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Exploring the Effects of Combat Exposure on American Civic Life

CHRISTOPHER S. PARKER

In democratic societies, citizens are required to serve the republic in many ways. To maintain liberty and stave off external threats to domination, citizens are sometimes required to place the common good ahead of self-interest by placing their lives on the line. While military service is the most demanding duty a citizen performs for the nation-state, many believe that individuals often emerge from military service more educated and dedicated citizens. They evince more loyalty to the nation-state, participate more vigorously in self-governance, and are zealous guardians of the way of life for which they risked everything. But what if the trauma to which many citizens are exposed while fighting for their country affects their civic orientation on returning to civil society? More directly, how might it affect their feelings about the political system for which they were willing to die? This is a question on which social science remains largely silent.

Scholars have shown that war-related trauma affects many aspects of veterans' postservice lives, usually for the worse. For instance, veterans who suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have a difficult time adjusting to "normal" life on their return to society. The symptoms associated with PTSD, such as flashbacks, emotional numbing, and hyperarousal, affect veterans' ability to retain healthy relationships with spouses and children, to remain gainfully employed and, in some cases, to secure shelter.¹ They are also more likely than veterans who do not suffer from combat stress and civilians in the same cohort to engage in criminal behavior and commit acts of violence.²

Veterans who suffer from PTSD and combat-related stress are also likely to be saddled with other issues, most of which are related to mental health in some way. Veterans from World War II and Vietnam afflicted with PTSD are at risk for major depression and substance abuse.³ Combat-related stress is also related to a feeling of social isolation and to becoming increasingly dissatisfied

with life.⁴ Veterans who suffer the effects of PTSD are also often afflicted with physical health issues.⁵

In sum, scholars have done much to inform us of the deleterious effects of combat-related trauma on veterans' subsequent health and its impact on their social and family lives and on their mobility. We know nothing, however, about the civic readjustment issues faced by veterans who suffer the debilitating effects of combat stress. Does PTSD, for instance, have similar effects on civic life as it does on social life? In other words, how, if at all, does combat-related stress affect veterans' ability to function as citizens in a democracy?

Drawing on a pilot study based on thirty-one semistructured interviews with veterans, I begin answering these questions by mapping the relationship between combat stress and civic life. In particular, I examine how combat affects civic attitudes. I posit two possible outcomes for participation in combat, both of which draw on the work of Elder and Clipp.⁶ The first, and perhaps the most familiar, outcome is called the developmental effect of military service. This is a decidedly positive outcome in which military service transforms individuals into more productive citizens, at least partially by increasing one's sense of confidence as they progress through life. The pathogenic effect, another outcome associated with participation in combat, is commensurate with the mental illness that sometimes accompanies combat trauma. In this scenario, military service produces less allegiant citizens, owing to the symptoms associated with the illness.

To examine the effects of combat exposure on civic attitudes, I investigate veterans' allegiance to the political regime. The effect of military service on allegiance is important because military service is believed to inculcate support for the political system. So strong was this belief that American political elites flirted with the institutionalization of universal military training, that is, compulsory military service, through the 1950s. Allegiance to its institutions and norms, in which the politically allegiant citizen enjoys both a legal and psychological connection to the political system that constitutes the political order, is essential to the stability of the political system.⁷ Otherwise, alienation, the flip-side of allegiance, threatens to undermine the stability of the regime by promoting insurgent activity.⁸

The principal import of this essay lies in its timeliness and urgency. The timeliness is related to America's continued involvement in overseas military operations in which it will likely remain engaged for the foreseeable future and the ongoing attention paid to issues surrounding combat stress. As figure 12.1 shows, since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan in 2002, more than 1,700 stories in the print media have touched upon combat stress in some way or another.

Year: 2002 Year: 2003 Year: 2004 Year: 2005 Year: 2006 Year: 2007
 78 167 211 269 412 521

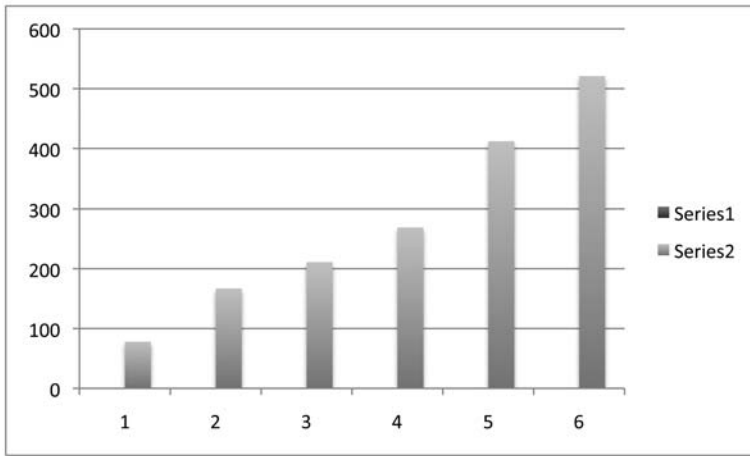


Figure 12.1. Print Stories on Combat Stress. From 2002–7, print stories in which combat stress was discussed increased more than seven-fold, from 78 in 2002 to 521 in 2007.

With the exception of 2005, when print coverage dipped from 2004, media coverage increased every year. From 2002–7, print stories in which combat stress was discussed increased more than sevenfold, from 78 in 2002 to 521 in 2007.⁹ Further, if what we know about Vietnam is any indication, the effects from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan will continue to reverberate for many years to come.

Millions of veterans have struggled with PTSD. Currently, more than 215,000 veterans receive disability benefits from the Veterans Administration for PTSD. But this number only represents one-fourth of veterans who actually suffer from PTSD; for various reasons, the remaining 75 percent never seek the benefits to which they are entitled.¹⁰ Of the veterans returning from Iraq who sought treatment at the VA, 31 percent suffered from mental health or psychosocial issues.¹¹ The potential impact of this high rate of PTSD upon the practice of democracy and equal participation makes addressing the essay’s questions urgent. While alienation can lead to insurgent activity, it may also dampen the likelihood for conventional political engagement, including voting and civic activism.¹²

In what follows, I first briefly discuss the background of combat-related stress, particularly combat-related PTSD, after which I detail the urgency of the problem. I then derive theoretical propositions based on the effects of combat exposure that ultimately aim to link combat exposure to civic attitudes. This

is followed by a description of the evidence on which I draw, after which I test and predict the positive and negative outcomes associated with combat exposure on political allegiance.

This essay suggests that the developmental effect of military service, an outcome of combat exposure commensurate with a rising sense of self-efficaciousness, is consistent with the attitudes of combat veterans who are not afflicted with PTSD. As a group, such veterans tend to embrace the political regime and political authorities more so than veterans who suffer from the pathogenic effects of combat. The latter group, the results suggest, are less allegiant to the regime and political authorities, particularly the president. More to the point, alienation varies according to combat exposure and the veteran's postwar mental condition: if a person is exposed to combat and suffers no combat trauma, that person will likely embrace the regime and political authorities. Otherwise, that person will become alienated to one or both.

Background and Theory

Combat-related stress, especially PTSD, is part of the military experience of many veterans. PTSD is a psychobiological syndrome of interlocking symptoms that cohere, forming a prolonged stress reaction to trauma such as war.¹³ For a diagnosis to be made, the individual must first be determined to have been involved in a traumatic event. In this case, a traumatic event is characterized by the patient experiencing or witnessing an event in which the threat of death or serious injury occurred to self or others, or in which others died; furthermore, the patient's response is characterized as one of fear, helplessness, or horror. According to the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), the symptoms of PTSD coalesce around three basic behavioral clusters, the first of which is associated with reexperiencing the trauma in the form of intrusive dreams, thoughts, or perceptions of the trauma and reacting to external cues that symbolize the event. Another symptom of PTSD focuses upon behavior undertaken to avoid thoughts or feelings associated with the trauma. Because of the event, individuals may also lose interest in significant activities, become emotionally distant, perceive that they have no real future, or become alienated from others. Many also turn to drugs and alcohol as a means of dealing with the trauma. The final symptom cluster is drawn together by the patient's increased state of arousal. This often produces insomnia, anger, reduced concentration, persistent alertness, and an increased tendency to become startled. The DSM-IV requires that individuals experience these symptoms for at least one month before a diagnosis of PTSD can be made.

Close to 10 percent of World War II and Korean War veterans suffer the effects PTSD—even after several decades removed from combat.¹⁴ More than 30 percent of Vietnam combat veterans have suffered from PTSD in their lifetime; 15 percent remain afflicted with it.¹⁵ Indeed, Kulka and colleagues estimate that approximately 479,000 Vietnam veterans suffered from PTSD.¹⁶ After the first Gulf War, PTSD affected approximately 10 percent of those who engaged in combat, while the more recent engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq have produced PTSD rates of 11 and 17 percent, respectively.¹⁷ Some argue that these figures are conservative estimates, indicating that these numbers will only increase over time.¹⁸ More to the point, it is likely that the number of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans who are or will be at risk for PTSD in their lifetimes will reach approximately 510,000. Combined with Vietnam era veterans who remain afflicted with PTSD, more than one million men and women will suffer from it in the near future.¹⁹

The effects of war on mental health may be divided into at least two broad categories: developmental and pathogenic. The developmental effects of war, according to Elder and Clipp, are those that allow war veterans to cope with adversity and hardships.²⁰ For some, simply surviving war serves to boost confidence. For many others, however, military service during wartime forces them to think in new and different ways and allows them to take full measure themselves inasmuch as they are pushed to their physical and emotional limit. Successfully performing tasks, highly valued in the political community, leads to a sense of self-mastery and a higher regard for self and one's capabilities.²¹

It takes very little imagination to believe that veterans who grow from military service will transfer this sense of internal control to the political system, perhaps, as normative political theory prescribes, even growing more attached to it as a result of their service.²² According to this logic, military service activates what sociologist Morris Janowitz called civic consciousness, a positive attachment to the nation-state in which the individual remains committed to its way of life.²³ Moreover, to the extent that the military not only guards but sustains democratic values, it should come as no surprise that many of those who are exposed to its institutional practices emerge from the service with an appreciation for democratic norms and practices.²⁴ In some cases, this is a function of the civic education received in the military.²⁵ In other cases, it is the antidemocratic nature of military culture and the restrictions placed on one's liberty that result in more appreciation for freedom and equality.²⁶ Thus, veterans who benefit from the developmental effects of combat should embrace the political regime and political authorities.

The positive effects of military service during war are all but taken for granted. It is assumed that military service produces citizens who, upon their

return from conflict, will care to participate in civic life and remain attached to the political system. But this may not always be the case. It is also conceivable that the psychosocial trauma associated with war, which has proven difficult to overcome in the affected veterans' social and familial life, may also affect their reintegration into civic life. While the pathogenic effect of war is often explored by scores of psychologists, no one attempts to connect the debilitating effects of war directly to politics.

A point at which PTSD and politics may overlap is located in the second symptom cluster: avoidance and emotional numbing in which combat veterans develop "feelings of detachment or estrangement from others," both of which may result in "withdrawal [and] social disengagement."²⁷ This feeling of isolation and social disengagement in the combat-stressed veteran was not limited to his or her immediate network of friends and family. Often combat veterans also felt alienated from the whole of American society, especially during the Vietnam War, when veterans perceived that the political establishment hindered American forces' ability to effectively prosecute the war.

If a veteran believed this to be true, distrust usually ensued.²⁸ Likewise, I expect alienation to run deeper among veterans with PTSD and combat-related stress. For them, I contend that their alienation from society spilled over to the political system. In other words, just as the veteran could no longer relate to friends, family, or fellow nationals, he could also no longer relate to a political system in which politicians were permitted to waste lives. These perceptions, then, promote the sense of political normlessness among veterans, the perception that public officials fail to conform the rules of the game, and that these violations are commonplace.²⁹ Estrangement from the political order and political authorities follows.

Taken together, the developmental and pathogenic effects of combat exposure suggest the following predictions:

H1: Positive experiences with combat exposure, for example, increasing self-confidence and successfully defending the values for which the country stands, should yield veterans who embrace the political system and political authorities.

H2: Emerging from the military with negative experiences associated with combat-stress or PTSD, for example, the feeling that one's life has been disrupted, should result in relative estrangement from the political system and political authorities.

Data and Method

To help map the proposed relationships, I turn to thirty-one semistructured interviews I conducted with veterans from February 2007 through April 2007.

Participants were recruited through newspaper ads placed in major daily newspapers in California: The *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times*. To guard against the possibility of bias associated with location, the interviews drew participants from the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and San Diego. The Bay Area was the site of fourteen interviews, all of which were conducted on the campus of UC Berkeley; eleven were conducted in Los Angeles on UCLA's campus; and six were completed in San Diego. Since there were no institutional arrangements with any campus in the area, I conducted the San Diego interviews in the homes of respondents. The interviews varied in duration from twenty-five minutes to ninety minutes, with a mean of forty-five minutes. Prospective participants were screened to ensure that they understood that this was a research project, not an attempt at outreach of some kind in which I represented an agency. Four prospective respondents were screened out on this basis. Upon determining that the respondents understood the purpose of the project, they were each scheduled for an appointment. Respondents were paid a sum of forty dollars for their time.

Veterans were divided into three cohorts. Six of the participants served during World War II or the Korean War, fifteen served in the military during Vietnam, and ten served after Vietnam, including nine who had served since the first Gulf War. Fifteen of the veterans served in the Army, six are Navy veterans, nine are Marines, and one is an Air Force veteran. Demographically, however, the participants are relatively homogeneous. Twenty-two of the participants are white; twenty-eight are male. Fourteen of the participants have at least a college degree; fifteen are retirees, five of whom retired from the military.

Veterans were also stratified by combat exposure: nineteen served in combat; twelve did not fight. (See the table 12.1 for more details.) Of the nineteen veterans who were exposed to combat, nine reported suffering from symptoms related to PTSD or combat stress. Perhaps the best way in which to assess the presence of PTSD is through a trimodal approach. Through self-reports, clinical interviews, and psychophysiological assessments, clinicians are able to correct the shortcomings of any single mode while simultaneously taking advantage of each mode's strength, allowing them to arrive at fairly accurate diagnoses.³⁰ In this essay, I rely upon self-reports of PTSD. If veterans conveyed to me that they were currently in treatment for PTSD or if they mentioned elements of the symptom clusters during the course of the interview, I refer to them as PTSD cases. For veterans who mention one or two but not all three symptoms, I refer to them as veterans with combat stress.

This essay attempts to gauge the extent to which exposure to combat affects one's orientation to the political system, specifically political allegiance. To assess allegiance, I asked the veterans whether they support the institutions

Table 12.1. List of Study Participants and Selected Demographics and Military Traits

Name	Age	Education (years)	Political Party ID	Service Era	Branch	Combat?
Ed A.	54	16	Independent	V/N–Iraq	Army	Yes
Willie A.	78	8	Republican	Korea	Army	Yes
Tony A.	24	College	Independent	Iraq	Army	No
Tom D.	58	18	Republican	V/N–Gulf I	Marines	Yes
Dave E.	70	20	Republican	Vietnam	Army	Yes
Oracio F.	67	18	Democrat	Korea	Army	No
Bill F.	85	16	Democrat	WWII	Army	Yes
Bill H.	80	12	Republican	WWII–V/N	Marines	Yes
Kathleen H.	27	18	Republican	Iraq	Navy	No
Lang I.	25	College	Libertarian	Iraq	Marines	Yes
Burt J.	65	19	Republican	Vietnam	Army	No
Tia L.	27	16	Democrat	Iraq	Navy	No
Larry L.	62	14	Democrat	Vietnam	Navy	No
Charles M.	72	13	Independent	V/N–Gulf War	Marines	No
Andy N.	78	12	Democrat	Korea	Air Force	No
Dan O.	36	14	Democrat	Gulf War	Army	Yes
Keith P.	44	12	Independent	Gulf War–Iraq	Marines	Yes
Ron R.	60	18	Republican	Vietnam	Army	Yes
Rob R.	26	College	Democrat	Iraq	Marines	Yes
Les R.	75	18	Independent	1954–57	Navy	No
Drew R.	24	College	Republican	Iraq	Marines	Yes
Bob R.	62	16	Republican	Vietnam	Army	No
Stan R.	90	18	Independent	WWII	Army	No
Mike S.	59	15	Republican	Vietnam	Army	Yes
Art S.	63	16	Democrat	Vietnam	Navy	No
Robert S.	62	13	Republican	Vietnam	Army	Yes
J.W.	62	16	Republican	V/N–Iraq	Marines	Yes
Tonya W.	45	14	Democrat	1979–83	Navy	No
Larry W.	59	15	Democrat	Vietnam	Marines	Yes
George W.	75	18	Democrat	Korea	Army	Yes
Carlos Z.	32	College	Republican	Iraq	National Guard	Yes

Note: “College” indicates veterans who are currently enrolled in school. V/N is the abbreviation for Vietnam-era veterans when the individual’s service era spanned more than one era. For cells in which service eras are dates instead of wars, these service members did not serve during a designated war.

that comprise the political system: Are the courts fair? Is the legislative branch functioning properly?, and so on. I began each battery of questions requesting a simple “yes” or “no” reply, after which they were asked to explain their responses.

Before embarking on the analyses, a word on some of the limitations faced in this study is necessary. First, it is possible that the veterans who suffer from combat stress do not read the papers in which I advertised. Although I do not discuss it in the present essay, some veterans had no trust for mainstream media. They felt that the media only reported events consistent with its own political agenda. This was especially the case with veterans who had recently seen action in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Perhaps the *L.A. Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* are too liberal for their respective tastes. For similar reasons (i.e., possible bias), the subjects probably represent those veterans in the upper bound of those who are interested in politics. Even so, I have no reason to believe that the relative differences between veterans with and without combat stress—the principal issue in this study—will be affected.

Combat Exposure and Allegiance to the Political Regime

The political community notwithstanding, there are two objects to which individuals pledge their allegiance: the political regime and political authorities.³¹ I begin the analysis by exploring the ways in which combat exposure affects veterans’ allegiance to the political regime, the mix of norms and institutional configurations on which the political system rests.³² The military seems to be a prime site through which to generate support for the American political regime. Beginning in childhood, citizens are socialized to support the political system and political authorities.³³ Adolescents maintain faith in the political system at least through early adulthood, after which cynicism begins to erode confidence in most things political.³⁴ However, it is at this juncture that military service may boost flagging confidence in the regime, for it (military service) generally occurs during a time in the life cycle not so far removed from adolescence.

Exposure to combat should only increase one’s attachment to institutions and the liberal principles by which they operate, core elements of what constitutes the political regime.³⁵ Of course, this is more consistent with the developmental effect of military service in which one emerges from the military with a higher regard for both self and country. Thus, we should expect combat veterans without symptoms related to PTSD or combat-stress more generally to be more committed to American institutions than any other group. For those who continue to experience the pathogenic effects of combat such as nightmares,

flashbacks, and other symptoms related to PTSD, I expect relative alienation to ensue. Noncombat veterans act as a quasi-control group, serving as a baseline against which to assess responses from the different groups of combat veterans.

Combat-Stressed Veterans

I begin the examination with veterans who remain affected by the psychosocial trauma associated with war. This group, as we shall see, differs from other combat veterans and veterans with no combat experience in at least one respect: the tone of their responses. Veterans who suffer from combat stress are not only more alienated; they are also angrier than the other groups. One example is Bob. A Vietnam combat veteran who continues to suffer from PTSD, his opinion mirrors other veterans who suggest that the dishonesty of politicians affects the political system. Bob explained, “My opinion has to do with the fact because I paid such a high price to see that our freedoms are put forward. Or a belief that they were put forward, or we were told, and we believed that these were honorable fights that we were in. Of course, that’s always hard to tell in the beginning or towards the end if you lose anyway.” His distrust of the political system is evident, however, as he alludes to the actions of the political leadership during Vietnam. Bob’s anger boils to the surface as he puts the ordeal into perspective. “Whenever you put forth your best, you’ve paid your price, you would hope that the American political system would see. But they’re playing games, often with men’s lives,” he screams. He added, “It’s gone on through history. I don’t expect it to stop now. But the fact of the matter is when a political system is not honest about the conflict, they often can cost more lives than what the soldiers have inflicted, and cause them being killed and others being killed because of non-responsibility. They have to be as tough as we had to be!” His rebuke of the system, therefore, has everything to do with his sacrifice and his disappointment with the conduct of politicians during war.

Bob’s critique is leveled squarely at American political leadership. His belief in the American political system was shattered by his experience during a war in which political deceit and cowardice led to the needless death of American troops. Political leadership is not the sole reason that some have lost faith in the political system, however. For some, it is the electorate, that is, the people, who are responsible for the failure of the American political system. Dave, a Vietnam veteran and retired police chief who mentioned flashbacks during the course of the interview, shares this view. He readily acknowledges that “a strength of American politics is that the people do have a voice, and that is the absolute essential bottom line in the democracy, and it’s one of the strengths that people from time to time get fed up, and throw the rascals out.” The prob-

lem, according to Dave, is that “people buy a lot of the bullshit that the politicians hand them. There isn’t a lot of informed opinion!” Dave holds the educational system responsible for this lack of informed opinion among citizens. He protests that “our educational system doesn’t lend itself to the strengthening of democracy. We put people out there that don’t understand crap about the history, the democratic process that elects people, or the system of government. They don’t know shit, and they go and vote, and that is the fault of the educational system!” Dave offers a rather bleak prognosis for the future of American democracy: “Will there always be stupid people that don’t know shit? Yes. Is there anything that we can protect? Look, the worst dictatorships in the history of man have been those that purport to have a utopia at the end of the road.” In the end, he has little faith that the problem will be corrected, at least in the near future. “The wrong people sometimes get elected. The right people sometimes get elected, and the people that make those choices aren’t as informed as they should be. But, again, I’m an elitist,” he sighs with a hint of resignation.

It is clear that for Dave, a principal weakness of the American political system ultimately rests upon education, a pillar of democracy. People are simply uninformed, and this causes problems and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Likewise, Bob has little faith in the American political system. However, not all veterans who continue to struggle with the effects of combat stress are pessimistic. Consider Carlos’s comments, a national guardsman who has recently returned from Iraq and reports becoming easily agitated and wary of crowds upon his returning, classic symptoms of PTSD. He believes the system “is the best one. Okay, let me rephrase that,” he says, upon a moment’s reflection. “It may not be great, but it’s definitely the best of the alternatives out there right now. It works.” He recognizes the presence of corruption but insists that in the American system the “corruption is either better hidden or just less than everywhere else.” Among the virtues of the American political system, according to Carlos, is that “it’s set up so we don’t elect no freaking Hitler or something like that.” Thus, another view that veterans seem to have is one in which the American system is simply the best one available; the alternatives are not so attractive.

Combat Veterans

On the whole, combat veterans who do not suffer from combat stress tend to be a little more optimistic about the political system than veterans with combat stress. This, however, does not mean that they are without criticism of the political system, one of which is the charge that the executive has too much power. In the present case, they are rather upset that President George W. Bush

seemed to do whatever he pleased, without regard to the institutional checks intended by the framers. George, a veteran of the Korean War and retired high school teacher, articulates this position the best. “I have a hard time with this,” he says. “I taught a course on this in high school, so I have 40 years of opinion on this. I feel that American political institutions need to be reorganized. I think that our President has too much power; not just George Bush, but people before him, taking it [Presidential authority] and using it as they are the king. [It’s] like they don’t have a Congress, and it doesn’t matter what Congress does.” He cites the war in Iraq as an example. “The President has the attitude that ‘I’m the President, and I can do anything I want.’” George concedes that the president is the commander in chief,

but [when] the generals in the Pentagon and Congress tell him something, why does he have to think “I know more than they do, so I am going to do it my way.” How could he do this when, in fact, he really was not in the military. You talk about veterans; they are guys who actually fought. He [Bush] was in the National Guard, and I don’t think he saw a plane and never showed up to his meetings and it was a joke! The military was a joke to him whereas he’s sending troops over there and doing all these military things!

George’s criticism is as much about flawed institutional design (i.e., too much executive power) as it is of President Bush’s dubious character. The implication is that reform lies with making the power wielded by other branches of government more equal to that of the executive. Criticism of the American political system is not limited to its structure, though. Some of the combat veterans believe that individuals inside these institutions cause harm to the political system. Bill, for instance, believes that the “political system’s effectiveness is influenced very much by the personalities involved in all the branches.” A veteran of World War II, he has had a long time to observe how individuals shape institutions and public policy. He draws on the Supreme Court as an example. “Although they are not supposed to, they bring into the Supreme Court all the prejudices and political leanings, and it has a tremendous effect on us, sometimes very much to our detriment.” The decision in *Bush v. Gore*, for Bill, is an ideal example of this. “I think a good, fair-minded court would have said the vote is the key thing. Let the people vote again and decide the issue that way instead of—as I understand it, it was a 5–4 decision, but they agreed to say it was unanimous in trying to unite the country, but it didn’t help.” He concludes, suggesting that public officials should strive to leave aside personal prejudice and biases and work toward the common good: “There are always some [individuals] that we are unhappy with because they let their prejudices

get in the way. I guess that's human nature. But maybe they can try harder to be more fair-minded."

There are, however, some combat veterans who believe the political system to be near flawless. Ed is one of them. A military retiree and veteran of Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom, he has unmitigated affection for the American political system. For starters, he highlights the system's ability to overcome potentially fractious divisions and frequent missteps, highlighting its durability. He explained, "Never in the history of mankind have we had the ability to take so many diverse languages, cultures, religions, and belief systems and meld them into one political volume as the glorious experience called America. We have made some tremendous boneheaded stunts that are hard to believe." He illustrates his point by citing a moment at which he educated some of his charges while serving in Iraq: "We were sitting in a country that has been populated for 4 millennia [with people] who are still living in mud huts and fighting inter-village clan battles. We are a country less than 400 years; we have been to the moon and back, and yet in the first half of the 20th Century, we believed that . . . slavery was approvable." According to Ed, the superiority of the American political system is evident in America's ability to "grow and adapt [remaining] melded together even after a major civil war and, where given our land mass, would be twenty countries if this was Europe." He concludes, opining "we have reconstructed the country into one that is the envy of the known world . . . because we are successful at being the body of politics."

Noncombat Veterans

Noncombat veterans, like their combat counterparts, were also at once skeptical of and enamored with the regime. Burt's opinion is a clear example of the former. A Vietnam-era veteran who served stateside during the war, he reports "not [being] too happy with these institutions, but it's not clear what a better alternative would be." Clearly, he believes there is a need for improvement, especially in reforming the incentive structure for politicians. Burt offered, "I would suggest that if any politicians take let's say more than a dollar from anybody they'd be shot." As an example, he cites the practice of earmarking, a part of the legislative appropriations process in which funds are designated by a legislator to be spent on a specific project, generally in his district. For Burt, it represents another institutional impediment to competent political representation if governing for the collective good is the goal. As for many Americans, earmarking is a source of enduring frustration for Burt. "In my view," he says, "any legislator who proposes any project that that costs government money for

his or her own district should be shot.” Other noncombat veterans are more impressed with the political system, but they are more impressed with its design versus how it actually works. Art, who served in the Navy in Vietnam, says as much, opining: “I think the forefathers couldn’t have [better] written . . . the Constitution and the structure of government, to me, it’s the best as far as I’m concerned.” Asked for specifics, he replies that, “We can amend things; we’re supposed to have a balance of power. Those guys were geniuses,” he says referring to the Founding Fathers. Kathleen agrees. One of the first female surface line officers to serve aboard a naval combatant, she unabashedly declares: “I believe in the Constitution. Obviously, I’ve taken an oath to defend it.” However, in addition to the system of checks and balances, she is a firm believer “in our system of representative democracy.”

With the exception of combat veterans, the majority of whom remain allegiant to the political regime, the interviews suggest that support for it remains in short supply among veterans. More telling, however, is the extent to which estrangement varies with the category to which veterans belong. Each group expresses some degree of alienation, but it is among the veterans who continue to battle the effects of combat stress who seem most distressed about the political order and pessimistic about reform, even angry. Given the well-documented political alienation associated with service in Vietnam, some may question these findings.³⁶ This possible objection would posit that most veterans who served during Vietnam were alienated, regardless of their post-service condition. Yet, when I account for the postwar condition of veterans, that is, whether or not they suffered the effects of combat stress, a gap emerges among Vietnam-era veterans. Among Vietnam veterans, most of those who remain afflicted by combat stress were far more likely to report feeling alienated than those not bothered by it.³⁷ While combat veterans cite weaknesses within American political institutions, to them, the flaws do not seem intractable. Since most pledge support to the regime but remain somewhat critical, combat veterans appear to be more supportive than anything else. Similar findings obtain for noncombat veterans. Thus, they too may be classified as allegiant.

We now have an idea of how veterans explain their perceptions of the political system, but we have no idea about the prevalence of their responses. We have noticed that some veterans with combat stress appear more distrustful than other groups of veterans. But as Carlos’s example suggests, there are at least some combat-stressed veterans who are willing to embrace the political system. Likewise, we may ask similar questions of combat veterans and veterans who have seen no combat whatsoever. To gain a sense of group trends, I tabulated a few simple frequency distributions. The percentages I report are based upon relatively few observations, a total of thirty-one cases. We must,

therefore, remain cautious about the extent to which we may generalize from these results.

Having said that, the results serve the illustrative purpose for which they were intended. The evidence suggests support for the claim that exposure to combat stress is also a factor with which we must contend when the relationship between politics and war, at the individual level, is considered. At 60 percent, more combat veterans, as a group, support the political system than other groups. But this remains true only insofar as the veteran is not haunted by combat stress. Only 44 percent (four out of nine) of those who served in combat and remain affected by it support the system, a general pattern that is repeated in the section that follows. Half of all noncombat veterans, those without the sense of self-regard that comes with surviving combat, remain allegiant to the political system. That more noncombat veterans embrace the system than combat veterans who remain distressed by their military service suggests the debilitating effects of combat stress.

As the interviews indicate, veterans' postwar conditions matter. Veterans who remain stricken with combat-related stress seem more cynical about the political system than the other groups. Moreover, if these findings are any indication, the combat-stressed veterans are also angrier than the other groups. This comports well with the work of psychologists who have found that some veterans with PTSD tend to become angered when they perceive the rules of the game are violated, something that veterans with combat-stress articulated in their comments.³⁸ And, as the frequency distributions suggest, this disposition is not confined to the veterans who were highlighted; cynicism and anger are carried by most of these veterans. This not to say that noncombat veterans were not cynical; some were. But they remained relatively hopeful about reform. What is more, I failed to detect much anger among this bunch. This distinction is akin to Sniderman's approach to alienation in which he distinguishes between the disaffected and the disenchanting. "Both," he says, "are alienated; yet the judgment of the second is balanced, the first is not."³⁹ In the present case, the anger and the condemnation of the political regime voiced by veterans with combat stress suggests a relatively unbalanced evaluation of it, one that paints the existing order irretrievably flawed. Combat and non-combat veterans' appraisals of the regime, on the other hand, are balanced by comparison.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

As this essay noted in its introduction, much is known about the effect of combat stress on the social and occupational readjustment of American veterans

on their return to civil society. However, until now, there has been no accounting for the civic readjustment of those who were subjected to the horrors of combat. This essay represents a step in that direction, one that seeks to correct this oversight. Toward that end, the essay sought to examine the hypothesized disparate effects of combat exposure, relating them to positive and negative outcomes of military service. The developmental effects associated with positive military experiences in which the service member emerges from war with higher self-regard, part of which is due to surviving combat, were believed to be conducive to support for both the regime and political authorities.

The pathogenic effect of military service, one that indexes, in this case, psychosocial trauma associated with war, portended political alienation. Consistent with expectations, this paper shows that combat-related stress, including PTSD, moderates the effect of war on civic attitudes. More to the point, it illustrates that veterans who must contend with combat stress or posttraumatic stress disorder are less inclined to have faith in politicians or the political regime relative to veterans who claimed not to suffer from the pathogenic effects of military service.

The fact that many veterans appear alienated from the political regime is not entirely new; Frey-Wouters and Laufer's as well as Johnson's work showed similar patterns.⁴⁰ What appears new, however, is that alienation varies according to exposure to combat. To the extent that alienation is differentiated between the disaffected and disenchanting, where the former is essentially "one-sided criticism" of authorities and the latter is characterized as a more "even-handed," veterans suffering from combat stress appear to fall more easily into the former category.⁴¹ For, as the interviews indicate, they tend to be more critical than the other groups, their criticism tinged with anger. It seems that when some veterans with PTSD do not believe people are following the rules, they become angry because they had seen buddies die because rules were not followed.⁴² These people who had pledged to support and defend the Constitution and obey the orders of the president see George Bush as failing to follow the rules. Perhaps this is the root of their disaffection.

Beyond its ability to affect regard for the political regime, it is possible that combat stress may also affect veterans' ability to participate in politics. Some scholars suggest that mental illness sometimes increases the likelihood of political engagement.⁴³ Perhaps Lasswell's account in which political symbols serve as an outlet for one's psychological instability is one way to account for increased activism when the political object from which one becomes estranged is the president, arguably the most dominant symbol in American politics.⁴⁴ However, none of this work considers the effect of combat stress, particularly PTSD. Links between PTSD and politics, I believe, are located within each

symptom cluster. For instance, the first and third symptom clusters may affect political participation.

Many scholars have documented the cognitive difficulties associated with PTSD. Specifically, combat veterans with the syndrome have difficulty with attention, working memory, and verbal learning.⁴⁵ Horner and Hamner suggest that the inability to effectively regulate and adapt intrusive memories, such as flashbacks and dreams that affect memory and cognition, are responsible for these deficiencies. It seems that the flash backs associated with re-experiencing the trauma involves “cognitive processing, information storage, and retrieval from memory,” taxing these cognitive functions during the process.⁴⁶ Hyperarousal and vigilance are implicated to the extent that these symptoms affect problem-solving abilities.⁴⁷ If political participation—especially activism—requires some cognitive ability, PTSD could impede the practice of democratic citizenship.

Beyond adding a layer to the literature on alienation and in which political estrangement usually results in decreasing engagement, not the increasing activism that I find, these findings highlight a lacuna in political science. With the exception of Lynn Sanders’s work on the connection between politics and mental health, there is nothing, as far as I know, that has touched upon this area in almost forty years.⁴⁸ Considering that 26 percent of the adult population suffers from mental disability or engages in substance abuse, often both, mental illness is something to which political scientists should pay more attention.⁴⁹

An obvious limitation of this essay, on which I have already commented, is the number of observations on which findings are based. The results are, therefore, meant to guide future research in which more data maybe gathered to more formally test hypotheses related to the way(s) in which combat-related PTSD moderates the effect of combat on civic attitudes and behavior, controlling for possible confounds and accounting for alternative explanations. Both are needed if we are to have more confidence in the ability of combat stress to explain variation in political outcomes of interest. Therefore, a natural next step includes collecting survey data in which a more representative sample is secured. Another step to be taken is to compare the impact of combat-related PTSD on politics to those who suffer from PTSD that originates with a different type of trauma. One place to start is with victims of PTSD around the terrorist attacks of 9/11, for as Rasinski and his colleagues demonstrate, trauma and politics, particularly confidence in the government, are related.⁵⁰

Notes

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