to test the assertion that protestors abused veterans during the Vietnam era. Though very few instances could be found of the media reporting about Vietnam anti-war demonstrators speaking or acting in an anti-troop fashion, "... Gulf War discourse, *even among protestors*, presumed that Vietnam-era war opponents had, in some way, targeted, blamed, or abused the troops" (Beamish et al., 1995: 346). Thus anti-war and anti-troop frames had been successfully bridged by elites. By logical extension, the contrapositive relationship—pro-troop and pro-war frames, had also been successfully bridged by elites. These frame bridgings allowed elites to put protestors on defense by simply saying the words support the troops. Protestors then had to respond—we support the troops, but... X is a bad policy because of the following reasons.

According to Beamish and colleagues, pro-troop framings during the first Gulf War were used by elites to preempt protest and to link problems experienced by Vietnam Veterans to Vietnam War protestors. They also found that elites used these pro-troop framings to distract from the most plausible linkages between and among the problems of veterans and: (1) the horrors of war, (2) ineffective policies, and/or (3) inefficient bureaucracies (1995: 355). Again the social construction of veterans influenced policy discourse.

### *Operation Iraqi Freedom*

Leitz (2011) is a sociologist who specializes in social movements and the role of identity in social movements. The public discourse during the first Gulf War concerning the mistreatment of Vietnam Veterans was still prevalent during post 9/11 military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Leitz (2011) did ethnographic fieldwork with military peace organizations; she found that the discourse concerning the mistreatment of Vietnam veterans by protestors led some organizations making up the post 9/11 peace movement to recruit and foreground veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Foregrounding Iraq and Afghanistan veterans allowed these organizations to inoculate themselves against being perceived as anti-troop. The reality of veterans for peace is supposed to disentangle bridged anti-war and anti-troop frames. That is, if former troops are against the war then being antiwar must not necessarily mean being anti-troop. The utilization of veterans within the peace movement was supposed to transform the frame of patriotism to include dissent generally and bringing home the troops specifically (Leitz, 2011).

However, Leitz found that many of the informants she spoke to could not conceive of bringing home the troops as patriotic. Instead, many informants thought of veterans, participating in the military peace movement and making such arguments about patriotism, as inauthentic veterans (Leitz, 2011: 250). The implication is that the authentic veteran must espouse pro-combat policy. So Leitz found that the efforts of the military peace organizations to use the symbolic capital of veterans to change social attitudes about post 9/11 military conflicts enjoyed only limited success. The dominant construction of veterans was difficult to reshape.

### *Frames Found In The Literature*

These studies present several different ways that people construct veterans in the public sphere. The framings of veterans that I found in the literature included the following: social deviant (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991: 387); mentally ill; alienated (Lembcke, 1998: 46); drifter (Lembcke, 1998: 48); stuck in their wartime experiences; psychotic and “violently insane” (McClancy, 2013: 51); “desperate revolutionary” (McClancy, 2013: 64); “fascist war machine” (McClancy, 2013: 64); wounded; victims of circumstance; victims of war; the empathetic veteran, who must be divorced from politics and a victim of circumstance (Price, 2005: 90); the authentic or true veteran, who must espouse pro-combat policy (Leitz, 2011: 250); the damaged soldier-hero undergoing a quest for the resurrection of their honor and the validation of their masculine purpose (Price, 2005: 90); taking control of the situation; the agentic soldier-hero on a quest to create “American cultural primacy” through “heroic masculine violence” (McClancy, 2013: 51); and having authority to speak on the war. The social construction of veterans described by the frames immediately above is not hegemonic. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned frames might be subsumed under a handful of categories: (1) anti-social behavior, (2) mental illness, (3) victimhood, (4) limits on self-expression, (5) and striving or being on a quest.

Loseke (2003) posits that part of the social construction of social problems involves whether or not individuals looking at the issue(s) characterize social actors as sympathetic or unsympathetic. Actors characterized as sympathetic tend to be seen as both undergoing hardship or adversity and as good or unimpeachable. The above five categories emphasize veterans undergoing hardship or adversity. However, these categories do not necessarily emphasize

veterans as good or unimpeachable. One example of a frame that seems to contain both attributes of sympathy is that of the damaged soldier-hero undergoing a quest for the resurrection of their honor (Price, 2005: 90). This is an example that indicates that veterans are both undergoing hardship—that is, damaged, and good—i.e., aiming for redemption. The victims of circumstance and victims of war frames seem at least marginally sympathetic since those frames involve people who are suffering through little fault of their own. However, these victims haven't also been explicitly framed as truly good characters. Therefore, these frames are not necessarily all that sympathetic.

This study builds on the extant literature in two ways. The first way this study builds on the existing research is by dealing with a new time frame—the time frame of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The second way is that this study deals with new data—letters to the editor and Op-Eds.

The new timeframe will allow me to address the following questions: (1) How do veterans currently exist in the public sphere? i.e., what types of frames are associated with veterans after over eleven years of continuous combat? (2) Does the amount of sympathy in framings of veterans found by this research seem to differ from the amount of sympathy found in the framings of veterans in the literature?

Letters to the editor and Op-Eds are new data. Generally speaking, “Very little recent research considers letters to the editor... from the point of view of public discourse (Perrin, 2005: 171). Specifically regarding the public discourse surrounding veterans, researchers have

not yet considered letters to the editor. The literature covering the social construction of veterans deals with media frames of veterans and with how elites, such as policy makers framed veterans. Letters to the editor are a medium where "... non-elites present their definitions of reality to others" (Silva & Lowe, 2015: 441). The non-elite construction of veterans is uncharted territory in the existing research. If we know how non-elites construct veterans, we have the opportunity in the future to explore how institutionalized elites' constructions of veterans are. Likewise, at a later point we could, gauge the level of resistance to elites' constructions of veterans.

The existing literature dealt mostly with the timeframe of the Vietnam War. The frames found during that timeframe were mostly unsympathetic. If the social construction of veterans seems to have changed since the Vietnam War, it could be because the data set considered in this research includes non-elite framings. Changes in the social construction of veterans could also possibly be due to changes in social norms and/or changes in the context surrounding veterans? In any case, social constructions of veterans are likely context bound, and it will be important to see what the norms surrounding veterans currently are.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS

This qualitative study explores the socially acceptable ways of talking about veterans in the U. S. I performed a LexisNexis search for the word veteran amongst letters to the editor and Op Ed's. The unit of analysis is the letter. A continuous timeframe was used for the search. The timeframe began on 1 January 2013. This choice means that all letters were written after the formal declaration of the end of the war in Iraq (December 15, 2011), and it means that the sample includes letters written contemporary with President Obama's announcement of a timetable for the drawdown of the remaining troops in Afghanistan (The 2013 State of the Union—February 12, 2013). No less than six scandals dealing with the mistreatment of veterans were reported on in the news from 2007 through January of 2013. The chosen timeframe yields a sample that gives a contemporary account.

Non-military references to the word veteran were excluded. After removing from the sample, those letters that do not refer to military veterans, my desired sample size was 200 letters. 200 letters provides sufficient variation to reach saturation. The date that the 200<sup>th</sup> letter was printed on was 13 February 2013. Thus the complete timeframe for the sample was from 1 January 2013 through 13 February 2013.

I performed an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987) that was empirical, qualitative, cumulative, and precise. The letters were coded for the frames associated with veterans. The coding and analysis of the resultant codes was an iterative process of discovery

and interpretive analysis (see Lofland et al 2006). As new codes emerged data was recoded to ensure that each instance of a code was captured in the data.

Coding occurred in multiple stages, moving from open codes to focus codes. Open codes are tentative and consist of highly specific concepts that are very closely tied to specific phrases from the text. Focus codes are themes or categories that emerge from among the open codes. Focus codes are still very much grounded in the data, but are necessarily more abstract than open codes.

First, highly specific open codes were applied to a subset of 75 letters. Notations were made as insights about codes arose. Precise codes were used until more general themes began to emerge, at which point, these codes were organized according to themes. In order to compare and contrast codes, I employed the use of bracketed memos alongside my codes as described by Lofland et al. (2006), and I continuously reanalyzed codes and themes to see whether or not certain codes might have been better represented by a different theme than they were initially associated with.

In the later stages, focus codes were applied to the entire sample. Focus codes associated with the general themes derived from the initial subset of 75 letters, were then reapplied to the initial subset of 75 letters and eventually to the entire set of 200 letters. However, after combing through the subset of 75 letters, I first came up with 257 very specific open codes. I open coded the subset in handwriting on a printed copy of the first 75 letters. These open codes were very concrete and specific. Sometimes the phrases that made up open codes were not that far

removed from the phrases utilized in the letters. For instance these initial codes included phrases such as: (1) “dealing with substandard care,” (2) “part of a spending dichotomy,” (3) “requiring law enforcement supervision,” (4) “possessed of what it takes,” and (5) “part of the American social compact.”

I then entered these open codes into an Excel sheet in an attempt to more easily compare, contrast, and otherwise analyze them. I gave each code a general description in the Excel sheet. Many codes shared the same general description with at least one other code. I came up with 25 general descriptions that described the 257 open codes. These general descriptions were more abstract, sometimes much more abstract, than the concrete, specific open codes. The general descriptions were basically rough, first-pass attempts at focus codes, many of which would change several times during the inductive, iterative research process. Examples of the general descriptions follow: credibility, deserving, financial, mainstream, memory, mental/emotional state, and struggling. Here are several examples of code/description pairings. (1) The open code “dealing with substandard care” was given the general description “struggling.” (2) The open code “part of a spending dichotomy” was given the general description “financial.” (3) The open code “requiring law enforcement supervision” was given the general description “credibility.” (4) The open code “possessed of what it takes” was given the general description “competence.” (5) The open code “part of the American social compact” was given the general description “mainstream.”

Next, I looked at the open codes that I had assigned to each general description. I then attempted to find any variation that might exist among that particular group of codes. I came up



with 183 different variations amongst all of the groups. The general description “credibility” was initially assigned 45 times in the initial subset of letters. I noted 21 variations within those 45 letters. Some of the variations among the initial “credibility” group follow: “competence,” “dynamism,” “trustworthiness,” “elders,” and “right to speak.”

If a group had more than one instance of a particular variation, I looked for differences within that set of instances. I found 98 distinctly describable terms amongst the aforementioned 183 initial variations. For instance “competence” was a variation of the general description “credibility.” I annotated ten different types of “competence,” including: “business skills,” “technical skills,” “talented,” and “dumb” (incompetent).

At this level, I again looked for seeming repetitions within each subset of descriptions. I similarly examined these repeated cases and I discovered 12 instances of further variation. I noted the variation “remembered” within several codes with the general description “memory.” I ascribed four types of “remembered.” One of these types was “stories.” “Stories” recurred seven times. Each instance of “stories” had a different description of further variation from the other instances of “stories.” Instances of further variation within “stories” include: “tellers of wisdom stories,” “tellers of stories that are not always true,” and “immortal through stories.”

Looking at the different levels of variation within the proposed focus codes helped me to assess the validity of those focus codes. If frames that I assigned were overly specific or concrete, they seemed like singular instances to me. Singular instances do not seem like slices of culture or parts of reality that might be magnified or made more salient. However, some of the

more abstract focus codes that I assigned seemed too broad to be just a *slice* of culture or to highlight “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993: 52). Also, some of the more abstract frames that I assigned seemed tenuously grounded in the data. Looking at the levels of variation helped me to dial in the correct level of abstraction. For example, the amount of variation in my tentative “credibility” frame made me think that “credibility” was not properly applied as a frame in my data. There were 21 different instances of variation among the 45 open codes described as credibility. Also, the type of variation that I saw in my tentative “credibility” frame convinced me that credibility was a concept that supervened on the data rather than a theme that actually arose from the data. The variation within the tentative “credibility” frame included other abstract themes such as “competence” and “trustworthiness.” Upon looking back through the letters, “competence” and “trustworthiness” seemed more closely tied to the data; whereas “credibility” seemed more like an umbrella concept that I had thrust upon the data and thrust upon several distinct frames.

I reviewed my Excel sheet, I reviewed the initial subset of letters, and I consulted with my committee chair. As I took these actions I removed inappropriate themes (general descriptions), I added themes that I had not at first noticed, and I generally worked to clarify and condense themes as appropriate. I became satisfied that I had a suitable roster of focus codes to apply to the entire data set of 200 letters. Those focus codes included the following: (1) deservingness, (2) health and wellness, (3) competency, (4) memory, (5) mainstream-ness, and (6) trustworthiness.

I then reapplied the frames—the binary oppositions of these themes, to the original subset of 75 letters and to the entire set of 200 letters. To accomplish this task I used a Word file of the complete set of 200 letters. For quick reference, in each letter the word “veteran” is boldfaced, underlined, and in red colored font. I inserted the frames directly into the letters as close as possible to the word or phrase that flagged the letter for that frame. Frames were entered boldfaced, in all capital letters, in regular black colored font. Memos were added by highlighting a given frame and by then using the comments function in Word.

Many letters included more than one frame. Most letters included only one side of a frame group’s binary, but a few included both sides of the binary. In instances where a letter included both pieces of a binary (frames), both pieces/frames were counted. For example, if a Korean War veteran wrote a letter to the editor and wrote two paragraphs about how veterans of the Korean War were forgotten, but then wrote the next two paragraphs about a celebration in honor of veterans of the Korean War and how it made him and all of his veteran buddies feel remembered, then I marked that letter as containing both the forgotten frame and the remembered frame.

Both the frames and the comments were searchable by hitting the keys control and f simultaneously on my laptop. I reviewed and re-reviewed the coded frames and their associated memos throughout the data. I tabulated the frequencies of each frame. I combed through all the memos associated with a given frame to look for insights about that frame.

This approach comes with some limitations. The ability to ask follow-up questions of the writers might have provided valuable data. Nonetheless, I did not attempt to determine the intentions or thoughts of those letter authors, whose statements make up the data set used in the study. The authors' inner monologues about veterans are not the point. What the writers say privately about veterans amongst close friends and associates is also not the focus. Rather per Mills (1940) I have tried as much as possible to take the perspective that "We cannot infer physiological processes from lingual phenomena" (1940: 909), and that "Motives are words" (1940: 905). The letters show what can be said in public about veterans. Letters are only one segment of the public sphere, so norms might vary in other places where people discuss veterans.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONSTRUCTION OF VETERANS

After analyzing and re-analyzing the collected letters for themes, I found that frames tended to fall into six main groups: (1) deservingness, (2) health and wellness, (3) competency, (4) memory, (5) mainstream-ness, and (6) trustworthiness. I tried to use straightforward, everyday meanings for the frames. All of the groups consist of two frames that are binary oppositions—i.e., two frames that sit at opposite poles of a spectrum. For example, the deservingness group consists of a deserving frame and an undeserving frame. I will now describe each in turn.

#### *Deservingness*

Deservingness was the most common group with 132 letters containing a deserving frame and ten letters containing an undeserving frame. For this paper deserving means worthy of. The deserving frame speaks to a positive evaluation of veterans' character; it means that the contributions of veterans are valued and that they are owed something for their contributions. A prime example of an instance of the deserving frame is when the author of a letter to the editor said, "Veterans should be our priority" (*The Times & Transcript*, 1/4/13: D8). The author goes on to detail instances of when the health, safety, welfare, and economic wellbeing of veterans did not seem to be a societal priority. The author follows one of these instances with the imperative statement, "Immediate action should be taken," and follows another instance with the interrogative sentence "Where is the priority the government claims they have for our veterans?"

The author indicates that he values the contributions of veterans when stating that they should be our priority. By stating that immediate action must be taken in reference to situations involving veterans with a lack of health, safety, welfare, and economic well-being, the author conveys that veterans are owed something for their contributions.

My analysis tended to show that it is usually socially acceptable only to refer to veterans as deserving rather than undeserving. Therefore, the next question to explore seemed to be, “What does the public find socially acceptable to call veterans deserving of?” This question yielded the following subcategories of the deserving frame: (A) generally deserving (no further explication given in the letter), (B) deserving of honor, (C) deserving of benefits (healthcare or monetary benefits), (D) deserving of jobs, job preference, and/or a living wage, and (E) deserving of an opportunity to speak. Asking the question, “What subjects were veterans framed as deserving of an opportunity to speak about?” yielded three main categories: (a) generally deserving of an opportunity to speak (This group contained some *one-off* cases of topics that veterans were deemed deserving of an opportunity to talk about as well as some *no further explication given in the letter* cases.), (b) deserving of an opportunity to speak about firearms, and (c) deserving of an opportunity to speak about combat, warfare, and/or national security. Additional examples of the above subcategories will now be given.

The *deserving of honor* sub-frame sometimes directly referenced worthiness of honor or respect—e.g., “Wouldn't it be wonderful to see local officials, teachers, firefighters, children, moms and dads all proudly wearing red poppies to honor and remember our veterans?” (*Walnut Creek Journal*, 1/3/13). The author explicitly uses the words “honor... our veterans” and

implicitly says that the whole community should honor veterans by stating that it would be “wonderful” if the community did so. Another time the *deserving of honor* sub-frame is annotated in letters that refer to veterans as “decorated.” A decoration is an award or *honor* that a military service person is given either for acts of valor or for exceeding standards. In one example, a letter author states, “Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who has never worn a military uniform, but who said, in a snarky tone, that these two decorated combat veterans are ‘less than ardent fans of our military...’” (*Austin American-Statesman, final edition, 2/4/13: A06*). The author makes it clear that she does not find it appropriate to question the patriotism of a veteran, who was worthy of the honor of being decorated. She also makes it known that she even finds it dishonorable to question the patriotism of an honorable veteran. The *deserving of honor* sub-frame is also noted in letters that positively refer to veterans parades, veterans assemblies, or other symbolic tokens such as including the phrase *Veterans’ Memorial* in the names of bridges or roads. In one case a letter author writes:

Veterans are more deserving of bridge name... Many people are suggesting to name the new bridge from Illinois to St. Louis after a great man, Stan Musial... I really believe that we should consider naming the new bridge after our veterans. Members of our military continue to serve and sacrifice for all of us daily without acknowledgment, adequate pay or healthcare... (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch, third edition, 1/31/13: A14*).

The author states that veterans are “deserving.” But rather than state out rightly that veterans are deserving of adequate pay or healthcare, she chooses to focus on “acknowledgment.”

The author makes it known that she feels veterans are worthy of the honor of a symbolic gesture—i.e., of having a bridge named after them.

The deserving of benefits sub-frame is found in instances in which letter authors state that veterans are owed either healthcare or monetary benefits for their contributions to society. Examples of the deserving of benefits sub-frame often involve explicit statements. In one example, the letter author states:

... [Veterans] should receive a pension for life. Where is the priority the government claims they have for our veterans? They spent \$28 million on the historical event of the War of 1812. Yet they see fit to fall short of meeting our veterans' needs... (*The Times and Transcript*, 1/4/13: D8).

The author states what veterans are deserving of. In this instance, the author then follows her statement up with an example of something she finds frivolous and undeserving of expenditures. The reason for this contrasting follow-up is to further emphasize how deserving veterans are of benefits.

The deserving of jobs, job preference, and/or a living wage, sub-frame is about how veterans have made a valuable contribution to society and how society in return owes them the dignity of work. Here is one example of a letter author writing about how veterans who have transitioned to the civilian world deserve to earn a living wage:



... Hey, this is great public relations for Wal-Mart if people don't look too closely. It's trying to improve its image, and I don't blame them. Oh boy, what a patriotic company—it's going to hire 100,000 veterans. For what, \$10 an hour? C'mon. These men and women are coming home after serving their country in the Middle East and they're going to have to settle for jobs that don't pay well enough to support their families? And most of those jobs are going to be part-time, so Wal-Mart doesn't even have to provide insurance and benefits (*The York Dispatch*, 1/25/13).

The author states that military service men and women, who have done their patriotic duty, deserve to earn at least a living wage in the civilian world. The author also very strongly implies that any large corporation that could afford to hire veterans and pay them a living wage, but that chooses not to, is unpatriotic.

The *deserving of an opportunity to speak* sub-frame is often noted when the author begins his or her letter by informing the reader that he or she is a veteran. The implication of stating “as a veteran” is that with that descriptor comes a certain amount of authority. In one instance the author starts his letter, “I'm a retired Marine who served and fought with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines in Vietnam” (*Austin American-Statesmen*, 1/1/13: A10). Then, the author follows that statement with a gripe about a citizen, who placed a nasty note on the author's vehicle. The note impugns the author's work ethic thusly:

‘Let me guess. Non-combat government leach *veteran* all you dumbass life.’ I realized this illiterate scribble was prompted by the *Veterans for Obama* bumper sticker on my car

pasted near a Marine Corps emblem (*Austin American Statesmen, Final Edition, 1/1/13: A10*).

The author later states that he supports the note writer's freedom of speech, but the point of the author beginning his statement with the facts that he is a combat veteran and a military retiree is to let the reader know that he has earned the liberty to express his political beliefs as he sees fit. A second instance of the *deserving of an opportunity to speak* sub-frame is seen when an author opens his letter by saying, "As a U.S. Navy veteran, I am well aware of the threat that our single-source dependence on oil poses to national security" (*Alamogordo Daily News, 1/23/13*). The author of the letter in this second instance follows up his opening statement with his positions about the importance of our country becoming more energy independent. The author is telling the reader that his knowledge of the threat of energy dependence to our security is not just intellectual; the author stated that he is "well aware" as a way to say that during his time in the Navy he has traveled around the world and has actually been to the unstable regions from which the U.S. buys oil. The author uses his personal experience in harms way to bolster the authority of his plea for the U.S. to become energy independent.

There were only ten letters containing undeserving frames. The low frequency of undeserving frames points to the difficulty of speaking ill of veterans in public. Also, there were patterned ways of saying that veterans are deserving; letter authors tended to say that veterans were deserving of certain things—e.g., honor, benefits, a job that pays a living wage, the right to speak. However, there was a lack of themes among the presented ways of saying that veterans were undeserving. The undeserving frames were idiosyncratic. One letter author wrote about the ills of gun control and gave the following example

involving veterans, “What about Gen. ‘Bug-out Doug’ MacArthur ” machine-gunning the veterans of the World War I Bonus Army?” (*The Augusta Chronicle, all edition, 1/12/13: A6*). In describing why he thought the public needs guns to protect itself from the government, the author describes for the reader a case in which the government did not find veterans deserving of the bonuses that were promised to them. Another letter author speaks unfavorably about Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy as part of his evidence why being a veteran is not necessarily a credential for Chuck Hagel to be confirmed as Secretary of Defense:

Our two most effective wartime presidents, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, had virtually no military experience. Jefferson Davis, by way of contrast, in addition to betraying the Union, was a fine officer, a veteran of the Mexican War, and a president who could barely stay on civil terms with any General other than Robert E. Lee, who managed him rather than the other way around (*The Washington Post, regional edition, 1/11/13: A17*).

The author’s example paints a picture of a veteran, who is undeserving of a top leadership post.

The only commonality among some of the undeserving frames seems to be that some letter authors (and an individual referred to by a letter author) felt free to characterize specific veterans as undeserving if the veteran’s politics did not agree with their own politics. In these cases, the category of being a veteran was not strong enough to overcome the letter author’s dislike for the veteran’s politics. To be clear this commonality does not represent a theme for talking about undeserving veterans generally, but a theme for talking about individual veterans, whose politics the author finds questionable. Five of the letters

containing undeserving frames dealt with veterans who had become elected officials (John Kerry and Chuck Hagel) and who were undergoing Senate confirmation hearings for appointment to President Obama's cabinet.

One letter author, who was unhappy with President Obama's selection of Chuck Hagel for Secretary of Defense, wrote:

'The horror of it, the pain of it, the suffering of it,' Hagel told a Veterans History Project interviewer in 2002. 'People just don't understand unless they've been through it. There's no glory, only suffering in war.' If you follow the logic far enough, it takes you to a glib notion: that anyone who has not seen combat and is not putting his own life on the line is less deserving of a voice (*The New York Times, on the web, 1/21/13*).

The author says that non-veterans are not less deserving of a voice by describing that notion as "glib." By logical extension, the author says that veterans are not more deserving of a voice than anyone else despite claims to the contrary by those in favor of Chuck Hagel's nomination.

Speaking about John Kerry, another letter author stated, "It's remarkable to me that we made a man secretary of state who once threw back military service medals because he was so against this country he could barely stand up straight" (*Austin American-Statesman, 1/2/13: A13*). The author impugns Mr. Kerry's patriotism because, despite the fact that Kerry is a veteran, the author does not like Kerry's politics. By calling Kerry's confirmation "remarkable," the author is saying that because he finds Kerry unpatriotic,

Kerry is therefore, undeserving of being Secretary of State. This example is reminiscent of the frame of the inauthentic veteran noted in the literature.

### *Health and Wellness*

Health and wellness was the second most common group with 108 letters containing an unhealthy/unwell frame and 17 letters containing a healthy/well frame. I kept repeatedly reading letters that talked about veterans not doing well. The authors of these letters were not just saying that veterans are sick. Different authors wrote about various aspects of life at which veterans were not succeeding. These frames can be covered by Corbin and Pangrazi's definition of wellness as a " multidimensional state of being describing the existence of positive health in an individual as exemplified by quality of life and a sense of well-being" (2001: 1). Such a definition is broad and for my purposes includes not just lack of disease or injury and not just physical and mental wellness, but also occupational and social wellness. Three examples that show some of the variability in the unwell frame follow.

(1) "Every day, another veteran falls ill to a disease attributed to the deadly herbicide agent orange. Every week 400 to 500 sick Vietnam veterans die" (Deming Headlight, 1/7/13). This letter is a clear example of unwellness by virtue of physical sickness or injury. The author explicitly refers to veterans becoming ill and dying of unnatural causes. (2) "Shouldn't more be done to help those who return home with post-traumatic stress disorder? Can we not see the divorce and suicide rates for returning veterans are at disturbing levels" (Contra Costa Times, 2/9/13)? This letter is an example of mental, emotional and social dimensions of unwellness. The author references emotional disorders/mental illness and marital instability—social unwellness at the family level. (3) "Homeless veterans—The system that provides

services for homeless veterans in El Paso is broken. The only facility in El Paso under contract to provide shelter to homeless veterans has been closed by the El Paso Department of Veterans Affairs for ‘safety’ reasons since April” (*El Paso Times*, 1/13/13). This letter refers to homelessness and is an example of the social dimension of unwellness faced by veterans. In the U.S. (and in many places) shelter is a prerequisite to being considered well. Veterans are framed as unwell in this letter not only because there are homeless veterans, but because there are enough homeless veterans that there is a system for taking care of them, and that system is evidently failing veterans.

I did find a higher frequency of the well frame than I did of the undeserving frame, but the letters containing well frames were still a definite minority among the wellness group letters. The well frames seem mostly to fall into one of two groups. The first group is letters that talk about veterans being gainfully employed. These letters do not necessarily talk about veterans being deserving of the right to work, but just about situations in which they have worked. For instance, the following letter author describes veterans that are gainfully employed in stable, middle-class jobs, “For millions of workers, including veterans and African-Americans, a job at the post office has been a ticket to the middle class” (*The New York Time, late edition—final*, 1/9/13: A19). Having work is an example of the occupational dimension of wellness. The second group is letters that talk about veterans giving back to the community. Philanthropic and charitable activity, such as the type referenced in the following letter excerpt, is an example of the social dimension of wellness:

From senior centers and fire companies to community baseball teams and high school bands, from EMS services and food pantries to the Salvation Army and York Rescue Mission, York County veterans’ organizations and clubs are donating big bucks to local charities (*The York Dispatch*,

1/31/13).

First of all these veterans are social, rather anti-social, because they belong to veterans' organizations and clubs. Second, these veterans are using the clubs resources to help a myriad of worthy causes.

### *Competency*

Within the competency group, 24 letters included a competent frame while only 3 contained an incompetent frame. I defined the competent frame as being seen as having skills, talents, perspectives, or qualities associated with success and/or with task completion. For example:

The characteristics of successful military leaders are the same as business leaders and entrepreneurs -- they are 'innovative, risk-taking, rebellious, adaptable, persistent, opportunistic and highly intense,' Mr. Kane argues. In the retention crisis, the military's loss is the private sector's gain, and many Fortune 500 companies have noticed and begun campaigns to recruit veterans (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1/20/13: B1).

The letter author indicates that the military has within its ranks highly talented and driven individuals, whose skills are transferrable to the civilian private sector. The author continues that civilian businesses, in some cases, seem to be doing a better job of wooing these talented veterans than the military is doing at retaining them.

The majority of the letters that included the competent frame dealt with a job that veterans had done well, were currently doing well, or could do well in the future. However, five of the letters that included the competent frame dealt specifically with competency at using a firearm. For instance:

What hasn't been pointed out to date is that over 22 million U.S. military veterans in America today form an intangible militia, based on the fact they all have sworn to defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies foreign and domestic, have had significant weapons training, and are therefore a viable resource for the defense of the constitution (*Spokesman Review, main edition, 1/20/13: B9*).

The phrases “significant weapons training” and “viable resource for... defense” delineate that veterans are competent to use a weapon.

There were very few—only three letters, that contained the incompetent frame. The low frequency of incompetent frames speaks to a difficulty of speaking about veterans as incompetent. The authors of these letters also referred to individual veterans rather than to veterans as a whole. This lack of generalization also indicates that it is difficult to speak about veterans as incompetent. One letter author refers to John Kerry as a “... joke of a sailor...” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh press edition, 1/4/13: A8*). By calling Kerry a “joke of a sailor” the author is saying that Kerry’s ability to execute his duties as a sailor is laughable. This derision is in direct contrast to having skills, talents, perspectives, or qualities associated with success and/or with task completion. Indirectly, the letter author is actually



indicating that sailors, generally speaking, are competent.

Another author states that Chuck Hagel will "... have to enlist deputies better versed in Pentagonese..." (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh press edition, 1/15/13: A8*). While this example may paint Hagel less harshly than the previous example painted Kerry, the author is still saying that Hagel does not have one of the skills associated with success. The author indicates that Hagel is not well versed in the language and perhaps the culture of the Department that he was nominated to head.

### ***Memory***

Among the examples in the memory group, 14 letters included a forgotten frame while 9 included a remembered frame. I defined the forgotten frame as un-recalled, un-recognized, neglected, and/or de-prioritized. The following example clearly illustrates the forgotten frame:

My fellow veterans and I were initially rejected for membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars because, as we were told, 'Korea was not a war, it was a police action.' This was rectified but not before thousands of us felt forgotten by the country that had sent us to fight in a foreign land (*The Washington Post, Regional Edition, 1/3/13: A16*).

The author, a veteran, talks about veterans being forgotten. Interestingly, without pro-veteran norms, the author's statement would make less sense. The status of veterans must be coveted if being unrecognized or unrecalled as a veteran produces emotional scars.

An American, who had been on vacation in London, reflected about Remembrance Day in England and wrote:

... This contrasts sharply with my experience of Veterans Day or Memorial Day in the United States. These holidays are often thought of in terms of a three-day weekend. I do see veterans outside of local markets handing out poppies, but people often rush by with disinterest... (*Contra Costa Times*, 1/3/13).

By writing that the holidays are “thought of in terms of a three-day weekend,” the author indicates that people do not think about the meaning of the holidays and have for practical purposes forgotten the meaning. By stating, “... people often rush by [veterans] with disinterest...” the author is further showing how veterans are forgotten. The meanings of their holidays are not only unrecalled, but actual veterans attempting to be noticed often go unrecognized during these holidays.

Remembered frames often seem to either be associated with an honorary remembrance or with a person or group who is working on behalf of veterans:

“I can’t describe the pleasure of learning that we would have our own float in the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, Calif. Thank you for taking the time to remember us old veterans on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the armistice, which was signed on July 27, 1953 (*The Washington Post*, regional edition, 1/3/13: A16).

This example, in which the author expresses his gratitude, is associated with an honorary remembrance—the Tournament of Roses Parade. Whereas, the following example of the remembered frame is associated with an individual working on behalf of veterans, “As a disabled veteran and advocate who stands in the gap for our veterans in making sure that none are forgotten or left behind, I have a very important message for Sen. Jay Rockefeller” (*Charleston Gazette*, 1/8/13: 4A).

One author—a Russian on a journalism fellowship in the U.S., observed:

I attended a press conference about the death of a veteran named William Nicklas, who died after contracting Legionnaires’ Disease at the V.A. Hospital in Oakland. In Russia no one would have paid attention. People would have said, ‘He was 87 years old; he lived long enough’ (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *sooner edition*, 1/5/13: B7).

The details about information being put out to the press and about people paying attention are the evidence that this letter included the remembered frame. I included this example because it seemed like an interesting counterpoint to the example comparing the remembrance of veterans in England to their remembrance in the U.S. Although, an American observing cultural activities in another country expressed that veterans in the U.S. were forgotten, someone from another country observing U.S. cultural activities expressed that veterans in the U.S. were well remembered.

### *Mainstream-ness*

12 letters contained a mainstream frame while 9 included an out of the mainstream frame. I defined the mainstream frame as normative or exemplar. The letters that included the mainstream frame contained author descriptions of veterans conforming to mainstream norms and roles, or of individuals helping veterans as conforming to mainstream norms or roles. Interestingly, all of the mainstream frames seemed to have a positive connotation, while about half of the out of the mainstream frames had a positive connotation and half had a negative connotation. An example of the mainstream frame follows:

These victims are the parents and grandparents who raised us. They were our role models, veterans and community leaders. They deserve a better ending to their lives (*Star Tribune, Metro Edition*, 1/11/13: 8A).

The letter author, by placing veterans among the same ilk as role models and community leaders denotes veterans as a type of exemplar.

The next quote about First Lady Michelle Obama is another example of the mainstream frame:

Republicans have long tried to paint her as some sort of closeted Black Panther who secretly loathes whites, but it has never worked - not when she's constantly seen reading

to school kids or talking about the need to support veterans (*Daily News, Sports Final Replate Edition*, 1/7/13: 20).

The letter author argues that Mrs. Obama is perceived as mainstream despite her opponents' rhetoric to the contrary and that this perception of mainstream-ness stems from her doing and being associated with mainstream things and working with mainstream groups. One of the groups referenced by the letter author is veterans. This example is interesting because it indicates that the category of veterans can be used to neutralize certain stigmas.

Here is a case of an out of the mainstream frame with a negative connotation, "... a radical veterans group that on one occasion voted on whether to assassinate U.S. senators it didn't like" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1/4/13: A8). The use of the term radical, as well as the association of veterans with violent, illegal, and treasonous activity clearly paint a more negative *outside of the mainstream* frame. However, this is an exceptional case in that I did not see authors in my data referring to veterans generally as radical. The previous statement was written about John Kerry's anti-war activities, and someone who did not want Kerry to be Secretary of State wrote the letter in which the previous frame was found. So just as was reported in my section of the undeserving frame, here is another case where the category of veteran is not strong enough to overcome someone's distaste for an individual veteran's politics.

And here is an example of an out of the mainstream frame with a positive connotation:

As one of the Peabody-labeled ‘anti-everything’ demonstrators at the Friday event, I feel compelled to respond (‘12 arrested in protest at coal company,’ Jan. 26). Since Senior Vice President Vic Svec could not come down to meet with the Native Americans directly affected by Peabody's actions, I suppose he could plead ignorance. My designated ‘anti-everything’ group was Veterans For Peace. Members at the event included Vietnam and Gulf War veterans and those who have served from lieutenant colonel down through the enlisted ranks in all four of the military services. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1/30/13: A16).

The letter author paints himself and his fellow veterans more positively as nonconformists, who have the courage to stand up for the disenfranchised and stand up against a powerful and influential corporation. Protestors can often be seen as radical. The protestors in the above case were referred to as a bunch of “anti-everything” groups, which sounds like an attempt to paint them as negative, impractical radicals. The author indicates that in response to the “anti-everything” label applied to the protestors by the influential corporation, he decided to write the newspaper and let people know that the protestors included many veterans. Just as the example of Michelle Obama being framed as mainstream, this example seems to indicate that the category of veteran can be used to neutralize certain stigmas.

### ***Trustworthiness***

And finally, eight letters contained a trustworthy frame while five letters contained an untrustworthy frame. The trustworthy frame is defined as being expected to do the right thing. The

trustworthy frame involved incidents of truthfulness, of self-control in tempting situations, of and inspiring confidence. The following is a quotation from a letter in which the trustworthy frame was found:

Hagel should be confirmed. As a veteran, he'll find and eliminate wasteful spending in that bloated military budget, no matter whose toes he steps on or what lobbyists he shows to the door (*Herald News*, 1/10/13: D07).

The author indicates that Hagel will do the right thing by showing restraint rather than aggrandizing himself by protecting the budget of the department he would head up. The author also indicates that influential people, who represent large corporations and rich, elite political interests will not be unduly influence Hagel.

The next example is about a Supreme Court Case that involves free speech at a college newspaper:

Whatever the debatable merits of Hazelwood when the speakers and listeners are children, it is unconscionable to withhold the full benefit of the Constitution from adult citizens by virtue of their enrollment in college. Nearly one-third of America's college students are 25 or older, and 155 of them are over 35. More than 270,000 are veterans attending college on the GI Bill—veterans trusted with bombers and aircraft carriers, who come home to learn they cannot be trusted with the freedoms they fought to defend (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1/11/13).

The author explicitly states that veterans were trusted with sophisticated equipment that costs millions and even billions of dollars. The author makes the case that student journalists should have just as

much freedom of speech as professional journalists, but student journalists are not trusted with the freedom of speech. He uses the category of veterans to bolster his argument by saying that those, who can be trusted with sophisticated expensive equipment, and who can be trusted with defending our freedom, must be seen as full citizens.

An example of the untrustworthy follows:

It was many years ago, at another newspaper where I was a section editor and a reporter filed a story about the recollections of a Vietnam veteran. Turned out, the subject of the story made the whole thing up, as was pointed out to us after publication by a couple of real combat vets. The source confessed when we confronted him, and we ended up doing a second story on how common it is for people to lie about military service (*The Evening Sun*, 1/12/13).

This example involves a case of a Vietnam era veteran lying by pretending to have done more than he did. The author indicates that follow-up research showed that it is common for people (not just non-combat veterans) to lie about military service. This farce suggests that the status of certain veterans—combat veterans, is coveted. The status of combat veterans must be so coveted by some individuals that they are willing to risk the shame of being caught lying to achieve the status.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Some notes about the major news stories during and immediately before the covered timeframe are in order. The timeframe for the writing of letters was intended to both give a contemporary account of the social construction of veterans and to tell us about the types of frames associated with veterans after over eleven years of continuous combat. The ongoing parade of scandals related to the care of military service members and veterans makes it relevant to ask when some of these scandals took place in relation to the published letters. Perhaps the public's awareness of these scandals impacted the ways that the public tends to frame veterans in the public discourse.

The letters were published from January 1, 2013, through February 13, 2013. As stated earlier in the paper, the data come from a period after the formal declaration of the end of the war in Iraq, December 15, 2011, and contemporary with President Obama's announcement of a timetable for the drawdown of the remaining troops in Afghanistan, February 12, 2013. Additionally, the Walter Reed Army Medical Center (Bethesda, Maryland) scandal broke in 2007 (Raz, 2007).

For example in 2008 "A nationwide review of the VA's 57 regional offices... found that 41 had records in their shredder bins that shouldn't have been there. In all, nearly 500 benefit claims records had been erroneously slated for destruction, including claims for compensation, notices of disagreement with a claim decision, and death certificates" (Ruggeri, 2008).

Additionally in 2009, the first of the HIV/hepatitis scandals at Veterans Administration Medical Centers, occurring at VA Medical Center's (VAMC's) in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Miami, Florida, and Augusta, Georgia, was brought to light (Hudson, 2009). Another HIV/hepatitis scandal, occurring at the St. Louis, Missouri VAMC, was reported on in 2010 (CNN Wire Staff, 2010). In 2010, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) had serious problems timely processing the post 9/11 GI Bill benefits of almost half of the veterans seeking to use their educational benefits (Reininger, 2010). Another HIV/hepatitis scandal, occurring at the Buffalo, New York VAMC, was uncovered in January of 2013 (Associated Press, 2013), during the timeframe of the writing of the collected letters. However, the waitlist scandal, first found at the Phoenix, Arizona VAMC and later found to be relatively systemic throughout the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) system, did not become news for the consumption of the general public until at least May of 2014 (Zezima, 2014).

The six years immediately before the writing of these letters contained scandals in at least five medical centers dedicated to the care of either military service members or military veterans and systemic problems in the offices dedicated to getting veterans their non-health care related benefits. And the not quite two-month period during which the letters were collected contained yet another scandal at a medical center dedicated to the care of veterans. These scandals were occurring even as the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan were still being waged.

Media coverage of problems in the delivery of healthcare to veterans led up to and included the timeframe of the writing of the examined letters. It seems likely that this coverage

would have increased both the number of unhealthy/unwell frames found, and the number of deserving frames found. Interestingly, however, the letters very seldom actually dealt directly with these scandals.

There were four other stories of note that might have had some impact: (1) the fiscal cliff deal reached in late December 2012 to delay sequestration from January 2013 until March 2013 (Matthews, 2013), (2) the U. S. Senate confirmation process for Chuck Hagel as a nominee for Secretary of Defense (Office of the White House Press Secretary, 2013) and to a lesser extent for John Kerry as a nominee for Secretary of State (Office of the White House Press Secretary, 2012), (3) the Newtown, Connecticut school shooting in December 2012 (Sanchez, 2013), and (4) U. S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's lifting of the ban on women in combat roles in January of 2013 (Bumiller and Shanker, 2013).

Intriguingly, I did not find that the context of these news stories influenced very many the frames of veterans that I found in the collected letters. Amongst the fiscal cliff letters, for instance, all of the letters' authors framed veterans as deserving, but some authors claimed that one major political party was willing to take away veterans benefits to prove a political point, and other authors made essentially the same accusation of the other major political party.

The Chuck Hagel nomination for U. S. Defense Secretary letters did not add a new or different frame to the mix or change which frame was the most prevalent among the letters collected. The Chuck Hagel related letters did bolster both the number of sub-frames of the *deserving—of honor* variety and the number of the frames of the *competent* variety. Only a very

few authors dared to make the case that combat veteran status had no relevance as a qualification for the Secretary of Defense position. Incidentally, from the Chuck Hagel related letters, one can rather easily infer President Obama's likely political strategy in nominating Chuck Hagel. And that strategy would seem to be that in an environment where most of Mr. Obama's nominees face a withering confirmation process, he was putting up someone that would be difficult politically for Republicans to resist. First of all Chuck Hagel was/is a Republican and second he is a combat veteran and many of the letter authors in my data set responded as though those Republicans, who opposed the nomination of Chuck Hagel, were attacking a veteran and thereby were doing something sacrosanct.

The Newtown school shootings stories may have impacted the number of sub-sub-frames of the *deserving—of the opportunity to speak—about firearms* variety. Nevertheless, some veterans wrote in and said that as a veteran, folks should listen to them about how our nation needs gun control. And other veterans wrote in and said that as a veteran, folks should listen to them about how the government is trying to take our guns/gun rights away.

Defense Secretary Panetta's lifting of the ban on women in combat did not seem to alter the quality or quantity of frames found. The lifting of the ban may have increased the number of frames of the *unhealthy/unwell* variety. However, several anti-women-in-combat letter authors basically stated that women veterans were now suffering physically and mentally from their experiences in the armed forces and that women veterans would only suffer more since the ban was lifted. Whereas, pro-women-in-combat letter authors (some authors were women veterans

themselves) essentially stated that women veterans may suffer physically and mentally, but that banning women from combat roles also caused women veterans' careers and paychecks to suffer.

Again, I found that the sundry news stories, which arose in the data, did not seem to impact much the types of frames that I found or on the frequency of those frames. This lack of influence suggests that the frames were not that sensitive to shifts in current events.

## CHAPTER 7

## DISCUSSION

This study builds on the existing literature in two ways. First it examines the new time frame of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second it deals with new data—letters to the Editor and Op-Eds.

The new timeframe allows me to address the following questions. (1) What types of frames are currently associated with veterans after over eleven years of continuous combat? (2) Does the amount of sympathy in framings of veterans found by this research seem to differ from the amount of sympathy found in the framings of veterans in the literature? The literature covering the social construction of veterans largely deals with media frames of veterans and with how elites, such as policy makers framed veterans. Researching letters to the editor allows the chance to see how non-elites frame veterans.

This study uncovered the following frames of veterans: deserving/undeserving, unwell/well, competent/incompetent, forgotten/remembered, mainstream/out of the mainstream, and trustworthy/untrustworthy. Veterans were more often framed as deserving than undeserving, as unwell than well, as competent than incompetent, as forgotten than remembered, as mainstream than out of the mainstream, and as trustworthy than untrustworthy. The unwell and forgotten frames point to the public viewing veterans as undergoing hardships. The deserving, competent, mainstream, and trustworthy frames point to the public as viewing veterans as good or unimpeachable. One of the main takeaways from the data seems to be that veterans are

generally seen as unwell, but also as deserving—in some cases very deserving. The deserving frame (132 occurrences) and the unwell frame (108 occurrences) had the highest frequencies of occurrence among the focus codes. If we take Loseke's (2003) view that actors characterized as sympathetic tend to be seen as both undergoing hardship and/or adversity, and as good or unimpeachable, then the copious findings of both unwell and deserving frames of veterans, seem to neatly fit the criteria of an actor, who is a good person undergoing hardship. These findings, in addition to the paucity of findings of undeserving and well frames, would tend to indicate that the public typically characterizes veterans as sympathetic social actors. Cultural norms are thus decidedly pro-veteran.

My research both confirms and updates the existing literature. The concept of unwellness is common in both the literature, which mainly referred to Vietnam veterans, and my research, which almost solely referred to veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Social deviant (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991: 387); mentally ill; alienated (Lembcke, 1998: 46); drifter (Lembcke, 1998: 48); stuck in their wartime experiences; psychotic and “violently insane” (McClancy, 2013: 51); “desperate revolutionary” (McClancy, 2013: 64); “fascist war machine” (McClancy, 2013: 64); wounded; victims of circumstance; and victims of war all seem to fit well within the un-well category. The general categories of anti-social behavior, mental illness, victimhood, limits on self-expression, which were used in my literature review to group these specific frames, also seem to fairly neatly accord with the concept of un-wellness.

This study both confirms and updates the literature. The concept of un-wellness is common in both the literature, which mainly referred to Vietnam veterans, and my research,

which almost solely referred to veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. This prevalence indicates that veterans continue to be thought of as undergoing hardship. However, the predominance of deserving frames found in my research was not found in the literature. The literature contained few positive references to Vietnam veterans. The few times when writers framed veterans as deserving occurred later in time during the Gulf War period. Veterans have sustained the positive gains they made in the early 1990's. Beamish and colleagues (1995) place these deserving frames in direct contrast to the framings of Vietnam veterans. The general grouping of striving or being on a quest seems mostly positive if we don't look at the specific frames in that category. Nevertheless, neither the damaged soldier-hero undergoing a quest for the resurrection of their honor and the validation of their masculine purpose (Price, 2005: 90); nor the agentic soldier-hero on a quest to create "American cultural primacy" through "heroic masculine violence" (McClancy, 2013: 51) necessarily sound purely or overwhelmingly positive. The literature does not seem to cast Vietnam veterans in a good/unimpeachable light. Whereas, the frames found in my research did cast Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in just such a light. This shift towards referencing veterans as deserving indicates an increase in sympathy for veterans from the period of the Vietnam War to the period of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Explaining the reasons for any such sympathy shift is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, such reasons would likely fall into one of two categories—(1) a change in the context surrounding the two conflicts and/or (2) a change in the social norms concerning veterans.

The two intended potential benefits of this project were to provide insight into a population whose social construction is not well covered in the interactionist sociological



literature and to provide results that could potentially be used for praxis. I feel that one insight of the study is a picture of veterans as deserving and competent yet suffering their fair shares of hardships. According to Loseke (2003), this should mean that the public views veterans as highly sympathetic social actors since the public seems to see veterans as both undergoing hardship and as good. Another insight provided by the study is that it is fairly problematic to publicly oppose veterans.

Given the sympathetic picture of veterans described above, the climate for ‘selling’ to legislators and to the public at large, policy remedies for veterans’ problems should be good. After all it should be easier to sell the idea of helping individuals who are sympathetic than it would be to sell people on helping others that they find to be unsympathetic. Despite this seemingly auspicious climate, it would be ideal to have a better idea of why the public might be framing veterans as deserving and as unhealthy/well. If much of the public’s current sympathy for veterans derives from the VA scandals, then policy solutions should be messaged such that they deal with eliminating the scandals. Also, if the scandals are a driver of sympathy for veterans, then activists should push policy solutions when scandals are being discussed in the public sphere.

Of course, deservingness and sympathy are not enough by themselves. It takes well-orchestrated actions to get things done. The passage of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 is an example of how even a bitterly partisan and gridlocked Congress can act for the well-being of veterans. But just how much can deservingness and

sympathy motivate the sort of day-in-day-out, complicated management of an efficient bureaucracy that is required to fix the delivery of services and benefits to veterans?

There are some important limitations to consider. The period reviewed here was short—about a month and a half. As this was a qualitative project, variation in framing over time is not something that I could reliably measure. This project could be a good jumping off point for a quantitative project about the framing of veterans. It might be important to know whether veterans were framed as deserving as often when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan first started and/or several years before the wars as they were in January and February of 2013. It might also be important to know whether veterans were framed as unhealthy/unwell as often when the wars first started and/or before the wars as they were at the beginning of 2013. Research questions for such a follow-up project might include: (1) Is the framing of veterans as deserving stable or does it increase or decrease from peace time to war time? (2) Is there variation in the framing of veterans as deserving the longer that the nation is at war? (3) When VA scandals occur, does the framing of veterans as unhealthy/unwell increase in states where those scandals occur? and (4) As more scandals occur, does the framing of veterans as unhealthy/unwell increase across the nation in correlation with the scandals? With answers to those four questions, we can then seek to try to answer the following question—If veterans are in fact generally seen as sympathetic, is it more the facts of war and of multiple deployments that are driving that perception or is it more the VA scandals that are leading to that perception?

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