



Memories of War: Sources of Vietnam Veteran Pro- and Antiwar Political Attitudes¹

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The sources of political attitudes are among the most studied phenomena of modern politics. Moving away from the traditional focus on party systems, the demographic characteristics of voters, or political socialization, I consider instead how memory and narrative shape political consciousness. Specifically, I focus on how culturally sanctioned memories of warfare influence the political attitudes of 24 Vietnam veterans. I compare two groups of Vietnam veterans who went to Vietnam in support of the war and political status quo, but who returned with opposing attitudes toward war. How can we understand these contrasting outcomes? Specifically, how do memories of war shape political attitudes? Antiwar veterans relate similar narratives of having their idealistic views of war challenged and experiencing a major rethinking of their support when they learn the true nature of warfare. On the other hand, pro-war veterans share a patterned narrative of indifference rather than idealism when describing their continued support of the war and political status quo after they return from Vietnam. I conclude by arguing that memory and narrative are an important mechanism for shaping political attitudes.

KEY WORDS: cognition; memory; narrative; political attitudes; Vietnam veterans; war.

INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL ATTITUDES

The sources of political attitudes are among the most studied phenomena of modern politics. Sociologists and others studying political attitudes generally focus on three sources that shape political opinions: party alignments, sociodemographic characteristics, and political socialization. Thus, commonly identified sources of political attitudes include the way in which political parties shape issues and realign the electorate (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Aldrich 2000; Baldassari and Gelman 2008; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Chen, Mickey, and Van Houweling 2008; Key 1955; Mayhew 2002); demographic characteristics

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such as race, class, gender, religion, age, and educational level (Greeley and Hout 2006; Howell and Day 2000; Walters 2001; Watts, 1999); or “socializing agents” such as the family, friends, or schools (Bender 1967; Hyman 1959; Torney-Purta 2000; Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, and Barber 2008). What is missing from these dominant perspectives, however, are the ways in which memory and narrative shape political attitudes. In this article, I focus specifically on how Vietnam veteran political activists remember their participation in war. Studies of political attitudes have yet to examine closely the way in which remembering major life-stressors such as war influence the political views of participants. I address this lacuna by examining the patterned ways in which veterans account for their participation in the Vietnam War and use those accounts to make sense of their positions *vis-à-vis* war upon returning home. Investigating the personal accounts of Vietnam veterans provides a new lens through which we can better understand how competing narratives of past events shape political attitudes.

In this study, I examine how two groups of veterans from the same generational cohort, exposed to the same major political event—the Vietnam War—emerged with sharply contrasting patterned accounts about their participation in the war. Despite their shared historical experience, contemporary interviews find Vietnam veterans starkly divided: one group supports the ideals of the United States’ war in Vietnam and its goal of preventing the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia, while the other group opposes the intervention of the United States into Vietnam and now avidly opposes war as an instrument of foreign policy. How can we understand these contrasting outcomes? How do veterans from the same generational cohort, even serving in the same branches of the military, come to embrace opposing political attitudes toward the same war? Specifically, what role do culturally sanctioned accounts of warfare play in shaping the political dispositions of both war supporters and antiwar activists?

My findings suggest that the political impact of experiencing warfare is mediated by broader cultural debates over contrasting meanings of war. Memories of participating in warfare are reproduced through cultural systems that shape patterned narratives of war in the following ways: (1) veterans who oppose the war describe themselves as prior war supporters who held an idealistic view of war, but maintain that the experience of guerilla warfare posed a moral dilemma that led to a reevaluation of political attitudes; whereas (2) those who support the war describe an absence of strong preexisting ideals before, during, and after their participation in warfare, a narrative that validates their support for the war after they returned from Vietnam.

In this article, I explore the patterned accounts constructed by Vietnam veterans describing three stages of their experience: before, during, and after their tour in Vietnam. I first analyze their retrospective reconstructions of their political dispositions prior to entering the military, followed by how some describe a shift in consciousness toward government and military service after participating in a guerilla war, and finally how veterans then reconcile their post-Vietnam orientations in support or opposition toward the war. I conclude by arguing that the connections between individual accounts and broader cultural debates are

important mechanisms for shaping political attitudes. Before proceeding with the competing narratives of pro- and antiwar Vietnam veterans, the following section outlines the ways in which sociology and political science traditionally examine political attitudes.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Attempts to explain political attitudes gravitate around three major bodies of literature. These areas of study range from macro theories such as political realignment theory (Brooks 2000; Chen et al. 2008; Clubb, Flanagan, and Zingales 1990; Stimson 2004), which examines broad partisan shifts, to demographic influences such as race, class, gender, and age (Bartels 2008; Black and Black 2003; Brewer and Stonecash 2001; Clawson and Clark 2003; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Jewett 2001; Manza and Brooks 1999; Stonecash, Brewer, and Peterson 2000; Walters 2001), or micro theories such as political socialization theory, which analyzes the development of the individual political identities that are central to mass political behavior (Conover and Searing 2000; Gimpel and Celeste 2008; Gimpel, Celeste, and Schuknecht 2003; Haste and Torney-Purta 1992; McFarland and Reuben 2006; Niemi and Hepburn 1995; Plutzer 2002; Sherrod 2003). Political realignment theory, demographic characteristics, and political socialization are useful for understanding traditional partisan politics or voting patterns, but they do little to capture the process through which political attitudes are constructed through memories of past political events.

This study attempts to open a space for the role of agency and subjectivity among political actors rather than reducing them to mere reflections of large political structures. Departing from the above traditional theories of political attitudes, the following work positions the connection between individual accounts and broader cultural debates at the center of analysis. Here, I focus specifically on the political event of warfare, and how patterned narratives compete for political legitimacy over the Vietnam War. In sum, I argue that a focus on competing political narratives within the field of political attitudes will ultimately provide a more refined understanding of political outcomes.

Remembering Major Political Events

Major political events that take place during formative years such as adolescence and early adulthood have significant influence on the emergence of political orientations (Rintala 1968). Developmental psychologists consider early adulthood a “critical period” in the formation of worldviews (Erikson 1968) and major political events, such as warfare, mark the “collective memories” (Halbwachs 1980 [1950]) of those who share direct and indirect experiences with the event. Thus, the age at which personal experience intersects with major political

“events” and “changes” (Schuman and Scott 1989) carries significant influence on the formation of political views.

The veterans who participated in this study deployed to Vietnam at roughly the same age, at a “critical period” of early adulthood when political attitudes and beliefs are most malleable.³ Therefore, going to Vietnam was a particularly meaningful experience that collectively shaped the worldviews of the cohort of young people who were sent to fight. But the meaning that they draw from their wartime experiences are adopted and adapted differently, and have evolved into competing memories and narratives over the moral justification of the Vietnam War. Vietnam veterans who participate in political activism upon returning home are particularly engaging because they emerge as “moral entrepreneurs” (Shils 1966) who give collective shape and voice to the memorialization of the war. In other words, although only a handful of veterans who participated in the war may go on to participate in political activism, they exercise powerful influence over how the events of that war are translated into the collective memory of Americans, particularly when the moral justification for fighting in Vietnam remains open ended.

The Vietnam War differed from previous wars due to its political and moral controversy and because it ended in defeat. Conversely, it was similar to previous wars because young men and women were called to participate and uphold “traditional virtues of self-sacrifice, courage, loyalty, and honor” (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991: 381). To date, Americans remain ambivalent about the Vietnam War and how the war should be remembered. Was Vietnam a morally just or unjust war? Did the war result in victory or defeat? Are Vietnam veterans heroes or deviants (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991)? For veterans in particular, their collective memories of fighting in war work themselves out in social contexts shaped over time by social, political, and cultural debates over the war’s legitimacy. Thus, only by accounting for the patterned ways in which veterans describe their experiences before, during, and after participating in the war (Orbuch 1997), did I come to understand how the development of their political attitudes were shaped by opposing liberal and conservative political cultures of the time.

Political and cultural debates over the moral justification of the Vietnam War arose with the coming of age of an unprecedented number of young people who began to question national and international policy (Light 1988). The level of social activism that developed through the 1960s and into the 1970s arguably redefined the cultural identity of America (Anderson 1995). At the same time, tensions over support or opposition to the Vietnam War were due in part to the complex ways in which the war was rationalized politically and fought militarily (Mueller 1971). As the rate at which casualties in Vietnam accumulated, and local communities began to feel the human impact of war, individuals grew to question political justifications for continuing to fight in Vietnam (Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997). Thus, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, young

³ Veterans in this study were between the ages of 18 and 25 when they served in Vietnam.

people deployed to Vietnam within the context of broader political, cultural, and social debates about war.

In Vietnam, many veterans in this study developed two identities as a means of survival, distinguishing who they were during the war from who they were before the war (Shay 1994). Experiencing warfare required them to focus on becoming someone else, doing their job, and then leaving. It was only later, through discussion, self-reflection, and triggering events such as the Iraq War that veterans in this study describe experiencing an “awakening” of the “truth” (DeGloma 2010) and retrospectively identified their participation in the Vietnam War as just or unjust. Through discourse “experience and memory are enabled, shaped, and structured” and veterans socially reconstruct their experiences of warfare through institutional (religion, government, mass media, etc.) and cultural (identity, memory, experiences, etc.) processes that later shape how they think about Vietnam (Van Alphen 1999: 36). It is important to emphasize that this in no way diminishes reality or validity of the veterans’ memories, narratives, or experiences: How veterans describe and think about their experiences is very real to them, and as they argue, shapes their political outcomes. As one veteran in the study remarked, “war is metal going through flesh. There is some sobering cold reality when you take it from the theoretical to the actual. It should have some effect on you to see people die or to kill, or at least trying to kill other people, that’s a trip in itself.” Thus, how Vietnam veterans describe their memories of the past are shaped and constrained by experiences of warfare that overlap with cultural discourses concerning the war’s moral and political legitimacy.

Competing Political Narratives

The shared past experience of Vietnam veterans is believed to bind them together as a group that has undergone a significant psychological trauma under political conditions that were unfavorable to their cause (Lifton 2005 [1973]). But for veterans who have turned toward political activism, their descriptions of the “truth” about what actually happened in Vietnam, as well as their “rhetorical strategies” and “moral frameworks” (DeGloma, 2009) are similar in structure, yet vastly different in terms of content and outcome. For example, the temporal order in which veterans construct their prewar expectations, wartime experiences, and postwar transitions follow patterned narratives and accounts of combat events that fit one of two culturally sanctioned but diametrically opposed arguments (Bruner 1987) either in support for or opposition to the Vietnam War. Veterans’ disparate accounts of war and combat in particular follow a set of selective narrative rules (Davis 2005) that structure their experiences in a particular way that shapes their pro- or antiwar political views.

Surviving a traumatic past experience involves a process of identity making that includes telling a communal story about how veterans’ participation in the Vietnam War shaped their political outcomes. Although the particulars of their

experiences differ, their communal pro- or antiwar story acts as a “temporary scaffold” on which veterans “add their story fragments as building blocks of the communal story” (Cain 1991: 229). Through the process of pro- or antiwar story frames that are culturally sanctioned, veterans “internalize each attribute, or piece of the puzzle, and complete the construction of their new master identity” (Kidron 2004: 533). As a result, they identify a causal sequence that helps to define how they developed their pro- or antiwar political attitudes and behaviors. Again, this is not to say that the experiences described by the veterans in this study did not take place, but rather that their stories have a cultural purpose and have become a sanctioned, patterned way to account for their return from war and to later position themselves as pro- or antiwar political activists.

Unlike previous conventional wars such as World War II, the Vietnam War was a guerrilla war in which it was not always clear who the enemy was, and exposure to violence was not necessarily through direct combat.⁴ Thus, the stress of war in a guerrilla campaign differs from that experienced in conventional conflicts, and combat exposure is not the sole indicator of war trauma. The case of war trauma in Vietnam is multidimensional and includes a combination of combat experience, the witnessing of abusive violence, and participation in abusive violence (Frey-Wouters and Laufer 1986). Traumatic events in Vietnam have an important role in the construction of veterans’ collective memories of warfare and their identity as political activists who have experienced the chaos of a particular kind of war that has become increasingly common, as recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have made clear.

DATA AND METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach for assessing how memories of major political events and life stressors influence political attitudes. The study also makes a significant contribution to existing research on memory work that emphasizes the cultural meanings of historical “sites” and “symbols” (Klein 2000; Nora 1996; Olick 1999; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; Wuthnow 1987), by expanding such inquiry to include personal narratives of warfare. The study draws on in-depth interviews, which are arguably “better able than standardized survey instruments to represent the rich, complex, interwoven reports ...with populations who are facing major life stressors” (Orbuch 1997: 461). The 24 participants are Vietnam veterans whose service ranged from 1964 to 1972. From the total sample, 62% enlisted, 38% were drafted, and 71% experienced combat. All participants are white males with the exception of one African-American male antiwar activist. I interviewed participants from 2008 to 2009 at homes, coffee shops, restaurants, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) halls, and bars. Interviews were composed of open-ended questions that were tape

⁴ For more on this distinction between “conventional” and guerilla wars, see Frey-Wouters and Laufer 1986; Hironaka 2005; Kestnbaum 2009; Roxborough 2006, 2007.

recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, providing the data used for the textual analysis. Using qualitative data analysis software, I employed issue-focused coding (Weiss 1994) of narratives to capture the contingent process through which veterans recounted their Vietnam experience and its effects. Finally, pseudonyms are used in the final report to protect the identity of individual participants.

My focus is on the conflicting political meaning veterans draw from their participation in war and the “formulaic patterned ways” they explain their subsequent participation in pro- or antiwar political activism (Degloma 2009: 108). Thus, half of my purposeful sample of veteran activists report supporting the war, while the other half report opposing it. Those who oppose the war do so by participating in or leading antiwar rallies in military fatigues, as well as participating in veteran antiwar organizations such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Meanwhile, war supporters participate in counterdemonstrations organized by pro-war veteran organizations such as the Gathering of Eagles (GOE). I solicited interviews via each respective organization website and by attending anti-Iraq War demonstrations where there was a significant presence of both antiwar veterans and pro-war veteran counterdemonstrators. Moreover, my own position as a former Staff Sergeant in the Marine Corps provided me with credibility among the veteran community across the political divide. Many of the interviewees in my sample are wary of interviewers due to their experiences with journalists “misrepresenting” their views, but once they learned of my military background, all of my interviewees were much more open and willing to talk about their views. It is worth noting, however, that trust was by no means automatic even then, as politically active veterans are skeptical of people claiming to have served in the military due to numerous historical incidents of people lying about this fact.⁵

I selected a purposeful sample of Vietnam veteran activists with contrasting political orientations in order to understand the process through which individuals arrive at divergent political outcomes (Gusfield 1963; Jasper 1997; Luker 1984). Veterans who are not politically active and uphold less “extreme” attitudes toward the Vietnam War are not selected for comparison because sampling from starkly contrasting cases of pro- and antiwar political behavior enables me to identify common themes in the data that are sensitive to patterned ways of remembering.

To understand how veterans draw meaning from their past, interviewees were asked questions about their experiences and worldviews before, during, and after the war. I am less concerned with the specificity or accuracy of accounts than with the process of how different culturally patterned memories of war shape political attitudes. Nonetheless, the participants in this study were able to remember and discuss extraordinary details about their experience in Vietnam and about combat in particular. Witnessing and participating in abusive violence in Vietnam is deeply embedded in their minds, and is identified by

⁵ In one instance, a veteran requested that I bring my DD214 military discharge papers as a condition for conducting the interview in order to “prove” I was telling the truth about my own military background.

the veterans' themselves as the cornerstone of their thinking about war and politics. While they agree on the significance of their shared experience, however, contested definitions of patriotism, honor, loyalty, duty, and country soon emerge in their narratives, constituting "mnemonic battles" over the moral justification and ongoing legacy of the Vietnam War.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vietnam: Before, During, and After the War

Vietnam veterans in this study recall growing up playing soldier. Their fathers took them to Army surplus stores to purchase canteens and helmets so that they could "play war" in the front yard with their friends. They describe their childhoods as enveloped in symbols of war, from veteran parades to monuments at local parks commemorating the valor of men who fought in World War II. They were children of the 1950s who experienced economic prosperity far beyond that of prior generations. The "happy days" of the 1950s were attributed to success in World War II, and the military man became an icon of American political values, freedom, and democracy. However, as the "baby boom" generation entered young adulthood during the 1960s, they were also exposed to new forms of music, cultural expression, feeling, speaking, and dressing that challenged this militaristic status quo. The escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965 and the institution of the lottery draft in 1969 threatened the opportunity to participate in what is now commonly known as the "hippie" counterculture. Some young men wanted to grow their hair long and take part in a seductive youth culture experimenting with sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Nevertheless, when the drums of the Vietnam War began to beat, regardless of whether they enlisted or were drafted, many felt a moral responsibility to fulfill an obligation of service to country, similar to that of the previous World War II generation. They anticipated a war similar to the media's portrayal of World War II: conventional warfare, heroism in battle, and dying with honor or returning home to women lining the streets welcoming American troops. Instead, they faced a guerilla war, hatred from locals, and the harsh reality of dying in combat. And, perhaps most upsetting of all, upon returning, they encountered a society unsympathetic to their experiences. They were forced to file away their emotions, get over it, and move on with their lives.

Many veterans do describe simply "getting over it," and remaining strong in their conviction that the war was a "just cause," vital to preserving democracy and the American way of life. But other Vietnam veterans argue that they returned completely opposed to the war. For them, healing their emotional scars meant opening the mental file cabinet and throwing their experience of war into the public eye. They refused to suppress their negative views toward the war, and political activism became their form of expression. But how and why did the Vietnam War engender such opposing political attitudes among veterans? To

answer these questions, we must begin with their individual political views toward the military and Vietnam before going to war.

Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You: World War II and the Baby Boom Generation

Vietnam War veterans recall a strong sense of duty inherited from their parents' generation and the broader collective memory of World War II. For many, their father or uncles either fought in World War II, or their parents were first-generation immigrants who developed a deep appreciation for the United States. As a result, their political behavior was influenced by a profound sense of patriotism and pro-military attitude throughout the Cold War. However, the 1960s hippie counterculture also shaped their political views. These two diametrically opposed conservative and liberal political cultures simultaneously strengthened their pro-military views, but also planted the potential seed for incipient antimilitary attitudes.

John F. Kennedy's famous inaugural speech in 1961, "Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You," resonated in the hearts and minds of many of the veterans in this study. This speech, along with the conservative ideology of the 1950s, instilled in many young "baby boomers" a strong sense of patriotism, duty, and pride for their country. It gave young men a powerful feeling of America as the best country in the world. Indeed, this post-World War II generation did experience economic and social freedoms far beyond the previous generation. However, children of the 1950s were also taught that this way of life was threatened by another "superpower"—communist Russia. Brian, a supporter of the Vietnam War recalls growing up in this environment:

I grew up in the '50s, and in my grammar school we would have drills hiding under our desks because the Russians might come across the poles with atomic weapons, so we were reasonably conscious that something was going on in the world.

This "threat" from communism against American democracy instilled a very conservative ideology among young men across the country. Many embraced American anticommunist rhetoric, became very pro-military, and developed a deep love of country. For example, Sam, who returned from Vietnam to become an antiwar veteran and member of VVAW, described his pro-American attitudes during his childhood in Florida:

My stepfather was a cop, and he was a member of the John Birch Society, and they had meetings at our house, and there was a flag that flew in front of the house. And my real father had been in the Army Air Corps in WWII. My general opinion was that I was very lucky to be in the best country in the world, that everybody wanted to be like us, that we knew everything, that we were the smartest, and that we were the best, and that we had the right to make everyone else like us.

Similarly, other Vietnam veterans in this study recall their father or uncles having fought in World War II, watching and reading Audie Murphie movies

and books about combat, and supporting conservative senator and Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater in 1964. For example, Dave, who later became a member of VVAW, explained to me in his Texan drawl that when he joined the Marine Corps, he was ready to go “kill a commie for Christ.” Dave describes himself as being ultraconservative and he actually worked on the Goldwater campaign as a member of the Teenage Republicans Society. However, he also recalls being terribly confused because, at the same time, he was memorizing the lyrics to his favorite Bob Dylan songs, even though they opposed his own conservative political views. Confusion about liberal versus conservative political ideologies was common for many veterans who later turned against the war when they returned from Vietnam. They report growing up in a highly pro-war conservative environment, but the hippie counterculture of the 1960s also had a tremendous influence on their political attitudes despite their idealistic views toward the Vietnam War and spreading American democracy to Southeast Asia.

In contrast, veterans who later became supporters of the Vietnam War did not report strong feelings either way about politics or the war before they entered the military. To these veterans, participating in the Vietnam War was “just something that you had to do” as a young man. They felt that the World War II generation of men fought for their country and now it was their turn “to do their part.” For example, this is true for Alex, a combat Vietnam veteran from Michigan who was drafted into the Army in 1967. He explained to me the way in which he viewed his duty to serve in Vietnam before being drafted:

Everybody wanted to be in the military, it was just one of those things that was cool, to just get off of the farm and go into the military. I never really thought too much about it until the draft notice came, then I'm going, wow, this is for real. But, it was just something people did. It was your duty to serve I guess, at that time. I never really gave it any thought or anything. Like I said, when I got the orders to go over there I just knew I had to go.

Alex's reported prewar expectations conform with those of many pro-war veterans whom I interviewed. They were raised in the pro-military environment of the 1950s and early 1960s. They learned to be patriotic and grew up with a favorable view toward the military due to the success of World War II, as well as the dramatization of heroic battles in Hollywood films. However, they report that before they entered the military, they did not have strong political views toward the Vietnam War. Going to Vietnam was simply part of fulfilling a sense of duty that they were taught as boys. To them, going to war was not political, it was simply “something young men do.”

The political attitudes of veterans before deploying to Vietnam illustrate the effects of political socialization. All of the veterans in this study formed their predispositions toward the military through “primary” and “secondary” agents of socialization such as parents, school, and the media. However, to understand how different ways of remembering major life-stressors shape political attitudes, the next section explores patterned memories of experiencing warfare that reportedly changed, or minimally affected veterans' political views toward war.

Heat, Dirt, and Mud: Slogging Through the Jungles of Vietnam

The first experience that veterans report upon arriving in Vietnam is the unbearable heat and humidity. When soldiers and Marines arrived to fight in Vietnam, they expected to “hit the beach,” in some sort of amphibious assault similar to what they had witnessed in World War II combat films. Instead, they arrived by airplane onto military bases. They walked onto the tarmac into a scorching heat wave and a completely unexpected environment. They were told in basic training that the enemy wore black pajamas and conical hats, but they quickly learned that this was the attire of most Vietnamese. They were prepared to fight a conventional war in which the goal was to move from South Vietnam to North Vietnam, capture the capital city of Hanoi, and win the war. But instead they encountered guerilla warfare, conducted by an enemy who lived among the people and who employed “hit and run” guerilla strategies.

Veterans who describe going to war with idealistic views toward spreading American democracy in Vietnam also report having very high expectations regarding America’s ability to fight against a “weaker” enemy. Sam, now an anti-war veteran, recalls graduation from Marine Corps boot camp as the proudest day of his life. When I asked Sam whether he considered himself “gung-ho” during this time period, he replied that “gung-ho” would be putting it mildly. He was so proud of being a Marine at the time of his boot camp graduation that, he explains, he would have reenlisted for 20 years if given the opportunity. He arrived in Vietnam ready to win the war in 6 months. However, the experience of combat in Vietnam quickly shifted his views regarding the glory of war. He fervently described to me his first combat experience, and seeing his friend Maine killed while on guard duty:

Everything erupted from dead quiet to a fucking roar. You could see them. I noticed on the post in the right front, which was the post that Maine was on, I could see the Viet Cong on top of the post shooting down at the Marines. I couldn’t fire across the compound because I needed to fire at the people that were in front of me, and I just continually fired There came a time when the shooting stopped. . . . When daylight came, an infantry company came and they took over security around the base and it was our job to bring the dead bodies forward. . . . I pulled the ponchos off of the dead Marines to see who they were, and one of them was Maine.

Sam told me that when he saw his friend Maine’s dead body he experienced a profound awareness of his situation. He realized that this was for real and that it was the enemy’s job to kill him. This was not a game where he could “call time-out and start over.” He told himself that he needed to begin paying attention, and “get my head out of my ass, ‘cause I’m in really deep shit.” When Sam realized that he was attacked by South Vietnamese (Viet Cong) instead of North Vietnamese, his sense of knowing who the enemy was became blurred and he was introduced to the unconventional tactics and stress of guerilla warfare. As a result, Sam reports transitioning from a motivated “gung-ho” Marine who was ready to fight the regular North Vietnamese Army, help free the South Vietnamese, and spread American democracy, to a bitter and angry human being who learned to hate all of the Vietnamese. He stated:

I made the decision that day that I was going to be ruthless and that I wouldn't give any of them a chance, and that I would just kill every fucking one of them that I got, and that I was going to get them back for what they did to us. If they were Vietnamese they were my enemy. . . . We were sent on patrols to follow the blood trails, and I came across a man wearing black pajamas, a gray beard, he's an old guy and he's hoeing in the fucking rice paddies, and I said to him where's the VC, which way did they go, and he said *cnh viec*, and that meant I don't know what you're talking about, but I didn't know what it meant, and I said where's the VC! and he gave that answer again, and I pulled out my knife and I slit his throat.

Disillusionment about the glory of war affected many Vietnam veterans who report holding high regard for the war and expected to participate in heroic battles similar to what they had seen in World War II films. Thus, the most patriotic and “gung-ho” veterans in this study are also now antiwar veterans who report experiencing a major shift in their views toward war when they learned there was nothing glorious or heroic about combat. In practice, veterans argue that fighting in a war is about “becoming someone else” in order to cope with the stress and chaos of warfare. In addition, antiwar veterans, in particular, report feeling like pawns for self-interested senior officers who were more concerned with their careers and Vietnamese body counts than about the safety of individual soldiers.

Freddy, now an antiwar veteran, believed that America was the best country in the world and joined the Marine Corps to help the South Vietnamese fight against communism. He reports being so “gung-ho” that during boot camp he asked his drill instructor if he could request orders to Vietnam if he was assigned elsewhere. Freddy was soon slogging through the jungles of Vietnam with an infantry unit that was constantly in combat. Similar to Sam, Freddy explains with deep passion an experience in Vietnam that challenged his idealistic views toward the glory of war. Here, he describes a major combat operation in which his two friends, Michael and Danny, were killed trying to save him:

Michael was sitting there knowing that this wasn't going to be a fire fight, this was going to be huge, and he knew it. He wouldn't talk to me. The only thing he said as he pointed at that helicopter was there's that fucking colonel. Now I understand what he was saying. We were being used as bait for his career. And that war was fought by body count. There was a North Vietnamese Army regiment there just watching us get off those helicopters. And they had it all set up. And the colonel was more than willing to drop us in there as I look back. . . . We were all pinned down and everybody is just getting killed. And I got up; we were on a line, all the screaming was going on. I was going to my left because somebody was dying. It's just what you do. And I want to make it clear that it had nothing to do with being a Marine, it had nothing to do with movies. You're human beings at that point. When I got up, I got shot dead smack in the stomach. And I go back, and one by one, Danny first and Michael second. They crawled over, and tried to stop the bleeding. And Danny got killed on top of me. And Michael came next. Shoved Danny, straddled me, and got killed. But he must have been killed at the instant he got that bandage tied because he stopped the bleeding enough. Next thing I know I'm being drug out on a poncho by these fucking amazing human beings who would run into a meat grinder like that to pull people out.

The experience of war for Sam and Freddy are representative of antiwar veterans in this study who report entering the military with profound conservative ideologies of patriotism, trust in government, and what they refer to now as

“American arrogance.” They report that the experience of fighting in Vietnam created an immense shift in their standpoint toward war. For them, the war changed from being about patriotism, stopping communism, and spreading American democracy, to brute survival and killing the Vietnamese. In short, the veterans who describe being the most intensely pro-war before deployment had the most invested in a particular set of expectations, and when those expectations were betrayed, they also describe experiencing the most profound transformation. But if the Vietnam War was such a negative experience, then why didn’t all Vietnam veterans turn against the war? How do veterans who continue to view the Vietnam War as just and who identify as war supporters narrate their experiences?

Supporters of the Vietnam War report growing up in a very pro-military cultural environment during the 1950s, but holding less idealistic views toward the war. They describe their parents as conservative, and state that the country in general was conservative during this period. Pro-war veterans report that they did not enter the military to be “gung-ho,” rather they simply viewed their military service as “a given fact of life” for young men. For example, Brian recalls joining the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program at Arizona State University because he could not otherwise afford college tuition. Interestingly, his father had served in World War II and told him that the glory of war was a myth. Brian thus expected the experience of war to be “horrible,” but still figured that “it was just his turn to go.” Brian arrived in Vietnam in 1970 as an Army intelligence officer trained in the Vietnamese language, which allowed him to have daily and constant contact with Vietnamese village people. The following is one representative event of many that had a strong impact on Brian:

I had to console a Vietnamese boy who saw the VC shoot his father in the head. You can’t get any lower than that. You can’t be any more angered, heartbroken, disgusted, fed up, you just can’t take it anymore, you won’t take it anymore, that was one of the more memorable ones, but things like that happened too often for me. You have your objectives now, which you can verify and document and put together in a coherent argument that says yes we had a reason for being there, yes we’re winning even though it was poorly done. Then there’s the emotional thing. People want to dismiss emotions as not being part of the clinical equation of war, but I’m here to tell you that if you don’t understand emotions you cannot understand Vietnam. That was one of the things that pushed me over the brink and in my own mind I said screw it, if I could, I would nuke Hanoi right now. I would, you bastards. . . . And stuff like that happened regularly.

Unlike the antiwar veterans quoted above, the Vietnam experience that resonates most with Brian, and that reinforced his support for the war, is not one of direct combat. Brian argues that he did not go to Vietnam with an idealistic view toward war, and although he experienced numerous “horrific” incidents, he describes his experience in Vietnam in a very accepting way. Moreover, unlike veterans who argue that their experiences taught them to oppose the war, Brian reports that his experiences taught him the opposite, and he learned that “evil exists in this world.” According to Brian, before he deployed to Southeast Asia, he truly believed that people could sit down and talk in order to settle disputes. However, he argues that his experiences in Vietnam taught him that with some

people you cannot sit down and talk out differences, and he concluded that at times there are no other alternatives to war.

Veterans who report deploying to Vietnam with less than idealistic pro-war views, believing instead that going to war was “just something you do as a young man,” share a similar pattern of describing their experiences of warfare in a remarkably neutral manner. For example, Alex, who earlier described feeling indifferent about the war before going to Vietnam, said the chaos of war continually caused him to rethink his purpose for being there, but in general, his support for the war was unyielding. He explained:

You couldn't trust anybody, even the little kids, because they would throw hand grenades at you or something, so then I'm thinking that we shouldn't even be over here. Then one time I went on a secret mission, I guess where we were not supposed to be in Laos. They had our [American] prisoners there. And we got there, but they left. The fires are still hot, and I got to see the prison camp, how they were, the stakes and stuff. Then you get really bitter on how they treat the prisoners. We have to treat the prisoners nice, and seeing how these guys [American prisoners] were treated with holes in the ground with bamboo spikes where they had to stand up. Then you turn bitter again and say we gotta win this one.

Although Alex was in an infantry unit that experienced numerous combat engagements, and went on secret missions into Laos, he describes his experiences to me in a very matter-of-fact manner.

Similarly, Alfredo, a VFW post commander in Michigan joined the Army because he supported the status quo, which at the time was in support of the war; nonetheless, after arriving in Vietnam, Alfredo also developed doubts about the possibility of victory. But like several other Vietnam veterans who report not going to Vietnam with idealistic views toward the war, he argues that his experiences minimally affected his support for the war. Alfredo is the son of first-generation immigrants and went to Vietnam to “fulfill his moral obligation as an American.” He believes—as do other pro-war veterans—that problems in Vietnam were due to negligent politicians who failed to fully support the troops and conceded to the antiwar movement, and that the war could have been won if soldiers on the ground had been given the appropriate resources and opportunity to win.

The political attitudes of veterans in this study were influenced by the cultural and political conservative/liberal dichotomy of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Converse and Schuman 1970; Lunch and Sperlich 1979; Rosenberg, Verba, and Converse 1970; Wright 1972). Pro- and antiwar discourses already existed through which veterans could make sense of their experiences. But it is their memories of actually being in Vietnam that provide the substance, so to speak, that is filtered through those lenses and made meaningful in the process. The veterans construct distinct, formulaic narratives of how their experiences in Vietnam influenced their pro- or antiwar political development. Veterans who report going to Vietnam strongly in support of the war recall experiencing a significant shift in their ideological political thinking that turned them against the war. In contrast, those who report holding less idealistic views toward the war before their deployment argue that they returned with a greater pro-war stance.

Hence, for both pro- and antiwar Vietnam veterans, their current political views are firmly rooted in their memories of warfare, and arguably became even more profound when they returned from Vietnam to a country where the war's meaning was fiercely contested.

Coming Home: Veterans Reflect on Their Participation in the War

The military is often viewed as one of the most authoritarian and conservative organizations in American society. Central to this argument is the "common mind-set" of soldiers, which tends to be ultraconservative, and organized into a rigid hierarchy of loyalty and obedience (Huntington 1957). Nonetheless, interviews of Vietnam veterans demonstrate that complete homogeneity of a military mind-set among all soldiers and veterans is seldom the case. Here, I describe how veterans turned toward political activism after returning from Vietnam.

Sometimes with mud from Vietnam still under their fingernails, some Vietnam veterans jumped directly into the antiwar movement of the 1960s. Freddy was discharged from the Army in 1968 and was one of the first returning Vietnam veteran antiwar protesters. He was still in the Army when he returned from Vietnam in 1967, and claims that when he returned he became an antiwar protester who was "raising hell about the war." As a soldier, he questioned officers about the war and immediately upon his military discharge he began to participate in antiwar protests. At the same time, other Vietnam veterans were also becoming politically organized across the country, and in 1967, a group of six veterans formed the VVAW at a peace demonstration in New York City. Membership grew as an increasing number of veterans returning from Vietnam began to protest the war. A series of antiwar demonstrations followed including the Winter Soldier Investigation, and protests at Kent State University and Dewey Canyon III. Sam, who earlier recounted being fervently pro-war and described slitting the throat of a Vietnamese farmer, explained to me his transition from pro-war veteran to antiwar activist. After returning from Vietnam, Sam attended the University of Florida, as he describes it, to meet girls and smoke pot, but instead, he found himself reading history, philosophy, and antiwar literature that influenced his way of thinking. Nevertheless, he remained pro-military and would wear his U.S. Marine Corps T-shirt to antiwar rallies to pick fights with protesters. He described to me the first time that he began to reflect on the atrocities he committed in Vietnam at the Winter Soldier Investigation:

They start asking me questions [about the war] and I'm totally open and totally honest. And I say well "Gee" I never thought about that before. Then who I am starts changing because the questions they're asking me, they're asking me to think about how I felt about certain things that I hadn't thought about before, and this transition starts happening to me. . . . There were Vietnamese there, and I started listening to the Vietnamese tell their stories and then it turns out that I'm an empathetic person. I didn't realize that, but because growing up in a neighborhood where I'm the only Jew, we're real poor, I'm getting jumped all the time for killing Jesus. So I had empathy for what it's like to be picked on when you don't deserve it. But for some reason that empathy didn't register in Vietnam

because after that first battle it was just survival and there can be no empathy. . . . And then there was the stuff from Howard Zinn's book and other stuff that I read. It was sort of like pieces to a puzzle.

During the war, many veterans such as Sam were unable to develop a political stance because as combatants they needed to employ mechanisms for surviving that simplified their role as either "subjects" of the war who played an active role in the event, or "objects" of the war who underwent the event passively (Van Alphen 1999). However, after returning from Vietnam, and reflecting on their experience as they encountered conflicting discourses, attended Winter Soldier panels, and had conversations with other veterans, family members, friends, and counselors, some veterans were able to develop narratives of their past and current experiences through which they forged a new sense of self. And for some veterans, this rethinking evolved into political action.

Other veterans did not actively engage with discourses about the war or discuss it extensively with others; instead, they became politically dormant when they returned from Vietnam. However, for some of these veterans, the Iraq War in 2003 triggered memories of the past that compelled them to discuss their views toward wars both past and present. These veterans had stayed away from politics when they returned from Vietnam, and attempted to "pick up where they left off" by going back to school, finding jobs, getting married, and starting families. Engaging in politics was far beyond the purview of veterans who were simply attempting to cope with their experience of war and readjust back into civilian life. Contrary to most accounts and, regardless of political views, all veterans in this study reported that they actually yearned to talk about their experience in Vietnam, but those who became politically dormant describe returning to an environment in which nobody wanted to hear about the war. Vietnam veterans such as Derrick explained that when he returned from Vietnam he was rejected and insulted by individuals on the political Left and Right. As a result, he explained that "after a while you don't even say you're a Vietnam veteran, you just get sick of the whole thing."

Charles is a combat Vietnam veteran who was discharged from the Army in 1971, but did not become an antiwar activist until January 2003 when the United States was preparing to invade Iraq. Charles described his own process of becoming politically active as we sat at his dining room table:

I was like a dormant volcano for all of those years. And occasionally, I would get moody or withdraw, but nothing violent. I guess it's because they were talking about the invasion of Iraq, and I watched the movie *Platoon*. And that's when the volcano erupted. It was just like holy crap. I saw those kids and I looked into their eyes and all of that stuff came back. I sat there, I was home alone, and I just sat there. I can describe it as lightning followed by thunder. I can just feel this stuff rolling through my body, and I thought, man, now what do I do with this? What do I do with this stuff? I was totally ignorant. I never watched a violent movie when I got back from the military. I never read anything about Vietnam, nothing about wars; I just didn't want to go there. . . . The next day after I saw that movie I was consumed with my ignorance because I didn't know diddly squat about anything. I was on the Internet, I don't know how many hours, and I just discovered all of this stuff. I started reading about Vietnam and found out about VVAW, read their Web site and found links there, started studying politics, the environment, why things are messed

up, all of this stuff was going through my head, I couldn't sleep at night. It just consumed me. Eventually, I formulated two questions. Why war? And why do we so proudly send our kids to kill other kids?

Charles's process of becoming politically active is representative of other veterans who remained politically dormant for many years. They relate experiencing an event or encountering some form of discourse that triggered memories of the war they had long buried. Psychologists study such processes through the rubric of "trauma." Survivors of trauma who experience a radical disruption of memory are forced to deal with the trauma through what Brison (1999) calls "speech acts of memory," whereby the individual must remake the self using narrative to work through memory and gain more control over the traces left by the traumatic experience. Moreover, it is argued that the process of suppressing the experience of war is symptomatic of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Shay 1994). But while a psychological perspective offers important insights about this process, suffering from PTSD in itself does not explain why veterans come to embrace a *particular* political stance. To understand why veterans claim identities either supporting or opposing war, we need to look to the broader social and cultural context in which their coping mechanisms occur.

Vietnam veterans who report having less idealistic views about the Vietnam War before entering the military, and believing that it was "just something you're supposed to do as a young man" are more likely to argue that they supported the war after returning from Vietnam. They report that they continued to believe in the political rationale of the "domino theory" and the containment of communism. Indeed, the supposed threat of communism during the 1960s influenced many veterans to rethink their own privileges as American citizens growing up in a democracy. Thus, they responded to Kennedy's "Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You" speech by answering the call to war. For example, Gary enlisted into the Marine Corps in 1966 because he was generally in support of the status quo, and felt guilty for not participating in the war. Similar to other current Vietnam veteran war supporters, Gary argues that he was not overly political before joining the Marines, nor was he highly "gung-ho" or idealistic about the glory of war. He simply felt an obligation to serve due to his Jesuit education that taught him to be conscious of his rights and privileges. As the son of immigrant parents, he felt that going to Vietnam was his way of fulfilling his responsibility to defend the "rights and privileges" he enjoyed as an American citizen. Similar to Charles, Gary "put Vietnam aside" for 25 years, but then became politically active during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But unlike Charles, Gary's "reawakening" has involved reaffirming his support for the ideals of the Vietnam War. Gary explained to me how the United States fulfilled its purpose in Vietnam and why the war was a "just cause":

The domino theory was in fact valid. For one thing, Cambodia and Laos did become communist. I used to live in Singapore, and the Singaporeans, Malaysians, and Thai all said the same thing. They said the North Vietnamese, the Chinese, and the Russians basically exhausted themselves in that war. They were not about to come after Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore because they had just been exhausted. Vietnam lost 1.4 million men.

There's an entire generation of women without husbands in North Vietnam. So, we basically prevented the domino theory from coming through any more than Laos and Cambodia.

Gary is enormously frustrated with the way in which subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been managed because he argues that we (the United States) failed to learn from our tactical mistakes in Vietnam. Gary believes that if the country is going to make the decision to go to war, then we should be fully prepared to commit all of our resources in order to fight and win. Similarly, Brian, another Vietnam War supporter, asserts his frustration with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He stated:

If you ever get into something like that again, do not mess around. I don't mean burn villages and all that shit. That's slop, that's undisciplined rabble. But devise an intelligent, cohesive, sophisticated strategy and implement it with brilliance. I don't think that we're doing that in Iraq or Afghanistan for that matter, the U.S. government is too clumsy.

Other supporters of the Vietnam War expressed related frustrations. For them, the Vietnam War was a "just cause" and winnable, but the government failed to implement and follow through with a strategy that would result in victory. In the case of these veterans, they argue that the experience of war reinforced a commitment to support the government during a time of war, in hopes that such support would prevent the government from wavering as it did in Vietnam.

The turn toward political activism works as a tool to help veterans reconcile their past wartime selves and behavior. Both pro- and antiwar veterans make sense of their experiences of warfare through culturally sanctioned narratives that support or oppose the Vietnam War. For antiwar veterans, the war was a highly traumatic experience through which they were betrayed by the American government. For pro-war veterans, the war called on them to fulfill their responsibility as American citizens and would have been winnable had it not been for politicians who succumbed to the antiwar movement. Thus, for both groups of veterans, the turn toward political activism remains part of a structured narrative that clearly links their experiences in Vietnam with their contemporary political attitudes.

CONCLUSION

The study of political attitudes through theories based on party alignments, demographic characteristics, and political socialization are too macro oriented to study how memories of major political events shape political attitudes. I argue that studies of political attitudes need to pay greater attention to how broader cultural debates and patterned ways of remembering influence political outcomes. In the case of Vietnam veterans, they discuss the "truth" of the war using political frameworks that oppose one another, but are both culturally and socially approved as ways of narrating the Vietnam veteran experience. Thus, the disputed "memory wars" (Davis 2005) between pro- and antiwar veterans of what actually

happened in Vietnam follow culturally sanctioned patterns of stories about warfare. While veterans' actual experiences of Vietnam differed, their stories tend to follow patterned narrative models that start with predispositions about war, turn to how experiences on the ground confirmed or contradicted those predispositions, and then draw causal links between efforts to make sense of those experiences and subsequent political ideologies and attitudes toward war.

Antiwar Vietnam veterans explain their dramatic break from the dominant political status quo of the time by citing combat events that put them sharply at odds with their prewar political beliefs. Therefore, to sustain an oppositional view, their memories of warfare follow a distinct pattern of (1) pro-war dispositions, followed by (2) a jarring combat event that (3) produced a major rethinking of their political attitudes. Similarly, patterned ways of remembering are also prevalent among pro-war veterans. They went to Vietnam as (1) a moral obligation, and experienced (2) combat events that were a "natural" part of warfare, producing (3) unwavering support for the war effort and political status quo, and reconfirming their identity as patriotic Americans. In sum, veterans who report deploying to Vietnam as highly conservative and idealistic young men argue that they underwent a profound epiphany about warfare that put them sharply at odds with their preexisting beliefs. Meanwhile, Vietnam veterans who report not holding idealistic prewar dispositions argue that their experiences of warfare validated their overall support for the war. In a sense, they already had less invested in their beliefs about the war before going to Vietnam and thus were less likely to experience any kind of radical epiphany while there. Then, upon returning and discovering a heated debate about the war at home and even hostility toward their experience, these veterans developed narratives that made sense of their continuing support for the war.

Examining how patterned ways of remembering shape political attitudes provides a window for better understanding the agency for individuals and groups in more general processes of political development. I depart from traditional studies of political attitudes to include how political culture and memory shape political outcomes. Far from simply being molded by external factors, social actors actively engage in meaning-making processes that weave together broader cultural discourses with narratives of their own deeply personal memories and experiences. The accounts of Vietnam veterans are formed within a generational cultural and historical context that delimits the socially acceptable ways in which their experiences of war can be related, but in constructing their individual narratives, veterans also claim their own part of and place in a nationally contested story.

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