

REGULATION OF BODIES AS GENDERED NATIONALISTIC IDEOLOGY:  
PHYSICALLY WOUNDED VETERANS  
AS POLITICAL PROPS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Using the 2014 State of the Union Address as an example, I show that the public honoring of physically wounded veterans hides the emotional, psychological, social, and moral wounds of military service, creating a normative veteran identity based on mental toughness, and essentializes all veterans as honorable by default. Using Michel Foucault's notion of Panopticism from *Discipline and Punish*, I argue that this unquestioned heroism of the veteran disciplines the nation, disengages the population from involvement, and enables unchecked, perpetual war. In response, I propose that we avoid thanking veterans publicly and abstractly, instead approaching each and every veteran personally in full recognition of their unique set of relations. This would improve veteran reintegration, politically engage the population in discourse regarding military conflict, and ultimately serve as a check on the use of state violence.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*“A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved.”*  
– Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

In the State of the Union Address on January 28, 2014, President Obama highlighted the life of Army Ranger, Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg, severely wounded from a roadside bomb in Afghanistan in 2009. The President discussed Remsburg’s injuries and recovery, the shrapnel in his brain, the months-long coma followed by the inability to speak or move, the years of surgeries and rehabilitation that have helped him speak, stand, and walk again. The President informed the many members of the U.S. government and civilians present in that chamber that Sergeant Remsburg was in fact present in that very room. When he stood up, the standing ovation that followed President Obama’s introduction of Remsburg lasted almost two full minutes. It was one of the most talked about and bipartisan parts of the Address. While powerful and unique because of its setting, the scene is one that is ever-present today in the post-9/11 world in which we live, a veteran being thanked, applauded, and honored.

While the politicians, military personnel, and civilians present in that chamber appeared unified in their support of the spectacle, physically wounded veterans<sup>2</sup> specifically, and veterans in general, being used as political props and nationalistic exemplars, even by simply thanking them for their service, has serious problematic implications for veterans, the wider population, and notions of justice and peace. The goal of the present work is to take apart and expose the various components of this scene including its many performative and

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the present work, I will be using the term ‘physically wounded veteran’ as opposed to the term ‘veteran with physical wounds.’ While the second term is preferable as it refers to the individual as a person first, the first term identifies and highlights the way they are objectified as props and further serves to distinguish the difference between a veteran with physical wounds and one with psychological wounds.

disciplining aspects. I will peel back the surface of the seemingly straightforward honoring of a physically wounded soldier in order to illustrate the complex nature of the relationship between veterans, nonveterans, and elected officials. It is my claim that this spectacle serves as a nationalistic performance where the imperialistic, war-making ideology of the U.S. is enshrined and enforced. First, the display of the physically wounded veteran reinforces the masculine notion of the rejection of the body in favor of a strong mind. Secondly, the veteran is utilized to essentialize the Muslim population as inherently evil and violent, while at the same time normalizing an acceptable, normative citizenship based in the neoliberal notion of individual choice. Third, the public honoring of veterans shifts the narrative from a focus on heroic *actions* of soldiers in combat to a focus on the heroic *choice* of all soldiers that decide to join the military. Finally, this public honoring of the physically wounded veteran enables the passing of the honor of the soldier for the honor of the nation and the nation's wars, i.e. the honorable service of the soldier serves as a marker of the "honorable" action of the nation as a whole, washing away the dishonorable and abhorrent actions conducted in the name of the nation.

The veteran in turn conducts a double performance. The first performative action is the military service itself, the decision to join, the basic training or boot camp, the advanced training in each recruit's unique military job (MOS – military occupational specialty), and the combat or support action carried out during each service members time in the military. The second performative action takes place when the service member returns from deployment and must reintegrate back into domestic society, which can happen when the service member is still in the military or when the service member decided to be discharged and fully return to civilian life. At this point the service member has become a veteran and must now perform that role. The expectations placed upon this second performative role serve to

exacerbate the difficulty of reintegrating back into civilian life. The more we dissect and understand these expectation and their function, whether we intend to place them on veterans or not, the more successful we will be and the less veterans will need to suffer. Simply focusing on the first portion, the actions in war and combat, will not alone address the issues veterans face and the wider issues of state violence, justice, and peace. It is the goal of the present work to shed light and deconstruct this second performative role, that of the veteran.

I write and think about this issue not only as a philosopher, but also as a veteran. I served for four years in the U.S. Army and deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq. I have experienced much of what I discuss here first hand. In this way, my philosophical approach begins phenomenologically. I examine the use of physically wounded veterans as it actually operates in practice, not simply how it is described to ideally work. I operate from the premise that power relations, material conditions, and ideologically constructed notions of gender, race, and subjectivity inflect experience and our understanding of it. As such, the present work examines these very aspects in order to better understand veteran experience in the post-9/11 era.

### Subjectification and Disciplining the Nation

The epigraph from Michel Foucault that begins this chapter, “[a] *body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved,*” forms the structure of the analysis. We will follow the way that the physically wounded veteran is subjectivated, utilized, transformed, and improved through the process of being publically honored and applauded. In the first section of Chapter II, I begin by discussing the Foucauldian disciplining process as it pertains to the use of physically wounded veterans.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault states that “[t]he success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement [*sic*] and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination.”<sup>3</sup> In the above described scene, I claim that there are multiple disciplinary examinations taking place that circulate and shift back and forth and make it difficult at first glance to neatly determine who is the examined and who is the examiner. Before an investigation into the effects, consequences, and outcomes, both intended and unintended, can be conducted, we must first uncover and lay bare the various characters in this spectacle and their shifting and morphing roles in this nationalistic disciplinary examination. This first step is not simply preparatory, but will actually do theoretical and conceptual work in the process of making sense of this complex scene in the chamber. We do not simply have a veteran being applauded by a crowd. The public nature and visibility of this scene, and the many others like it where a veteran is being honored, put the veteran body under certain but unverifiable surveillance. President Obama becomes a “central tower” in the Foucauldian sense through his public honoring and surveillance of the physically wounded veteran.

We must first look to Cory Remsburg, the ten-time deployed Army Ranger severely wounded from a roadside bomb in Afghanistan, who is the focus and recipient of this two-minute-long standing ovation. For the purpose of this current work, I must be clear that anything said about Remsburg is not intended as a reflection on him as a person, nor as a belittling of the difficulties he has experienced, nor as anything simply unique to him and his circumstances. Rather, this particular scene and Remsburg’s place in it, serves as an example of the wider and pervasive approach we have in the United States towards veterans and the wars in which they have fought over the last thirteen plus years since the attacks of

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 170.

September 11, 2001. It would also be wrong to focus in on whether or not Remsburg himself actually wants the attention given to him during this State of the Union address. We are not here discussing simply the desirability of the celebratory actions taken towards veterans, but rather are looking at what these honoring performances actually *do* in the world, whether at a national State of the Union Address or a simple “thanks for your service” from a stranger at the coffee shop. A rebuke to the present work that claims Remsburg actually enjoyed his standing ovation would miss the point being made.

In Chapter II, I argue that to look at Remsburg as simply the recipient of the applause fails to account for the active role he plays, as a placeholder for all veterans, in disciplining everyone in the chamber and all the people watching the Address from the outside. While it is clear that the Address, the standing ovation, and the applause, and for that matter, Remsburg simply being there in that chamber, subjects him to a certain disciplinary examination, he, as a representative for all veterans, serves as an examiner in the Foucauldian sense subjecting everyone else to normalizing examination. Everyone else’s actions, from the applause in the chamber to the journalists writing on the event after the fact, are regulated by the very presence of Remsburg in that chamber as a physically wounded veteran. This is the first aspect we must grasp to move beyond a simple, reductive understanding of veteran interaction as simply an appreciative action done *towards* the veteran. The veteran functions as a regulative force *towards* the behavior of those around the veterans, and in this way the veteran, as a representative for all veterans, functions as a political and normalizing prop for the dominant ideology of the nation. Try for a moment to imagine a member of congress in that chamber *not* applauding Remsburg... The fact that it is hard to imagine illustrates the depth of this regulative force.

Furthermore, President Obama is the conductor of this scene. As the person giving the speech, he is the one that announces Remsburg, his injuries and recovery, and thanks him for his service. In this way he is the narrator of the story, both Remsburg's and the scene playing out in real time in that chamber. Through his statements about Remsburg, that he is "sharp as a tack" and "like the Army he loves, like the America he serves, Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg never gives up, and he does not quit," Obama elicits the response from the rest of the members in the chamber. In this way, he prompts all those present to respond and by doing so serves as a disciplinary actor. He sets the stage, in effect challenging everyone present to not respond in kind. However, Obama's role as narrator and Thank-in-Chief is severely problematized by the fact that he is also the Commander-in-Chief, ultimately responsible, as the head of the nation, for Remsburg (and all veterans) being in Afghanistan at all. In this sense, Obama is both disciplining, and being disciplined by, Remsburg as a representative of all veterans and service members. Partially, Obama's thanking of Remsburg functions as appreciation for doing what the President and country has asked of him. However, in another sense, the thanking and honoring serves to obscure this responsibility, and instead functions to disconnect the President and nation that sent Remsburg (and all veterans) to combat from the President and nation that is lavishing praise and honor onto Remsburg and by proxy, all veterans. It is this second, sinister function of the veteran hero-worship that I uncover and examine, the thanking and honoring that disconnects from responsibility in favor of inhabiting a place of pure appreciation and good intentions.

In addition, the members of government present in the chamber, by applauding for two minutes straight, are in fact disciplining Remsburg, other veterans, and potential and soon-to-be soldiers. Again, the fact that this unanimous applause lasted for almost two actual

minutes, in an Address where there is rarely unanimous applause for any statement at all, encourages and supports the notion that all veterans are heroes beyond reproach that should be responded to as such. Much like the president, the members of the government are made to perform in a certain manner, i.e. are examined and thus disciplined, which results in blind support of the military and claims of “we support our troops,” even while they may at the same time vote against bills that would actually assist veterans. This spectacle, rather than connecting the political leaders to the veterans, drawing them closer in to an understanding, actually works to further push these two groups apart. The response is done without thought because it doesn’t need to be thought about. It simply is what you do as a political leader in the U.S.

The American public watching the Address, much like the politicians in the chamber, are being disciplined and trained in the proper treatment of veterans. This public, high profile honoring of a soldier instructs the people of the nation on how to “properly” treat veterans, by thanking them for their service, etc. Because of this indoctrination, rather than an individual, personal interaction with veterans, a generic thanking of the veteran in the abstract is being perpetuated, which harms veterans and fails to engage the rest of the nonveteran citizenry more deeply. In another words, the rest of the population that are not veterans gets let off the proverbial moral hook. Their patriotic job becomes simple and replicable: support our troops. This becomes the extent of the engagement expected of the population when it comes to gravely important issues like state use of force, war and invasion, torture and interrogation, etc. The citizenry is being instructed directly away from their proper role as a critically involved, democratically engaged check on government power.



Finally, at the same time as the scene from the U.S. chamber is working to disengage the U.S. population from questioning their government's military actions, people from all around the world are actively engaging and questioning the role the U.S. plays (and will play) in world wide military intervention. This spectacle illustrates that the U.S. has courageous individuals that choose to enter the military, along with a population and government that acknowledges them. However, the presence of this Address, and the multifarious other ways this same scene plays out all around us, also shows that we are a country at war, or as Sora Hans says, "the United States *is* war."<sup>4</sup> The U.S. has military bases worldwide and military spending that is more than the next ten highest countries combined. The fact that we have these wounded soldiers and veterans shows that we're a nation at perpetual war, and the disconnected thanking of the veterans that have served in these wars by Obama and the rest of the people in the chamber, while at the same time leading the country that "*is* war," demonstrates the internal conflict the U.S. possesses and expresses this contradiction.

#### Masculinity and the Rejection of the Body

In the second section of Chapter II, utilizing Bonnie Mann's work, *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lesson From the War on Terror*, I demonstrate that this subjectivation of the physically wounded veteran encourages the masculine notion of self-justificatory radical independence and the primacy of a strong mind over the violability of the physical body. I argue that a consequence of the manner in which physically wounded veterans are held up and applauded, while emotionally and psychologically wounded veterans are left to suffer in silence, is that this perpetuates and strengthens the masculine notion of a strong mind over a wounded body. The fact that Remsburg's body was injured, but his mind was still sharp furthers the notion of masculinity that imagines the body as simply a tool of the mind and a

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, "Three Pillars of White Supremacy," 69.

body wounded in the service of the nation as a mark of honor, while an injured mind in the same service remains a disgrace and a source of shame. It is my contention that the visible absence of emotionally, psychologically, and socially wounded veterans combined with the hyper-presence and visibility of physically wounded veterans regulates the identity of veterans by creating an environment where those veterans with wounded minds and hearts must remain hidden or else risk losing the presumption of possessing a strong mind, the marker of the honorable soldier and veteran.

All the veterans watching this scene unfold are in turn disciplined by being exposed to the manner in which this particular veteran is being received. In this way, the honoring of Remsburg becomes a performance with a message about the specific kinds of veterans the nation desires and honors. I will show that Cory Remsburg sitting in that chair at the State of the Union Address (and not twenty-two empty chairs to represent the daily veteran suicide count, for example) *does* disciplining work in terms of defining acceptable, normative veteran identities and bodies as those that may be physically wounded, but are mentally strong.<sup>5</sup> This decision about what types of veterans get this kind of recognition regulates an appropriate patriotic and nationalistic sacrificial masculinity that views physical injury as the ultimate display of devotion to the country, which diminishes and trivializes all of those veterans that are wounded, but simply not in this same physical way, but rather are experiencing wounds that are social, mental, emotional, psychological, etc. In this way, a violence is perpetrated on the 10's of thousands of veterans suffering through non-physical wounds through honoring of only certain veteran bodies. Horrific nightmares, emotional disconnection, and thoughts of suicide do not get applauded as great sacrifices for the nation.

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<sup>5</sup> President Obama stated in the Address that Remsburg was “sharp as a tack.”

## Essentializing the Enemy and Neoliberalism

In Chapter III, I first explain the shift in veteran identity that occurred from the Vietnam era until the present day and that the present day hero worship of veterans can be seen as arising out of the poor treatment of Vietnam-era veterans. I also illustrate that a moral equality between veterans and civilians, which existed in the Vietnam era, is presently lacking. I further claim that the physically wounded veteran so subjectivated is utilized to essentialize the enemy of the nation in the current War on Terror, in this case the Muslim terrorist Other. For this I call on the work of Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy” and Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. I also will demonstrate that in contrast to the barbaric Muslim other, the physically wounded veteran is utilized to represent the proper, normative citizen based in neoliberal capitalism. For this I rely on Louis Althusser’s work on Ideology, specifically “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” and Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.

In this chapter I demonstrate that the physically wounded veteran plays a double role. First, the veteran in this public display gets depicted as a source of patriotism and pride. The veteran is looked up to as heroic, selfless, and sacrificing, all for the good of the country. The physical wounds that the veteran bears are a symbol for the sacrifices made for the country. We are made to feel proud that these individuals exist to defend and protect us. However, at the same time, the physically wounded veteran serves as a source of fear, as a very material reminder of the physical threat facing the country. The physical wounds serve as grim examples of what can happen to us if the nation does not remain vigilant in its “War on Terror.” The physically wounded veteran becomes proof for the veteran’s continued need to exist. Additionally, the fear instilled in the population by the physically wounded

veteran also serves to essentialize the Muslim population as an inherently evil and violent threat to the nation.

I explore how the wounded veteran's body becomes the symbol for the Muslim/Islamic threat to the nation. I examine how veterans receiving varied and non hand-to-hand combat wounds (such as IEDs) by non-identifiable combatants results in an entire group, in this case Muslims, bearing the blame and fueling the nation's constant fear of a terrorist threat. In fact, the wounded veteran is such a symbol to this cause that they are the common focus for media and political propaganda. They are allowed to be shown in parades, State of the Union Addresses, military advertising and recruitment campaigns, etc., a sharp contrast to other more devastating aspects of war, dead soldiers whose flag draped caskets are not permitted to be shown by media outlets. I argue that a wounded veteran plays a significant role in disciplining the nation toward national patriotism whereas conversely, dead soldiers insinuate defeat.

In addition, the "honoring" of veteran bodies serves to further the ruling capitalist ideology. It also regulates and represents to the people an image of acceptable normative citizenship. Through this process of honoring, the people are shown the primacy of individual, free-market choice. Because being a heroic soldier is tied to individual free choice in the capitalist sense, and being a soldier is connected with notions of proper citizenship, through the disciplining of the veteran body, proper citizenship gets linked to capitalist free market rationality. I will demonstrate that here we have a road map, a depiction of praiseworthy citizenship. It is my claim that this notion of proper citizenship has a racial component to it that connects ideas of whiteness with being a proper member of the capitalist system. In this way, the ideas of whiteness and fitness within capitalism, and thus proper citizenship, gets attached to the body of the physically wounded veteran. I will show

that this racialized proper citizenship of the physically wounded veteran is depicted in sharp contrast to those racialized groups deemed not in the category of whiteness, and by extension, not representing the correct relationship to the dominant capitalist logic. All too often these pathways to proper citizenship require those not already in the whiteness category to forgo, negate, or leave behind some aspect of their identity. So, for oppressed racialized groups, this ascendancy might require them to forget the nation's violent history towards members of their group because holding onto that knowledge would prevent someone from fully being able to embrace the nation's dominant capitalist ideology. By contrast, the veteran being depicted in capitalistic, free choice terms, represents the proper path of ascendancy. Capitalism gets linked to proper citizenship by way of passing through the heroic soldier.

### The Heroic Choice

In Chapter IV, I show that with the veteran being made the representative of free market neoliberalism, a shift occurs from a focus on heroic action to heroic choice. Instead of individual service members being labeled heroic because of some action, I demonstrate that all service members are labeled heroic equally for their decision to join the military. Furthermore, this distinction splits the population into warriors and everyone else. For the purposes of this chapter, I use Andrew Bacevich's work, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*, which highlights the separation between the group of people that join the military and those that don't, a circumstance of the all-volunteer force arising out of the Vietnam era.

The most prominent consequence of treating veterans in this public manner is that it fosters and reinforces the neoliberal notion of the primacy of an individual choice made by an individual rational agent. In this way the veteran gets depicted and reified as the ideal

consumer making the most selfless and honorable free-market decision. Rather than being viewed as a duty for which we all bear some responsibility, military service and the violence done in our name as a nation is viewed as one free-market choice among many. Veterans are heroes because they made that decision when they could have easily made another. Here, in this very notion, we see the shift from honoring soldiers because of some heroic *action* they did during war, to honoring soldiers because of their heroic *choice* to sign up for military service, now disconnected from any reality of their actual service record.

The assembled members of government present in that chamber on the evening of that 2014 State of the Union Address were applauding Sergeant Remsburg for over two minutes straight. But what were they really applauding? Was it Remsburg's injuries? His actual physical wounds? This would be a strange thing to applaud. You don't really applaud someone's injuries. This sounds odd when you stop to think about it. Is it his being blown up in a roadside bomb? Again this would be a curious thing to applaud, as it is pure chance, like being stuck by lightning. The fact of you being one of the people blown up by an IED (improvised explosive device) is hardly based on how you perform as a soldier generally. Is it his *recovery* from the injuries that is being applauded? Possibly, but this cannot be all that is being applauded as there are any number of people that could have been brought in and applauded for overcoming serious injury. No, there is something specific that is being applauded. I claim that the applause directed towards Remsburg was focused on his choice to join the military. This represents a shift and defining characteristic of the manner in which veterans are depicted post-9/11. Remsburg is not being applauded because he was blown up in Afghanistan, rather he is being applauded for his individual decision to join the military, which resulted in his being blown up in Afghanistan, but it is that initial decision that holds the most weight. This is the same logic that is behind the "thank you for your service"

comments that are stated whenever a person finds out someone is or has been in the military. No specifics are known about the individual's service record, combat experience, mental, emotional, or physical state. The veteran is simply being thanked for their decision to sign up for military service.

For the potential future soldiers witnessing the Address, Remsburg functions as a tool for recruitment. Look at what he has accomplished! He is an honorable person being given a standing ovation at the State of the Union Address. His applause can be your applause is the message being sent. He is someone who made a choice to join and ultimately sacrifice himself and is now being held up as a hero. You have a choice, and being a soldier is the right choice. This effect is similar to the effect on veterans because the performance is showing what acceptable veterans are supposed to be. However, because the people in this role have yet to experience the military setting, they are being disciplined into the roles and attitudes they feel they *should* have and attain. Whereas with people that are already veterans, the spectacle serves to repress, ignore, or silence thoughts and emotions that people already *do* have. In both instances, though, the public display at the State of the Union Address denies the people in these groups a portion of their humanity, the full range of human emotion and experience.

#### The Soldier's Honor is the Nation's Honor

In Chapter V, I demonstrate how this heroic, honorable identity of the veteran gets lifted out and made to stand in for the nation's honor as a whole. To illustrate how this process is accomplished, I utilize Elaine Scarry's work on torture, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. I argue that in both cases, torture and veteran honoring, control of visibility and invisibility is at play, and this control is an expression of agency and power. Ultimately I claim that in the current War on Terror, the U.S.'s use of the honorable

veteran hides the nation's dishonorable actions and prepares the nation's soldiers to partake in these very actions.

The honor of the veteran is based on their decision to join the military disconnected from any specifics about their service record. By this, all veterans are equal in being honored because they all equally made the decision to serve in the military. The blanket honoring of veterans' "heroic" choice, through the public disciplining examination of veterans, gets transplanted onto the nation as a whole, and thus the honor of the veteran stands in for the honor of the nation. Because the honor of the veteran is devoid of connection to specific actions conducted while serving and is only based on the decision to join, when this honor latches on to the nation, the honor of the nation is devoid of any connection to specific events in the world. The soldier is honorable by default, and therefore the U.S. is honorable by default. The American public is also disciplined by this process and thus accepts on its face that the U.S. is just and honorable, and therefore fails to live up to its responsibility to hold its government accountable for its actions. I conclude that this enables the U.S. to conduct perpetual war without restraint.

### Relational Ontology

In order to provide a response to this utilization of physically wounded veterans, in Chapter VI, I draw on the work of American pragmatist philosopher, Mary Parker Follett, and her notion of relational ontology. Follett puts forth the notion that what is real is the relations between entities, and not the entities engaged in the relating. The practice of dividing the world up into static parts provides a false picture of what is actually there. The use of physically wounded veterans as political props commits this very violation. The physically wounded veteran is isolated, universalized, and used to essentialize *the enemy*. In response, I suggest a two-stage solution. In the first stage, my suggestions would assist



veterans *within* the current state of war. I propose three new ways of relating to veterans. First, we must avoid thanking veterans in the abstract, and instead relate to each veteran personally. Second, we should avoid the very public displays of gratitude for veterans and service members at sporting, political, and educational events. Third, we must acknowledge the full extent of the harm and issues experienced by veterans, which includes the psychological, moral, social, and emotional harms, as well as the physical. The second stage is achieved through a thorough application of these three aspects. I ultimately argue that by application of these three new ways of relating to veterans, we would shift our focus from a glorification of war to a focus on peace.

While the present work is not directly engaged with Just War theory, I see it as providing a theoretical and practical expansion to this doctrine. While Just War theory primarily focuses on *jus ad bellum* (justice in going to war) and *jus in bello* (just action in the conduct of war), I see the present work as contributing to the growing body of literature in the area of *jus post bellum* (just conduct in the aftermath of war). Whether veterans are being treated fairly and justly after they return from war should also factor into the notion of justice when thinking about war in the general sense. Because the disciplining and regulating of veteran bodies being address in the present work functions ideologically to shape and prep soldiers for future wars, the *jus post bellum* nature of the current work can be viewed as being connected to the *jus ad bellum* of the next war. This connection can be seen in President Obama's address when he states at the end: "Cory [Remsburg] has grown stronger. Day by day, he's learned to speak again and stand again and walk again – and he's working toward the day when he can serve his country again." Because his mind and heart are strong, even though his body may be wounded, he will be able to serve his country again. This is the

overall message being conveyed about proper veteran identity in President Obama's Address specifically, and in the larger discourse surrounding veterans more generally.

## CHAPTER II

### SUBJECTIFICATION

In this chapter I lay out the theoretical background that will inform our understanding of physically wounded veterans throughout the present work. I begin by first explaining Michel Foucault's notion of panopticism from his work, *Discipline and Punish*. I then unpack the scene of physically wounded veteran, Cory Remsburg, being honored at the 2014 State of the Union Address and illustrate that this scene functions according to Foucauldian panopticism. In the second section of this chapter, I demonstrate that this particular disciplinary examination of physically wounded veterans encourages the masculine notion of self-justificatory radical independence and the primacy of a strong mind over the violability of the physical body. To inform my analysis in this section, I utilize Bonnie Mann's *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lesson From the War on Terror*. This chapter will demonstrate that the public display of physically wounded veterans shifts power among those watching the scene and disciplines each according to certain norms of nationalistic behavior.

#### Panopticism

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault provides an analysis of the changing nature of control and power from one that exerted itself through physical domination and absolute authority to one that functions in a dispersed and interconnected manner. According to Foucault's account subservience, docility, obedience, and conformity need no longer occur at the end of a whip, the butt of a rifle, or the darkness of the gallows. Rather, because power is now dispersed among the members of society, and not simply owned and possessed by a king or sovereign sitting on high, obedience and conformity to norms of behavior are achieved by self-imposition and self-regulation. Power is no longer merely a

force that is wielded to secure a specific action or behavior, but under this Foucauldian notion, power, which is discharged through discipline that is dispersed throughout the group, becomes a way of organizing a smoothly running, docile society. Discipline becomes a method, rather than an immediate application of a rule. “Discipline is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine.”<sup>6</sup> Foucault explains how this notion of power and discipline operate through the example of Jeremy Bentham’s prison design, the Panopticon.

Bentham’s prison, the Panopticon, consists of a central watchtower with a 360-degree view outward. Encircling this central tower are the prison cells stacked on top of each other all facing towards the center of the ring and the watchtower. From the central tower, an observer is able to see each and every cell, like a lighthouse’s beam sweeps across the entire horizon. In addition, from any given cell, the central tower is clearly visible, but it is not possible for the occupant of that cell to determine if anyone is presently peering in at that moment. Because of this inability, the prisoner must act as if she is constantly being watched. The indeterminacy of the observation achieves obedience. In this way, maximum control is achieved through minimal time and energy by way of enforcement being both readily visible (in the structure of the central tower) and unverifiable (in the indeterminacy of observation).

For Foucault, what is interesting, informative, and instructive about the Panoptic structure is that the prisoner “becomes the principle of his own subjection.”<sup>7</sup> Through the prisoner’s constant and unrelenting visibility, the feeling and knowledge that someone may

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 164.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

be watching at any moment, the regulatory drive on behavior comes from the prisoner herself. The whip and rifle have been internalized, and in this way “[v]isibility is a trap.”<sup>8</sup> The move from the darkness of the gallows to the light of the open panoptic scheme feels as if it is an improvement, one that the prisoner herself desires, but actually works against the prisoner by putting her in a mental prison and not simply a physical one. “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”<sup>9</sup> According to Foucault’s analysis, this panoptic schema is not simply present in the physical form of Bentham’s prison, but is actually how power through discipline works presently in the wider society. Because of power’s dispersion, we all have become the principle of our own subjection. Even outside the prison, a whip or a rifle is not needed to achieve disciplined obedience. Visibility is the key both inside and outside the prison, and it is my contention that the current political use of physically wounded veterans is precisely an example of this Foucauldian visibility.

Foucault states that “[t]he success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement [*sûr*] and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination.”<sup>10</sup> In the case of Cory Remsburg being applauded at the State of the Union Address, there are multiple disciplinary examinations taking place that circulate and shift back and forth, making it impossible at first glance to determine neatly who is the examined and who is the examiner, who is at the center of the Panopticon and who is being disciplined at the periphery. We do not simply have a veteran being applauded by a crowd. The performance of the disciplinary

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 170.

examination here is subtle and nuanced and definitely not limited to the State of the Union Address described here. The very public and visible mode of these veteran examinations, whether at States of the Union, NFL Super Bowls, or Veteran’s Day Parades, makes them function as examples of Foucauldian Panopticism. The veteran body is under certain, but unverifiable surveillance. Even the seemingly innocuous “thank you for your service” by an unknown passerby exerts this surveillance power, which is legitimated and codified, i.e. turned into a “central tower,” by the President’s surveillance of Remsburg. At the same time, the physically wounded veteran, on display and applauded, is a panoptic central tower of normalization making highly visible all that watch this display. In this chamber, power is circulating. “Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.”<sup>11</sup> The first step in deconstructing this use of physically wounded veterans is unpacking these relations in which veterans (and the rest of society) are caught up.

As Foucault states, in the Panopticon, “[v]isibility is a trap,” and it is no less true when physically wounded veterans are put on display and applauded.<sup>12</sup> Human beings desire recognition for the tasks we accomplish and the difficulties we overcome, whether for a good grade on a test, taking our first step, or surviving through war. This desire for recognition is part of us being social, political, and moral creatures. The fact that we care about what other people think and desire positive recognition connects us and keeps us from being isolated individuals. The pleasure we receive when this recognition goes well keeps us interacting with each other. It is a motivator for action. However, the desire for

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 200.

recognition has a negative component. It can be manipulated. The strong desire for the pleasure of recognition makes us vulnerable. We may lose sight of ourselves in our quest for it. A student may cheat in order to gain that good grade. It can constrain critical thinking. The act or identity that enabled the positive recognition may not be reflected upon. Also, the recognition may be distorted. It may be used to achieve some further obedience. The very public job promotion with the corner office can serve to make this employee compliant to the wishes, desires, and goals of the executives above her. The desire for recognition thus has a two-edged nature, and we must therefore be ever watchful and critical when recognition is at play.

We see this two-edged nature at work in the case of physically wounded veterans being recognized for their service and survival. The recognition that has a desirable quality to it, also disciplines the veteran on display to self-regulate behavior in order to be the type of veteran that is so honored. It is both positive and negative. The President's statements about Remsburg are not simply a report on who he is, but also guide Remsburg (and other soldiers and veterans) on who they *should* be. "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).<sup>13</sup> The applause and the honoring of veterans constructs them as useful bodies for the perpetuation of nationalistic ideologies, while also decreasing the likelihood of political disobedience and protest. The school principle that honors the top-performing student in a school-wide assembly has turned that student into an example for the perpetuation of norms that the principle finds appropriate, while also securing obedience from that student to go along with the dominant rules of the school, all without one detention or punishment given. Visibility is indeed a trap. By being put on display, veterans are disciplined into subjecting themselves to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 138.

self-inflicted norms of behavior like the honor roll student and a prisoner in Bentham's Panopticon.

“The body of the king, with its strange material and physical presence, with the force that he himself deploys or transmits to some few others, is at the opposite extreme of this new physics of power represented by panopticism.”<sup>14</sup> A tyrannical dictator ruling through direct force possesses absolute power. However, in Foucauldian panopticism, power is not possessed, but shifts and circulates. Obama's speech about Remsburg's military service, injuries, and recovery and the two-minute standing ovation that followed shift power from the President to Remsburg, making him the disciplining agent or visible central tower. Control and obedience that would have to be obtained through direct force and violence if conducted solely by the President is now achieved without physical violence or threat of force. In this way control, conformity, and obedience is obtained without a heavy hand. Everyone in the chamber applauds. Obedient actions are more easily taken up and expressed; they are felt to be more authentic and free because they have *passed through* a physically wounded veteran. The president doesn't explicitly tell anyone what to do in this scene. Instead, the desired actions are achieved through the seemingly voluntary support of the physically wounded veteran and not the President. The President, through his speech, creates Remsburg as a subject to be applauded. It is then this support of Remsburg that accomplishes the disciplinary conformity of everyone watching. This represents Foucault's two-way relation of power: “The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is an effect, it is the element of its articulation. The

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 208.



individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.”<sup>15</sup> Power is made capillary, extended out through its very application and circulation.

When we take a closer look at the portion of the State of the Union Address where President Obama speaks about Remsburg, we can see and feel this circulation of power shifting back and forth like a Rubin’s Vase image that shifts back and forth from a vase to two faces based on our focus. In one way, Remsburg, or any other physically wounded veteran selected by the President’s office to attend an event like this, is clearly the disciplined one. He is being subjectified through the power of the President and the members of government there in that chamber. He is visible in that chamber. The central tower is watching. He is controlled and obedient. However, at the same time, and depending on our focus, it is also clear that the presence of a physically wounded veteran is bringing about self-regulated discipline in everyone there in that chamber from the President all the way down. Here, Remsburg represents the central tower. He is commanding the scene, and the behavior of all in the chamber is regulated through being visible in his presence. Remsburg’s control of the scene in this way is not a personal, conscious decision on his part. It is a power exercised through the structural reality of the scene. Here again we see the two-edged nature of recognition. The physically wounded veteran’s honoring brings about an effect that is outside of his individual control. Try and imagine someone in that chamber not applauding along with everyone else and you get a sense for the power that is distributed to this physically wounded veteran. In this way, everyone involved in the event, from the President to Remsburg, from members of congress to other veterans, from military leaders to the average citizen, are subjectified in response to a physically wounded veteran being applauded in this public, official manner.

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98

“The panoptic mechanism is not simply a hinge, a point of exchange between a mechanism of power and a function; it is a way of making power relations function in a function, and of making a function function through the power relations.”<sup>16</sup> In these relations of power, cause and effect are not simple linear, one-way processes. When we see these events honoring physically wounded veterans as simply a crowd applauding in recognition of a physically wounded veteran, we miss this aspect of power’s mechanism. However, when we pay closer attention to how power relations function through a function, in this case the function of holding up and honoring physically wounded veterans, we can uncover the more hidden operations of power at work.

Ultimately Foucault wants to conduct an “*ascending* analysis of power, starting...from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics and then see how these mechanisms of power have been—and continue to be—invested, colonised [*sic*], utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination.”<sup>17</sup> This ascending analysis of power is also our task here in relation to the political use of physically wounded veterans. Power has worked its way out to the periphery, and so we must follow it.

### Mind Over Matter

The physical body has been conceptualized as a problem to be overcome through out much of Western thought. Plato says in the *Phaedo*, “If we are ever to have pure knowledge of something, we must be separated from the body and view things by themselves with the soul by itself.”<sup>18</sup> The body is theorized as and felt to be a hindrance, a

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 206-7.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 66d-e.

prison, a disability. Those most able to rise above the encumbrances of the body were the true heroes. Descartes' dualism furthered this notion that the mind and the body are separate. Through his famous claim, *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am, the mind, thought, becomes the proof of existence. Again the body is to be overcome. Further, there is a gendered component to the denigration of the physical body. Woman is thought to be a victim of the body, forever chained to this flesh, marked by her menstruation and pregnancy, and unable to rise out of it. Man, as opposed to Woman, is defined by his ability to escape the confines of the body through its antithesis, reason. He alone can wield his keen rationality to break the chains imprisoning him in the dark cave of corporeality.

Our language and actions surrounding veterans in the current, post 9/11 era, particularly the use of physically wounded veterans as political props, continues this masculine rejection of the body in favor of the rational, strong mind. During his speech, President Obama described Rensburg's injuries, recovery, months-long coma, shrapnel in his brain, and his learning to walk and talk again. The President, as narrator of the story, disciplines and normalizes veteran bodies and identities by his depiction of this particular physically wounded veteran. Mental strength and toughness is valorized over and above the fragility and violability of the physical body. Through his statements about Rensburg, that he is "sharp as a tack" and "like the Army he loves, like the America he serves, Sergeant First Class Cory Rensburg never gives up, and he does not quit," Obama reinforces the notion that the body is a limitation to be overcome through a strong mind and will. Though the physically wounded veteran's body is broken and damaged, the fact that his mind is strong and he will not quit becomes the desirable and laudable characteristic of the honorable veteran.

In this way, the honoring of physically wounded veterans becomes a performance with a message about the specific kinds of veterans the nation desires: Lost your legs in a roadside blast, good to go. Suffered burns on your body and lost one eye, good to go. Suffering from PTSD and are an alcoholic spouse abuser, not so much. One of the twenty-two veterans a day who commit suicide, definitely not. That Cory Remsburg was sitting in that chair at the State of the Union Address (and not twenty-two empty chairs to represent the daily veteran suicide count, for example) *does* disciplining work in terms of defining acceptable, normative veteran identities and bodies as those that may be physically wounded, but are mentally strong. Here we have invisibility through visibility. The continued invisibility of psychological wounds is perpetuated through the *visible presence* of a particular kind of veteran, one with physical wounds, but a strong mind. However, let's imagine for a moment twenty-two empty chairs at the State of the Union Address. What could invisibility in this situation make visible for us? Picture President Obama pointing out the empty chairs and saying that they represent the twenty-two veterans that took their own life that day. Applause would certainly not be the response. Through these empty chairs, the discussion and engagement about the actual costs of war that we are not currently having would suddenly become patently visible. Those we choose to make visible says a great deal about those we want to stay hidden, another component of the two-edged nature of recognition.

This decision about what types of veterans get this kind of recognition regulates an appropriate patriotic and nationalistic sacrificial masculinity that views physical injury as the ultimate display of devotion to the country, which diminishes and trivializes all of those veterans that are wounded, but simply not in this same physical way, but rather are experiencing wounds that are social, mental, emotional, psychological, etc. Horrific nightmares, emotional disconnection, and thoughts of suicide do not get applauded as great

sacrifices for the nation. In this way, “[m]aintaining a pretense of caring about soldiers, state and society actually collaborate in betraying them.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lesson From the War on Terror*, Bonnie Mann argues that the United States in its War on Terror from 9/11 onward can be understood to be operating under a specific gendered identity, that of a masculinity that imagines itself to be inviolable, exceptional, radically independent, and self-justificatory. In the nation’s honoring of physically wounded veterans, we can see these very aspects put into play. “[Judith] Butler describes the sovereign subject as one that builds itself on the conceit of its own inviolability.”<sup>20</sup> The normative physically wounded veteran is depicted and represented as incapable of being violated, conquered, or undone. His mind is strong. He does not quit. He will serve his country again. The bodily wounds are just obstacles, merely something to be overcome, like the hindrance Plato desired to get passed. “The sovereign man, in essence, declares his own state of exception, in which he fantasizes that he is no longer subject to human vulnerability and intersubjective dependency (i.e. to the human condition).”<sup>21</sup> Through his will, exercised independently, the physically wounded veteran perseveres, or so we are made to believe.

Mann tells us: “We are embodied, limited, vulnerable, and mortal creatures. We are reminded of this in our embodied relation to nature, and to others. The masculine subject attempts to avoid this reality through a process of self justification which is (apparently paradoxically) mediated by woman/women.”<sup>22</sup> The physically disabled veteran serves as a reminder of this embodiment, which would seem to be a reason to avoid the very visible and

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<sup>19</sup> Bacevich, *Breach of Trust*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Mann, *Sovereign Masculinity*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

public display of these bodies if the nation wants to engender a sense of inviolability. However, the process of self-justification operates in just this way. The physically wounded body is overcome and surpassed by way of the sovereign, unencumbered mind of the veteran that will not quit. Again the feminine is characterized by being stuck in the body, mired in the emotions and feelings that permeate it, whereas the masculine sovereign agent is able to rise above the destruction and prison of the body through his self-possessed exceptional nature. The frustration with the fragility of the body, marked by anger when it is made manifest in a physically wounded veteran, but also shame because these wounds remind us that we in fact are not inviolable, has been turned into achievement and accomplishment through overcoming.

“Masculine justification, then, seeks to rupture or break the intersubjective structure of human existence in favor of a mystified form of this same structure, in which the existential and material risks of our dependence on one another are put out of play.”<sup>23</sup> This represents the conversion from vulnerability to sovereignty, and is enacted in the President’s speech. Obama’s characterization of Remsburg’s recovery gives the illusion that it happened in a vacuum where the physically wounded veteran, through pure strength of mind, overcame the limitations of his injured body. Except for a small reference to “care-givers like his father,” this portion of the speech, and the manner in which veterans are honored throughout society, enforces a notion of radical independence that belies the reality of our interconnectedness as human beings. When veterans are struggling with reintegration and suffering through feelings of isolation, the reinforcement of radical independence through the political use of physically wounded veterans is nothing short of violence against them.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 44.

Furthermore, holding up and applauding the physical wounds of veterans disciplines all those watching into believing that emotionally and psychologically wounded veterans carry unacceptable wounds unbecoming of a desirable veteran identity. The fact that the President depicts Remsburg as having an injured body, but a sharp mind furthers the notion of masculinity that imagines the body as simply a tool of the mind and a body wounded in the service of the nation as a mark of honor, while an injured mind in the same service remains a disgrace and a source of shame. The visible absence of emotionally, psychologically, and socially wounded veterans, combined with the hyper-presence and visibility of physically wounded veterans, regulates the identity of veterans by creating an environment where those veterans with wounded minds, hearts, and souls must remain hidden. To openly display these kinds of wounds, the veteran risks losing the presumption of possessing a strong mind, the marker of the honorable soldier and veteran. Here we see Mann's claim ringing true: "The shame that structures sovereign manhood is especially good at binding the self into projects of patriotism or nationalism that disrupt critical cognition and moral concern."<sup>24</sup> With the physically wounded veteran thus subjectified into docility, he can then be utilized to further nationalistic goals and ideologies.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 114.

## CHAPTER III

### UTILIZATION

In the previous chapter, I established how the physically wounded veteran is turned into a particular kind of subject through Foucauldian panoptic examination. In this chapter, I first explain the shift in veteran identity that occurred from the Vietnam era until the present day and that the present day hero worship of veterans can be seen as arising out of the poor treatment of Vietnam-era veterans. However, I also show that a moral equality between veterans and civilians, which existed in the Vietnam era, is presently lacking. Next, I illustrate that this veteran subject is utilized in order to essentialize the enemy, the terrorist Muslim, as inherently barbaric. For this section, I rely on Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* and Andrea Smith's "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing." Finally, I argue that the physically wounded veteran serves to depict the U.S., contrary to the barbaric terrorist Muslim, as equal and just in neoliberal, capitalist terms. I utilize Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" for this purpose. In addition, I demonstrate that this stark dichotomy between the terrorist Muslim other and the just physically wounded veteran normalizes a notion of proper citizenship according to capitalist ideals that is raced, classed, and gendered. For this, I call on Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.

#### From Vietnam to the War on Terror

When we see veterans being honored, whether at a sporting event, a school's convocation or graduation, or at a political rally or State of the Union address, it appears to be a positive acknowledgement of service that in the past generation's Vietnam-era was lacking. Indeed, much of the fanfare and hero worship around soldiers and veterans today



can be understood as a potential corrective to the Vietnam-era response to veterans. During the Vietnam War, the soldiers and veterans became the symbol of the unpopular war. The people that went and fought were connected with the war itself. Anger with the war was directed at the individual soldier returning from combat. The spitting on and calls of “baby killer” are two examples of how this frustration with the war was carried out. Bob Feist, an Army Vietnam veteran and retired Navy pilot, cites specific examples: “I am not aware of many Vietnam vets who were not subjected to some disrespect, either personal or from the culture that called us “baby killers.” We were shamed and embarrassed. My car (with a military base sticker) was “egged.” I bought a wig to hide my military haircut.” Beyond just his own experience, “spitting incidents were reported by Pulitzer Prize winners Max Frankel in the New York Times (November 1969) and Carl Bernstein in the Washington Post (May 1970).”<sup>25</sup> However, dividing up the population dichotomously and neatly into people that protested the war and those that served in the war would erase all the Vietnam veterans that became a strong, vocal portion of the anti-war movement upon returning from deployment. Also, this simple division would erase the equality expressed between the two group’s engagement with each other.

In once sense, we can see the Vietnam veteran and Vietnam War protester as opposites, as mutually exclusive categories that have nothing in common. They can be viewed as having hatred for the other side. However, in another way, if we look at it more closely, there is a similarity, an equality between the Vietnam veteran and protester. The Vietnam-era protester and veteran each holds the other accountable and responsible for their actions and choices. The protester holds the veteran responsible for the violence conducted during the war. The veteran holds the protester accountable for the decision to

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<sup>25</sup> Feist, “Disrespect for Vietnam Vets is Fact, Not Fiction,” June 26, 2012.

not fight in the war. Neither side occupies a location of moral purity outside of responsibility. The act of going to serve when your draft number was called or burning your draft card in defiance of the war are both equally political acts. The engagement with the other side, even when violent or cruel, expresses this equality in political and moral terms. It also sheds light on the large number of Vietnam veterans joining the anti-war movement post service. Because there is a moral equality in political terms, the movement to the other side, from veteran to anti-war protester, makes sense. They both represent political actions in the public sphere. In the current post-9/11 era, we have lost this equality in political and moral terms.

Now, the veteran has been disconnected from the war in which he fights. Today, we hear claims to support the troops even if we don't support the war. While trying to rectify the treatment of Vietnam veterans, this saying breaks the moral and political equality between the soldier that fights in the war and the rest of the population. The soldier, and by extension the veteran, are not to be engaged as political, moral actors. The attempt to separate the soldier from the war pushes the soldier and veteran to a location of moral purity beyond the realm of political responsibility. The soldier and veteran must be supported. End of story. While a potential corrective to cruel and violent treatment of Vietnam veterans, the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. The reality is that protest against and political involvement with war has not become more vocal, but has been quieted. The separation between the soldier and the war in which she fights, rather than bringing about a more intense focus on the actual decisions regarding political use of violence, has brought about a lack of engagement in war. The support for the troops has become a stand-in for political engagement with the act of war itself. The soldier and veteran are freed from moral

and political responsibility, and thus the body of the veteran, now unencumbered by political and moral engagement, is available to be used by the state.

Because of the veteran's subjectification through the Foucauldian examination of being so visibly honored, as discussed in Chapter II, the veteran becomes a useful vehicle for the normalization of nationalistic behavior. Said another way, while the veteran is being honored, he is also fulfilling desires of the state. Rather than a political, moral actor in the public sphere, he has become coopted by the national ideology. Specifically, the physically wounded veteran so visibly on display perpetuates the absolutist logic of the War on Terror. "In militarist thinking, human bodies are subordinated to abstract causes," and the physically wounded veteran is just so utilized.<sup>26</sup> Rather than a complex symbol for the injustice and inhumanity of war, the physically wounded veteran operates as a justification and rationality for the continuation of the fight, now purified from any moral or political nuances.

### Essentializing the Enemy

In *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Sara Ruddick quotes Jean Bethke Elshtain: "One basic task of a state of war is to portray the enemy in terms as absolute and abstract as possible in order to distinguish as sharply as possible the act of killing from the act of murder...It is always "*the enemy*," a "pseudo concrete universal."<sup>27</sup> For war to continue with as little push back from the population as possible, the human beings on the other side of the battle lines must be represented in as absolute and abstract terms as possible. It is a process of dehumanization. Adults and children are not dying; rather *the enemy is being neutralized*. Bodies on both sides are not broken, destroyed, and killed; rather *our way of life is being preserved*. People are not experiencing post-traumatic stress, emotional detachment,

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<sup>26</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 146.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

substance abuse, and suicide; rather *it is a fight for freedom*. Through the public and highly visible utilization of physically wounded veterans, *the enemy* in the War on Terror, is further essentialized and dehumanized. *The enemy is a terrorist*.

The veteran would not be physically wounded if not for this group, in this case Muslims. Andrea Smith explains the necessity of having a threat in her work, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy.” In it she lays out three sets of ideas that work together to uphold the logic of the present structure based in White Supremacy. They are the notions of Slavery and Capitalism, Genocide and Colonialism, and Orientalism and War. This third “logic of Orientalism marks certain people or nations as inferior and as posing a constant threat to the well-being of empire.”<sup>28</sup> This is based on Edward Said’s idea of Orientalism as “the process of the West defining itself as a superior civilization by constructing itself in opposition to an “exotic” but inferior “Orient.”<sup>29</sup> Because these groups marked “Orientals” function as a constant threat to the superiority and survival of the West, Orientalist logic “serves as the anchor for war, because it allows the United States to justify being in a constant state of war to protect itself from its enemies.”<sup>30</sup>

Prior to the War on Terror, the Soviet Union and Communism were the enemies of the U.S. Here the ideological lines were clear. It was the religious, moral, and capitalist U.S. versus the atheist, immoral, and communist USSR. However according to historian Andrew Bacevich, in the current War on terror, “[w]hen it comes to providing an ideological justification for U.S. policy...the pivot from communism to Islamism that occurred between 1989 and 2001 has yielded at best problematic results. No longer a source of solidarity as

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, “Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” 68.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

during the Cold War, religion has become an impediment, notably complicating any action involving the use of U.S. military power.”<sup>31</sup> The current enemy is not a godless archenemy easily contrasted to the goodness of the religious and Christian U.S. A political or military leader standing up and saying that they are Muslim and we are Christian, therefore we are at war is not going to be effective. This notion would directly go against the ideology of the U.S., which fashions itself as a place of religious freedom.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the justification is barbarity versus civility, where barbarity is linked to notions of deprivation and civility is linked to economic freedom. The broken bodies of returning soldiers are utilized to further this narrative.

The physically wounded veteran, bombed, burned, paralyzed, limb-less, being put on display in order to be “honored” and “thanked” serves to perpetuate and feed this logic of barbarity. The wounded veteran’s body becomes the site and physical representation for the barbaric and faceless terrorist threat to the U.S.’s survival. Because so many wounds occur through explosive devices and the like, the combatant is unknown and thus cannot be pinned down and identified; because of this fact, the violence, threat, and barbarity of the terrorist acts get transcribed onto the entire group, in this case Muslims.<sup>33</sup> The enemy is not seen and so the actions become representative of the entire group. The physically wounded veteran and his injured body become a specific example of this indeterminate threat.

It’s a telling fact that the flag-draped caskets of U.S. soldiers killed in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq were not permitted to be shown by media outlets, whereas physically *wounded* soldiers are consistently paraded around in “support of our troops.” A dead soldier

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<sup>31</sup> Bacevich, *Breach of Trust*, 163.

<sup>32</sup> This is of course not to insinuate that the religious argument is not made. It is certainly wide spread, but it is not embraced and touted by the leaders of the nation.

<sup>33</sup> We see this essentializing of *the enemy* occurring in *American Sniper*, the book and movie about Navy Seal sniper, Chris Kyle, where the Iraqi population is represented as being “savages” and not worthy of democracy.

in a casket only displays failure and defeat, a stark and absolute reminder of our fragility and violability. A physically wounded body, however, can accomplish the seemingly contradictory achievements of instilling pride and patriotism in the nation and continued fear and vigilance towards a barbaric and ever-present enemy. A dead soldier is a hindrance, whereas a wounded soldier can still be utilized. Physically wounded veterans having to serve this role does not help them reintegrate into society nor does it work toward the larger notions of justice and peace. A physically wounded veteran should make us want to stop war, not be used to garner more support for continued violence.

The physically wounded veteran plays a double role. First, the physically wounded veteran serves as a source of fear, as a very material reminder of the physical threat facing the country. The physical wounds serve as grim examples of what can happen to us if the nation does not remain vigilant in its “War on Terror.” However, at the same time, the veteran in this instance gets depicted as a source of patriotism and pride. The veteran is looked up to as heroic, selfless, and sacrificing, all for the good of the country. The physical wounds that the veteran bears are a symbol for the sacrifices made for the country. We are made to feel proud that these individuals choose to defend and protect us. The physically wounded veteran represents all that is good about the U.S. He becomes a living embodiment of the nation’s freedom. The physically wounded veteran in this way gets utilized to perpetuate the dominant ideology of the country: neoliberal, free-market, capitalism.

### Neoliberalism

Here in this section I introduce the notion of choice. At this point I am specifically focused on choice as an attribute of free-market capitalism, as it is contrasted with the terrorist Other. Choice in this section is investigated as a component of the ideology of the nation. The concept of choice as it relates to political action and responsibility of the soldier

and veteran will be further developed in Chapter IV. Exploring this broader understanding of choice now will situate the more specific analysis of choice that follows in the next chapter.

The physically wounded veteran put on display essentializes the barbarous enemy, but also represents the U.S.'s sharp contrast to this restrictive, violent, Muslim Other. The U.S., through the body of the veteran, is depicted as just, free, moral, and democratic. Through the sacrifice and honorable service of the veteran, the U.S. makes a statement about the superiority of its system and its people: We are not restrictive. We are just and free. Just look at our veteran here. He had the choice to do as he wished, and he volunteered to serve his country. No force was needed. No barbarity. And look what was done to him for this honorable decision. He was bombed, broken, and injured by the vicious enemy. The veteran had the choice to serve in the military or not, and it is this attribute, free-market choice, that gets highlighted as emblematic of what makes the U.S. great. In this way, the honoring of veterans supports the dominant capitalist ideology, and thus operates as an ideological state apparatus in the Althusserian sense.

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser puts forth the notion of ideology as the means through which the relations of production in the capitalist mode of production are reproduced. Here, ideology can be thought of as that which gets the members of society to continue to go along with the dominant structure of society. Althusser brings up two different state apparatuses that accomplish this conformity: Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). "What distinguishes the ISAs from the (Repressive) State Apparatus is the following basic difference: the Repressive State Apparatus functions by 'violence', whereas the Ideological

State Apparatuses function ‘by ideology’.”<sup>34</sup> The RSAs are institutions like the police, prisons, and the law, those institutions that directly enforce conformity through force or threat of force. The ISAs include institutions like the family, schools, religious groups, and political organizations. In ISAs, conformity to the dominant societal logic is not achieved through direct violence or threat of violence, but rather through ideological desires for being accepted as part of a particular group. In this way there are similarities between Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses and Foucault’s panoptic application of power. Both achieve conformity through self-regulation rather than through external applications of physical force.

Althusser highlights the fact that it is the ruling ideology of the class in power that unifies the diverse and contradictory nature of the plurality of individual ISAs. This ruling ideology achieves harmony between the RSA and ISAs, both of which are necessary for the achievement of the reproduction of the relations of production. So important are the ISAs to the reproduction, and thus success, of the capitalist mode of production, since “*no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses,*” Althusser claims that the ISAs “may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle.”<sup>35</sup>

We can see how this dominant logic of the capitalist mode of production infiltrates an institution of the Ideological State Apparatuses by looking at the school system. Conformity to the dominant ruling ideology is achieved by the school system operating more and more through capitalist logic. Education becomes more about the economics of grades, arbitrary bell schedules, and conformity to rules and authority, than about critical

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<sup>34</sup> Althusser, “Ideological State Apparatuses,” 111.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 112-13.



interrogation of power and collective responsibility to society. Here in this environment, being a good student represents an ability to operate under the ruling ideology of capitalism. The educational system, so infiltrated, serves to reproduce the relations of capitalism by forming children into the roles they will carry out after school. Grades become pay for work completed. Obedience to the rules of the classroom becomes obedience to the owners of the means of production, and narrowly defined achievement on standardized tests becomes conformity to expectations of the workplace. In the same way, the ideology of military service has been infiltrated by this same ruling ideology of capitalism.

Military service is no longer understood as a political action engaging all of society. With the draft being ended in the post-Vietnam era, military service is now able to operate under the logic of the ruling capitalist ideology. Free-market volunteerism is now the ideology of military service. It is one possible choice among many. The physically wounded veteran being applauded furthers the primacy of this logic in two ways: he fought to protect the ideals of this capitalist free market, and his decision to fight represents a free market decision. Here, free-market capitalism gets normalized and codified through the body of the physically wounded veteran. He becomes the exemplar of the neoliberal entrepreneur. Through individual fortitude and hard work, he has fashioned himself into the person being honored. However, there is a catch, a hidden reality at play. As Althusser tells us “[i]deology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”<sup>36</sup>

When it comes to veterans, this neoliberal notion of free-market volunteerism in military service obscures the very real and ever-present material conditions underlying the reality of serving in the military. People join the military for a wide variety of reasons. Some join to pay for college. Some join to make a jumpstart to a better economic situation. Some

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 123.

join as it is the only way out of their current situation. Some join because there is simply no other option. For some, it's jail or the military. Holding up military service as a symbol of the purity of free-choice neoliberalism, obscures the unequal material reality of the pool of potential recruits. Furthermore, after service ends, veterans face difficulty reintegrating to the civilian world. Jobs skills don't easily transfer into the civilian sector. The money the veteran earned for college does not work in the precise way it was described by the recruiter, thus the difficulty, isolation, and expense of college becomes a stark contrast to the world the veteran knew during his service. Physical injury, mental and emotional traumas, and self-medication through drugs and alcohol further the difficulty of obtaining and living out the American Dream of neoliberal capitalism. For many, the story of entrepreneurial self-fashioning being told is an illusion. As in the wider society, this neoliberal ideology "represents [an] imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."

Furthermore, linking military service with neoliberal free-choice ideology negates the very real hurdles that need to be overcome in order to get people to kill for their country. Intense socialization is necessary. As Sara Ruddick says: "If men were so eager to be fighters, we would not need drafts, training in misogyny, and macho heroes, nor would we have to entice the morally sensitive with myths of patriotic duty and just cause."<sup>37</sup> Rather than being an example of free market choice, military service and war fighting needs much assistance in order to get itself off the ground. It is not merely freely chosen as one choice among many equally viable options. Instead, capitalist notions of free choice and patriotism motivate, foster, and color people's military service. The cause is mistaken for the effect. Rather than an exercise in free choice, military service has become an action conditioned by the ideology of free choice. Either, I must serve in order to defend free choice or I have no other choice,

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<sup>37</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 152.

so I must serve. Portraying military service in this light, as the symbol for the expression of free choice, is yet another way that ideology creates imaginary relationships to the real conditions of existence.

Finally, physically wounded veterans, and the neoliberal free choice ideology upheld through their representation, creates a narrative about desirable, acceptable citizenship that potentially leaves out certain members of the society. Because being a heroic soldier is tied to individual free choice in the capitalist sense, and being a soldier is connected with notions of proper citizenship, through the disciplining of the veteran body, proper citizenship gets linked to capitalist free market rationality. Here we have a road map, a depiction of praiseworthy citizenship, a model to be followed. However, the depiction is incomplete. It is an ideological illusion. The narrative accomplishes this exclusion of certain members of society through its depiction of this entrepreneurial, unencumbered self-fashioning as equally accessible to all members of society.

The veteran fits in with the narrative of capitalism, or more rightly, is coopted by the dominant logic of capitalism. The veteran is depicted as being the example to be followed: If you can't make it out there in this society defined by free choice, it's your fault. Look at what these veterans accomplished. Through this example, the people are shown the primacy of individual, free-market choice and made to believe it is equally accessible to every member of society. This particular depiction of the veteran obscures the fact that many people view those that join the military as potential refuse. The average kid joining the military is imagined as having no other real option or nothing else to offer the capitalist society. For some this may very well be the case. Joining the military may be their one chance to *make it*. Military service, rather than being proof that the system works, may actually illustrate the limitation of the system. The military becomes an example of the success of free choice,

where it may actually be more of an example of the limitation of choice. Furthermore, the focus on neoliberal unencumbered free choice as the ideology of the nation negates the cultural, racial, and historical conditions that brought the country to the current moment. The equality that is imagined as arising out of entrepreneurial free choice is connected with a particular notion of gender and race, specifically masculinity and whiteness.

Jasbir Puar discusses the notion of the “ascendancy of whiteness,” which “is ensconced in (neo)liberal ideologies of difference—market, cultural, and the convergence of both—that correspond to “fitness-within-capitalism” and ultimately promise “incorporation into the American Dream.”<sup>38</sup> Whiteness in this sense can be thought of as acceptable citizenship. In this way, the path to acceptable citizenship, to whiteness, can be traced through these corridors that make one “fit” for capitalism. Race and gender are categories that get read through economic notions of proper citizenship. Rather than just being about skin color, genitalia, or body type, race and gender become markers to identify those members of society that have attained proper citizenship in relation to neoliberal free market capitalism as well as those that are seen as not fitting into the narrative or actively working against it. We can see this playing out currently in the “Black Lives Matter” movement and protests in Ferguson, MO and Baltimore, MD, just to name two. Destruction of property in response to racial injustices by bodies labeled as black is depicted by media as hurting small business owners and destroying the communities’ economic capabilities. The violence and protests get read through “fitness within capitalism,” the protesters being represented as not working, on welfare, and thus not normative citizens. By comparison, the destruction and violence following a sporting event or during spring break celebrations resulting from people labeled as white is not depicted in the same manner, but rather as revelry and exuberance.

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<sup>38</sup> Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 26.

Furthermore, protests like we see in Ferguson and Baltimore are bringing to light the illusion of this neoliberal, free choice narrative. The anger, frustration, and violence are in response to the very real way that these communities have been violated by economic, educational, and legal harms, partly the result of neoliberal cuts in public spending. In this way, the protesters, rather than being viewed as heroes fighting against injustice, are depicted as the problem itself. They become the non-normative citizens, the unfit for capitalism. Because of this representation, they are put in direct comparison to their antithesis, the physically wounded veteran.

A specific example of this distinction is visible in a recent social media meme about protests involving the American flag. The original picture was of two black women standing on the American flag with raised, clenched fists. The meme adds writing to the picture in response to standing on the flag. It reads: "I don't care who you are. I don't care what your cause is. If I see you doing this. [sic] I will punch you in your stupid fucking face. Recognize the irony of disrespecting a symbol of the nation that protects your right to disrespect its symbol. Most other countries would have you shot."<sup>39</sup> Here, as in many instances, the flag becomes the symbol of the veteran's service, and the veteran takes on the responsibility of protecting it. In addition, a statement is made about who actually has the right to use the flag and in what way. The veteran gets depicted as having earned the freedom that the flag represents, whereas the protester does not possess that right. The protector of the flag is entitled to "punch [the protester] in [their] stupid fucking face," but the protester is not entitled to step on the flag in protest, even though this freedom is supposed to be an aspect that the veteran fought for and what makes the U.S. great. That is an irony the meme does

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<sup>39</sup> Facebook post. Tony Jansen. May 4, 2015.  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155446107305004&set=p.10155446107305004&type=1&theater>

not mention, the irony of threatening people when they exercise freedoms you claim to support. The discussion is refocused around proper citizenship, rather than the issue the protester is highlighting. Here we see how this narrative of proper citizenship depoliticizes the population by enforcing a notion of who is allowed a political voice.

The protester against racism, sexism, and other injustices represents the problem, and their fight is put in direct contrast to the service of the veteran. The protester is incapable of success in the free market and is working against this system, whereas the veteran is representative of the success of the system. The veteran fought for the continued success and protection of the free market system, epitomized in the nation of the U.S. Also, his honorable service is representative of the successful application of entrepreneurial free choice. Again, military service and war fighting has moved away from a political act that engages the entire nation to a free market choice that both works to protect the sanctity of the system from external destruction, while at the same time internally serving as the example to be followed.

The illusion of this neoliberal ideology and the “ascendancy to whiteness” that it entails requires those groups and people not already in the whiteness category to forgo, negate, or leave behind some aspect of their identity or material history. So, for a Native American, this ascendancy might require them to forget or leave behind the nations’ violent history towards indigenous groups and the almost total eradication of these peoples. Holding on to that knowledge, the knowledge of indigenous genocide and its role in supporting capitalist expansion would make someone less “fit” for capitalism. Nor does this need to be simply about historical events, but a turning away from the continued oppression and suffering of indigenous populations would also need to take place in order to fully embrace the ascendancy and become fit for capitalism. In like fashion, the veteran being depicted in

capitalistic, free choice terms, represents a path of ascendancy, but again one that is not without its need to forget or leave behind the knowledge of capitalism's injustice, oppression, and violence. So, the free-market decision to serve in the military makes one fit for capitalism, but that service may be premised on the fact of denying that same freedom to others based on religion, race or ethnicity. Again, an imaginary relationship to people's true material conditions is perpetuated by the linkage of free choice and proper citizenship achieved by way of passing through the heroic veteran.

The most prominent consequence of honoring and applauding physically wounded veterans is that it fosters and reinforces the neoliberal notion of the primacy of an individual choice made by an individual rational agent. In this way the veteran gets depicted and reified as the ideal consumer making the most selfless and honorable free-market decision. Rather than being viewed as a duty for which we all bear some responsibility, military service and the violence done in our name as a nation is viewed as one free-market choice among many. Veterans are heroes because they made that decision when they could have easily made another. Again, the actual freedom of that choice is obscured. Military recruiters actively go into places where kids are viewed as being out of options, failing out of school or about to go to jail. Yet, the veteran is held up as being the exemplar of complete, unrestrained free choice. Here we see how these contradictory notions are working together to create a new idea around military service.

Here the neoliberal choice to join the military replaces a different notion of veteran identity. It is no longer heroic action that is most to be honored, but rather the heroic choice to join the military in the first place. Here, in this very notion, we see the shift from honoring soldiers because of some heroic *action* they did during war, to honoring soldiers because of their heroic *choice* to sign up for military service, now disconnected from any

reality of their actual service record or material reality prior to joining. This is ultimately the aspect that the elected officials in that chamber during the State of the Union Address were applauding, Remsburg's *choice* to join the military. The veteran, utilized to essentialize the enemy and further the neoliberal ideology, has now, as a result, been transformed.



## CHAPTER IV

### TRANSFORMATION

Building off of the previous chapter's discussion of neoliberal choice, this chapter will demonstrate that the view and understanding of military service has shifted from a focus on the heroic actions of particular service members to a focus on the heroic *choice* all service members made in deciding to join the military. I claim that this shift neutralizes differences among actual veterans by enforcing upon them this predetermined heroic identity applied equally to all service members. Furthermore, the shift to treating all service members as heroes because of their choice to join radically separates those that serve from the rest of the population. This separation fosters a lack of political engagement on both sides, the civilian who is supposed to simply *support the heroes* and the veteran, who, already a hero by definition, has nothing political left to do.

In this chapter I am utilizing and building off of the work of Andrew Bacevich, specifically his book, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*. Bacevich is an historian at Boston University, West Point graduate, Vietnam veteran, and retired Lieutenant Colonel. As a historian his work has focused on the shifting nature of war fighting and the soldier in the U.S. context. The work I am relying on here, *Breach of Trust*, discusses the separation between the civilian and the soldier occurring in the post-9/11 era's War on Terror. Bacevich charts the rise of the volunteer military in the post-Vietnam era and highlights the way that this elective service has enabled perpetual war freed from wider public engagement. As a historian, he pays particular attention to the process of this shift, recounting specific legal, military, and political occurrences from Vietnam until the present day. His discussion of the separation between civilian and soldier, an outcome of the all-volunteer military and the populations' hero-worship of this warrior class, aligns with the

argument I am making here in this chapter. However, I further develop the philosophical nature of choice as it functions as an ideology in society. While Bacevich focuses primarily on the civilian/soldier divide and the disengagement of the civilian population, I argue that this heroic label applied to all service members gets utilized to stand in for the actions of the nation as a whole. I set the stage for this move here in this chapter, and then develop it more fully in Chapter V.

#### From Heroic Actions to Heroic Choice

During the State of the Union Address the applause directed towards Remsburg was focused on his choice to join the military, disconnected from his actions during service. Even though his extensive injuries by a roadside bomb were highlighted by President Obama, Remsburg is not being applauded because he was blown up in Afghanistan, rather he is being applauded for his individual decision to join the military, which resulted in his being blown up in Afghanistan. It is that initial decision that holds the most moral weight. He serves as representative of all veterans and service members that made this heroic choice to join the military. This represents a shift and defining characteristic of the manner in which veterans are depicted post-9/11. While we still have awards, like the medal of honor, that single out heroic actions done by certain service member, the dominant narrative in the nation post-9/11 is to talk about *our heroes who wear the uniform* and *the heroes that are protecting our freedoms*. Rather than being an identity reserved for those few and rare instances where an individual goes above and beyond the call of duty, heroism has been universally applied to everyone who serves in the military. No specifics need to be known about the individual veteran's service record, combat experience, mental, emotional, or physical state, nor their reason for and/or circumstances of their enlistment in the military. The veteran is simply heroic for their decision to sign up for military service. The extent to which free choice has

become the primary characteristic of military service is evident in legal recourse to secure equal access to military service around gender. “To hasten that day [when gender equality would be achieved], female officers in 2012 sued the army, charging that barring them from combat violated their constitutional rights, above all the right to exercise individual choice.”<sup>40</sup>

When veterans are treated as heroes simply for being in the military disconnected from their actual actions and experiences during their term of service, an ideology is created that veterans, all veterans, are honorable and just by default. Veterans as a group get totalized, reduced to nothing more than that, the hero. While it may seem to be a compliment and sign of recognition to be referred to as a hero, in actuality this blanket hero worship dehumanizes veterans by universalizing, and thus neutralizing, their individual, unique experiences and positionalities. Veterans possess a wide range of thoughts, feelings, and (dis)connections with their military service and time in combat (or lack thereof). An approach to veterans that reduces any one individual veteran to simply a placeholder for all other veterans will deny and erase these differences. Calls to *honor our heroes* and *thank a veteran for their service* accomplish and perpetuate this totalization of identity and reduction of unique differences.

In speaking to fellow veterans, I have heard a number of different frustrations with this manner in which society approaches them. One veteran expressed discomfort with being thanked all the time or being called a hero for his service because during his four years of service he never really “got to see any action.” He spent most of his time on a ship and feels like he never did anything heroic. For him, the hero worship of veterans places him on a pedestal for which he does not feel fit. Another veteran expressed that the hero worship caused discomfort because for this particular veteran the decision to join the military had a

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<sup>40</sup> Bacevich, *Breach of Trust*, 71.

very material reason: he needed money for college. The choice was a practical one not tied in with notions of patriotic duty or national cause. For this veteran, the blanket hero label brought about feelings of embarrassment and a sense of frustration at having to pass as the type of veteran people and society wanted him to be. A third veteran that experienced intense ground combat in Fallujah, Iraq, and had reservations and doubts about the violence he witnessed and participated in, always felt like responding to people thanking him for his service by saying, "If you knew what you were thanking me for, you wouldn't be thanking me." These three individual veterans represent just a few of the unique particular veteran identities and views amongst the many veterans in the post-9/11 world. An approach to veterans that reduces all veterans to one single identity will further hinder reintegration of veterans once they return home following combat.

Conversely, applying the designation of hero to each and every person serving in the military by default simply because of that decision obscures and hides the problems within the military. Perpetuating an ideology that labels ALL service members honorable by definition further makes invisible the problems of military rape, drugs, theft and other crimes. The more visibly service members and veterans are thanked, honored, and presented as heroic by simply being in the military, the more difficult it is to make these already hidden problems more visible. Furthermore, when it comes to the actual business of the military, this universal hero label prevents serious investigation into actions done during combat. When people already imagine military service members as honorable beyond reproach, due to massive fanfare domestically, the thought that a U.S. service member would violently torture a prisoner, wrongfully kill civilians, or callously rape other human beings becomes almost unthinkable. The hero worship of military service members, functioning through the heroic choice narrative, actually works to make the military less honorable by preventing

critical engagement with these less than honorable actions and practices. Simply saying it doesn't make it so.

Because of the universal reduction of all veterans to one singular identity, free choice for the veteran is actually reduced or taken away. So, while the physically wounded veteran is utilized to uphold the very notion of unencumbered neoliberal free choice, the reality for many veterans is actually a reduction in free choice when it comes to their identity. Those people that will be joining the military are disciplined into the roles and attitudes they feel they *should* have and attain. For those people who are already veterans, the spectacle of veteran hero worship encourages them to repress, ignore, or silence thoughts and emotions that people already *do* have. In both instances, though, the public spectacles that represent all veterans as heroes, like the State of the Union Address, denies the people in these groups the full range of human emotion, thought, and experience. The veteran is reduced to playing a predetermined role.

The shift in focus from heroic action to heroic choice not only mires veterans in a predetermined, confining role, but the hero worship of veterans diminishes critical engagement of the non-military members of society. Depiction of military service as heroic simply based on the choice to join establishes a hierarchy between those that join versus those that don't. The civilian, rather than applying the check on military force necessary in a democratic society, instead is expected to just *support the heroes*. The hero is beyond reproach, which drives a wedge between the military and rest of the population essentially creating two separate classes of people. The soldier and veteran, transformed into heroic exemplars by way of their heroic choice, foster the idea that the role of the rest of society in relation to the military, war, and use of force is simply to support our troops.

## Support Our Troops

The disconnect between the wider population and military service members began following the Vietnam War and the abolishment of the draft as a practice for readying the nation for war fighting. Andrew Bacevich discusses this very disconnect in his book, *Breach of Trust*, and highlights the separation between the group of people that join the military and everyone else. It is not that the citizenry is completely devoid of interaction with the class of people that serve in the military, that relationship, rather, has become a very narrowly defined interaction. “Indeed, as citizens, Americans today acknowledge no higher obligation [than supporting the troops].”<sup>41</sup> The political engagement expected of the average citizen amounts to nothing more than thanking a veteran, applauding when veterans are honored, and supporting veterans, which usually entails nothing more than simply stating, “I support our troops.” The use of physically wounded veterans directly fosters this narrow interaction between these two groups, as the focus on heroic choice of the veteran reduces the role of citizens to mere sycophantic admiration.

The role of the citizen should not be one of fawning underling expected of nothing more than worshipping the soldiers that fight wars for the country. Rather, we must realize that we are all equal members of our society, including the veterans that served in the military. Fighting a war for the country is not *the* political act; rather, it is one of many political acts. Holding up service members as heroes by default in a completely separate class from all other members of society denies the other work being done for justice, equality, and fairness. Not every hero wears a military uniform, but the hero worship of soldiers and veterans obscures this fact. Furthermore, we must remember that soldiers are tools of the government, instruments that are employed at the behest of those in power, and like all

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 4.

tools, they are not simply good or bad, but are dependent on the manner in which they are utilized. So, if we as a population genuinely care about and want to *support the troops*, then we must be ever deeply engaged in the decision of when, where, and for what reasons our military service members are sent into combat. In addition, from a material perspective, every one of us is monetarily tied in with the military. With over fifty percent of federal discretionary spending going towards defense and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq costing between \$4 and \$6 trillion once medical care of veterans is factored in, we are all involved.<sup>42</sup> However, we are being directly moved away from this engagement.

The American public watching the State of the Union Address and the many other veteran fanfares receive instruction by way of hyperbolic example on the proper treatment and interaction they are to have toward veterans. That military service members are all heroes because they made the decision to join when they could have done otherwise, the implicit claim in these honorific displays, instills in the population an abstract understanding of veteran identity. Rather than an individual, personal interaction with veterans, a generic thanking of the veteran is being perpetuated, an appreciation that falls radically short of adequately assisting veterans. “Since 9/11, that relationship [between the military and the wider society] has been heavy on symbolism and light on substance, with assurances of admiration for soldiers displacing serious consideration of what they are sent to do or what consequences ensue. In all ways that actually matter, that relationship has almost ceased to exist.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, the large portion of the population who are not veterans gets removed from political responsibility. Their patriotic job becomes simple and replicable: support our troops. The citizenry is being instructed directly away from their proper role of a

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<sup>42</sup> Londoño, “Study: Iraq, Afghan War Costs To Top \$4 Trillion.” March 28, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Bacevich, *Breach of Trust*, 14.

critically involved, democratically engaged check on government power. War is no longer their business. They have been reduced to sidelined cheerleaders, not expected to have a say in what is happening in the game, but expected to fully and enthusiastically support those who are playing in it.

As Bacevich claims: “Indeed, the warrior has eclipsed the soldier.”<sup>44</sup> The warrior is imagined as without flaws. He is honorable beyond reproach. The soldier on the other hand is a complex member of society comprised of courage but also fears, virtues, but also flaws. The warrior is simply a hero. It is this identity that the use of physically wounded veterans brings about. The physical wounds get redefined as obstacles the warrior overcomes. Rather than seen as flaws or failures, the physically wounded veteran is represented as being the warrior par excellence. “American warriors...perform the invaluable service of providing their country men with an excuse to avoid introspection. They make second thoughts unnecessary. In this way, the bravery of the warrior underwrites collective civic cowardice, while fostering a slack, insipid patriotism.”<sup>45</sup>

Following Vietnam, the people disavowed any participation in war. Another draft was not going to take place. “With the people opting out, war became the exclusive province of the state.”<sup>46</sup> The requirement placed on the populace to support the troops even if you don’t support the war disconnects military service and veterans from war itself. War thus becomes an act that the state can partake in without consent from or reliance on the wider population. This disconnect enables further expression of free choice as a foundational ideology. Citizens are not required to fight, and thus are freely able to choose what course of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 13.



action fits in with their own entrepreneurial self-fashioning. However, the state, the nation, also then applies this free choice mandate in its decisions to engage in war without end.

According to Bacevich, the three postulates of the American people in the post 9/11 era are: 1) We will not change. 2) We will not pay. 3) We will not bleed. Following Vietnam, the collective tone of the population expressed that when it comes to war they do want to make any sacrifice that alters their present behavior, they do not want taxes raised to fund any kind of war, and they will not accept being required to fight and potentially die for these wars. “Instead they remained intent on pursuing their chosen conceptions of life, liberty, and happiness, unhindered and unencumbered.”<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically these three postulates were expressed during the very same time when many were cheering and supporting the wars themselves. “According to the third postulate [of the American people, “We will not bleed,”]<sup>48</sup> actual participation in war became entirely a matter of personal choice. Service (and therefore sacrifice) was purely voluntary. War no longer imposed collective civic duty—other than the necessity of signaling appreciation for those choosing to serve.”<sup>49</sup> The state, however, through its utilization of the physically wounded veteran as a political prop, is complicit in this docility of the wider public. The disconnect between soldier and civilian is not simply the result of a distracted, apathetic populace, on which Bacevich at times tends to focus. The use of veterans *perpetuates* this separation between soldier and civilian, all while in the guise of supporting the troops.

The hero worship surrounding veterans obfuscates an underlying lack of respect for soldiering and war fighting. While there are many calls *to support our nations best and bravest*,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 32.

when it comes to actually signing up there is present a general notion that *it shouldn't be my son or daughter to sign up and go fight*. “In a 2012 survey of America’s “ten worst jobs,” for example, respondents rated soldiering number three.”<sup>50</sup> The honoring of physically wounded veterans, rather than actually working to assist and help the veteran, serves to discipline the populace into valuing military service, not for some inherent reason, but in order to get people to do it, *so they don't have to*. Rather than an appreciation for service already completed, the public display of physically wounded veterans becomes an apparatus to ensure a future stream of soldiers. The heroic choice narrative becomes disciplinary, thus turning the veteran into a docile body in the Foucauldian sense. Visibility has indeed become a trap. “So where courage is most needed, passivity prevails, exquisitely expressed (and sanctimoniously justified) in the omnipresent call to “support the troops.”<sup>51</sup> While the population is occupied in thanking veterans for the service, the state has continued to engage in war without restraint with the veteran paying the price (not to mention the many millions on the receiving end of U.S.’s military endeavors): “In 2011, the year the Iraq War ended, one out of every five active duty soldiers was on antidepressants, sedatives, or other prescription drugs. The incidence of spousal abuse spiked, as did the divorce rate among military couples. Debilitating combat stress reached epidemic proportions. So did brain injuries. Soldier suicides skyrocketed.”<sup>52</sup> Despite these injuries, the state does not hesitate to further utilize the veteran as a means to sanitize the state’s continued violence and intervention around the world.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 105.

## CHAPTER V

### IMPROVEMENT

In the previous chapter, I focused on establishing that heroic individual choice has supplanted the heroic actions individual soldiers may do in combat. In this chapter I demonstrate how this heroic, honorable identity of the veteran gets lifted out and made to stand in for the nation's honor as a whole. To illustrate how this process is accomplished, I utilize Elaine Scarry's work on torture, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. I argue that in both cases, torture and veteran honoring, control of visibility and invisibility is at play, and this control is an expression of agency and power. Ultimately I claim that in the current War on Terror, the U.S.'s use of the honorable veteran hide the nation's dishonorable actions and prepares the nation's soldiers to partake in these very actions.

#### Transferable Honor

Through the disciplining examination of the physically wounded veteran, the soldier is turned into a hero by default. His choice was heroic because he could have done otherwise, but chose to join and fight. This blanket heroism laid over all service members prevents serious engagement from the wider population both in relation to veterans themselves as complex individuals, but also in relation to the wars in which they fight. If this represented the extent of the problematic and harmful utilization of veteran bodies, it would be alarming enough. However, there is one final move in this scene, one more achievement accomplished by the regulation and use of veterans. The final step in this process substitutes the identity of the nation and the identity of the veteran. The veteran stands in for the nation itself.

The honorable, heroic, physically wounded veteran becomes the symbol of the nation as a whole. Through public fanfare, political speeches referencing the greatness of our

nation's heroes, and symbolic connections made by uniforms and the American flag, the nation itself takes on the identity of the veteran. Patriotism ties the veteran and the nation together. And most importantly, the honor and heroism the veteran possesses attaches onto the nation. The nation coopts the honor and heroism of the veteran. Here in the U.S. when we applaud, honor, and thank veterans for their honorable service, we are in effect applauding our nation. The final step in the docility of the physically wounded veteran has been achieved. He has been improved. Not only has the individual been turned into a proper, normative citizen, but the veteran and his heroic choice has been turned into a useful identity for the honor of the country. The nation has been able to benefit from his subjectification.

The neoliberal free choice expressed and epitomized by the physically wounded veteran becomes a trait exercised by the nation's leaders. Military service is no longer an action guided by notions of collective responsibility, but is one free market choice among many. This is not to say that some people's decision to join may be motivated by notions of responsibility, patriotism, and selfless service, but the national narrative surrounding military service is not spoken of in these terms. Soldiers and veterans are honored for their patriotic service, but those who choose not to serve are not called unpatriotic, cowardly, or traitors. Ultimately, in the neoliberal free choice marketplace, our individual decisions are to remain unquestioned by others, and military service is no different. There is no penalty, formal or informal, for not serving in the military. Therefore, those that do join should not be questioned by those who don't. With the nation attaching itself to the narrative of the heroic veteran, the nation, when it comes to use of military force, operates in a similarly unquestioned manner.

“All it takes to bomb Belgrade, invade Iraq, or send Navy Seals into Pakistan is concurrence among half a dozen people and a nod from the president. No need to secure prior congressional assent, certainly no need to consult the American people: that’s what the all-volunteer force allows.”<sup>53</sup> The heroic choice made by the individual soldier and veteran shields them from investigation and engagement. Their service is a matter of pure entrepreneurial free choice. By the nation coopting the identity and heroism of the soldier, predicated through this notion of free choice, the nation is in like manner shielded from investigation and engagement from the average member of society. However, it is not simply because of apathy, disinterest, or distraction amongst the population (this is of course present), rather it is also structurally built into the current system of military service in this country. Unrestricted free choice is valorized through the body of the physically wounded veteran making military service beyond reproach. The nation links itself to the identity of the veteran. Thus, the nation also enjoys this unrestricted free choice. The heroic, honorable status of the veteran secures the sanctity of the free choice and unquestioned acts of the nation as a whole. It is not that the nation conducts the same process as is done with the veteran. Political leaders cannot simply stand up and depict the nation’s actions and decisions as free market choices, and thus as honorable and simply worthy of thanks and applause. The population would not readily accept this. It would be to obviously hierarchical, dictatorial, and thus anti-democratic. However, the free choice of the nation’s leaders is mediated through the honor of soldiers and veterans. The hero worship of the soldier and the veteran creates a society that readily relinquishes authority and control to those in power. The call to *support our troops* gets translated into *support our nation’s decisions*.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 125.

The nation, by mediation through the physically wounded veteran, becomes honorable by default.

In order to understand the mechanism of this mediation, we can look to Elaine Scarry's work on the nature of torture, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, specifically her explanation of how the pain of the tortured gets translated into notions of power for the torturer and the torturer's nation. She summarizes this process: "First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person's body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person's body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency."<sup>54</sup> Questioning and infliction of physical pain go together in torture, but Scarry highlights the fact that torture is rarely about gaining information. Instead, torture is a radical expression of agency and power by the torturer on behalf of the nation by bringing about the self-betrayal of the tortured. The tortured body is used as a vehicle to express the power of the nation. As Scarry says, "[t]he physical pain [of torture] is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of "incontestable reality" on that power that has brought it into being."<sup>55</sup> In a similar way, the honor of the physically wounded veteran is made "incontestably real" through the pervasive thanking of veterans for their service and universally bestowing on them the title of hero, as discussed in Chapters III and IV. This incontestably real honor of the veteran then gets transferred onto the nation, for the nation brought the honorable veteran into existence. The honor is lifted out of the veteran and ascribed to the nation as a whole. The nation created the honorable veteran and the nation is that for which the veteran fought. This mediation

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<sup>54</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

through the veteran can be seen quite literally in President Obama's statement about Remsburg from Chapter II: "Like the Army he loves, like the America he serves, Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg never gives up, and he does not quit." The nation and the veteran are linked. The honor of the nation gains ontological reality through the body of the physically wounded veteran.

While I am not trying to say that this transfer of honor from veteran to nation is identical to torture, it is interesting to think about how these two processes work together. The U.S., in its War on Terror, has made greater use of torture as a technique. At the same time as the practice of torture has increased so too has the act of publicly honoring soldiers and veterans. Scarry informs us that torture "bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body."<sup>56</sup> The power of the torturer is expressed through this making visible of that which is usually hidden. However, these acts must also remain hidden from view to keep the torturing nation just in the eyes of the population. The very visible honoring of soldiers and veterans accomplishes this hiding. It keeps the immoral acts invisible by making hyper-visible the honorable veteran. Furthermore, just as agency is expressed in the act of torture, so too agency is expressed in this ability of the nation to engage in torture and at the same time keep it invisible. The nation decides what to make visible and invisible. The nation expresses the power and agency of the torturer.

Scarry brings up a very informative, yet seemingly simple, observation. She tells us that "[e]very weapon has two ends."<sup>57</sup> There is the violent end and the safe, protected end. In discussing torture, she explains that while we usually think of dehumanization serving to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 59.

make the torture less awful (They are just animals anyway), it also functions to keep the torturer on the safe end of the weapon by focusing on his own suffering in having to participate in this act. Instead of sympathizing with the beaten, broken bodies, slipping down the barrel to the violent end of the weapon in Scarry's image, the focus is kept on the safe end. The torturer laments the cuts on his hand, rather than the head and face that received the blows from his fist. In like fashion, the public honoring of veterans serves to keep the nation on the safe end of the weapon in the War on Terror. The U.S. is the honorable one. In this way, any action that is done, whether face-to-face torture or extra-judicial assassination by drone, is lamentable not because of the violence and death experienced on the receiving end, but because the U.S. had to participate in it. Here, the hero worship of the veteran and the honor bestowed on the nation as a result, rather than bringing about justice and honor, actually enables and readies the nation to more easily participate in these dishonorable actions. Thanking of veterans could just as easily, and potentially more effectively, be done in private, but the highly visible use of physically wounded veterans keeps us securely on the safe end of the weapon and thus makes it much more difficult to see the awful acts in their totality.

In this way, just like labeling all service members as heroes prevents an examination of the problems, crimes, and issues within the ranks of the military, so too the nation depicted as honorable by default prevents the population from viewing any of the actions of the nation as potentially unjust, dishonorable, or criminal. The honoring of soldiers secures the honor of the nation. Unchecked, perpetual war becomes normalized. Torture, assassination, and invasion are redefined washing away the dishonorable and abhorrent nature of the actions conducted in the name of the nation. The population is kept securely on the safe end of the weapon. Whatever the nation does is honorable by default. Here we



see Foucault's claim about power playing out in real time: "Discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or 'anatomy' of power, a technology."<sup>58</sup> Compliance has been achieved without use of the whip or gun, but rather through dispersed, Foucauldian panopticism. The people comply willingly because of these instruments and techniques. Just as torture is not about gaining information, the display of physically wounded veterans is not about supporting our troops.

When we look closer at this linking of national honor to soldierly honor, a painful discrepancy becomes readily visible. Going back to the specific situation with which we began, President Obama's honoring and applause of Cory Remsburg, the physically wounded veteran present at the State of the Union address, accomplishes this very linking of Remsburg's honorable, heroic choice to the honor of the nation and the nation's wars. However, Remsburg is physically wounded as a result of the decisions made by the President and the government for which he is the chief executive. It is these very grave decisions of the nation's leaders that are placed beyond examination through the use of the physically wounded veteran. Therefore, the physically wounded veteran is being utilized to cover over any investigation into his very creation. Here we have a very material example of Foucault's claim that "[t]he individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is an effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle."<sup>59</sup> The fanfare attempts to keep the soldier and

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<sup>58</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 215.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98

veteran securely on the safe end of the weapon, but in the process obscures the fact that the soldier and veteran is anything but on the safe end of the weapon.

Furthermore, when we look into that chamber during the State of the Union address, the members of congress, all of whom applauded for almost two minutes straight for this physically wounded veteran, are also the very same congressional members that vote against the bills that would assist veterans. These bills include legislation that would work to directly assist veterans through Veterans Administration funding or assistance in job training and housing, but also legislation that is directed at the wider population, which also benefits veterans, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other healthcare legislation. Through the public disciplining of veterans, members of congress, as representatives of the nation, also obtain the label of honorable by default. They *support our troops* even when factually, materially, and legally they may do the very opposite.

Also, the depiction of veterans as heroes by definition obscures the fact that veterans are in fact in need of help and assistance. The hero worship of soldiers and veterans turns them into individuals that are incapable of being hungry, homeless, or suicidal. Heroes are invincible. This representation of veterans denies the material conditions in which many veterans find themselves. For example, “Nationwide, in any given month, a total of 900,000 veterans...lived in households that relied on SNAP to provide food for their families in 2011.”<sup>60</sup> Here again we have ideology representing an “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”<sup>61</sup>

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault tell us: “The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the

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<sup>60</sup> Sisk, “Nearly 1 Million Vets Face Food Stamps Cut,” Oct. 29, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Althusser, “Ideological State Apparatuses,” 123.

functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies—this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city.”<sup>62</sup> While not a plague of biological disease, the current “War on Terror” has brought about an immobilization of the U.S. people in the same logic of Foucault’s plague-stricken town. While the result of a number of different factors, this immobilization has been facilitated by the use of the bodies of physically wounded veterans. While not bringing about a perfectly governed city in every facet, this immobilization has succeeded in creating a society where perpetual war is unrestrained by interference from the members of the “town.” For Foucault, the fruitful study of power is not achieved by looking at the heads of state or the governmental administrators, rather the examination “should be concerned with power at its extremities, in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, we have seen that the physically wounded veteran is one of these capillary expressions of power, the effect of which should not be underestimated in its force.

### Perpetual War

One day while working on this paper at my campus, the University of Oregon, I took a break to go outside of my office for a walk. While crossing the campus, I saw a large black 18-wheeler parked in one of the lots in the center of the university. This tractor-trailer was there as part of the spring career fair taking place through the University’s Career Center. The entire rig was shiny and new looking, painted in all black with large yellow and black graphics and images of people on the outside. The largest image, in big letters, immediately caught my attention: “U.S. Army.” This tractor-trailer was part of the Army’s Mobile Exhibit Company that consists of an “array of exhibits such as the Multiple Exhibit

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<sup>62</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198.

<sup>63</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 96.

Vehicles, Interactive Semis, Adventure Semis, and Adventure Trailers manned by Army recruiters in order to re-connect America's People with America's Army and enhance Army awareness among high school and college students and their centers of influence."<sup>64</sup> This particular trailer was their U.S. Army Healthcare Professionals recruiting rig, the Medical Marketing Semi (MMS).

Inside the trailer were a number of displays depicting the many healthcare jobs available in the Army, the research being conducted, and the learning opportunities present. One area focused on the benefits of a military career. These displays were all very hi-tech with interactive components, theatrical lighting, and flat panel TVs. The area about research had on display a number of prosthetic limbs currently being used on physically wounded veterans. There was another section showcasing the research being conducted into traumatic brain injuries (TBIs). While TBIs play a role in psychological issues, the display focused on the physicality of these injuries, with new helmets to protect against TBI and monitors within the helmets to measure the physical impact. A few Army recruiters were present to answer any questions that may arise among the visitors. It had the feeling of a science and technology museum.

From one vantage point, this seems an all-too-common occurrence. We have become quite accustomed to military recruiters in this country. It is easy to see this trailer as just another part of the career fair, simply advertising job opportunities for those college students majoring in healthcare fields. However, when we look at this recruiting display from the new point of view established in the present work, the scene takes on a different meaning. First, the existence of physically wounded veterans becomes a means of recruitment. The body of the physically wounded veteran is literally being used to encourage

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<sup>64</sup> U.S. Army recruiting website - <http://www.usarec.army.mil/MSBn/Pages/MEC.htm>

people to join the Army. Secondly, the trailer establishes the current situation, veterans with missing limbs and brain injuries, as the new normal. It is simply assumed that there will be many more physically wounded veterans rather than fewer in the present and future. A statement is being made about perpetual war. The trailer's displays normalize this reality for the visitors. Finally, a statement is made about the proper veteran identity: all the injuries discussed in the trailer are physical injuries.

Even the Army's healthcare recruitment website ([healthcare.goarmy.gov](http://healthcare.goarmy.gov)) perpetuates this erasure of psychological wounds. Along the left side of the site is the list of available healthcare jobs organized by type. There are tabs for Physicians, Dentists, Nurses, and Veterinarians. In order to find the psychological and social healthcare jobs you have to go under a tab labeled 'Allied Health.' This is a neutralization of psychological health and injuries and is another specific example of the particular narrative that seeks to use physically wounded veterans to perpetuate the heroic identity of all veterans and by extension the nation as a whole.

This trailer, and the Army and nation it represents, furthers the notion of physical wounds over psychological injuries. From this trailer a visitor gets the impression that our nation's veterans are incredibly healthy except for the very specific physical injuries mentioned. Again, this fact makes a statement about acceptable veteran bodies. Physically wounded bodies are useful as recruiting tools and instilling nationalistic ideology, whereas psychologically wounded veterans are harder to utilize. Psychological wounds are too tied in with our own nation's actions and don't neatly place the focus on the barbaric enemy. Physical wounds are more easily reduced to the actions of *the enemy*, whereas psychological wounds arise not simply from actions of the enemy, but as the result of multiple deployments, participation in wars with immoral justifications, and inadequate care upon

return home. These causes implicate the U.S., and thus must be kept hidden. To use Scarry's image again, recognition of these psychological wounds enable us to slide down the barrel toward the violent end of the weapon. In the *us versus them* logic of the War on Terror, we must be kept neatly and securely on the safe, just side of the weapon, and the terrorist, Muslim Other must be kept securely on the violent end. The psychological wounds of veterans destroy this neat dichotomy, and so they must be kept hidden.

## CHAPTER VI

### WELCOME HOME

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the service members of the military have been placed in the spotlight. Yellow ribbons, signs and commercials claiming “We Support our Troops,” individual expressions of “thank you for your service,” and demonstrations of appreciation and gratitude at Super Bowls, State of the Union addresses, high school and university graduations, etc., have become the norm. The U.S. has made a national pastime of “supporting our troops.” However, while the fanfare has been loud and visible, for many military service members that have completed their service and returned to civilian life, the reality has not shared the same glitz and pageantry. Many veterans find themselves in a difficult world. Twenty-two veterans a day take their own life, and male veterans under the age of thirty are three times more likely to commit suicide than civilians in the same group, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, PTSD, moral injury, and other psychological issues also plague veterans and those around them.

The call to *support our troops* appears to arise out of a realization that veterans and service members have endured much in the way of physical danger, time away from friends and family, and the injury and death of fellow service members, not to mention injury and death on a wide scale. However, the hero worship, and warrior designation that goes along with it, does not adequately address these issues. In fact, as I have demonstrated, it actually works against helping veterans with these issues. Furthermore, the very public and hyperbolic honoring of veterans can further exacerbate the difficulty in finding work, psychological and emotional trauma, alcohol and drug abuse, etc. experienced by many veterans. Losing a job can be difficult enough, but if you have been told over and over how

much of a hero you are, that loss of a job can feel like an even greater failure. If we really care about veterans, we should be focused on actually caring for them, and not simply just saying how deserving they are.

Furthermore, this superficial call to *support our troops* and the narrowly-defined patriotism characteristic of the post-9/11 era has exacerbated a disengagement from political, democratic involvement by the population as a whole, including the elected officials making the decisions to send troops into combat. The result has been an ongoing, worldwide War on Terror that has included invasions of two countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, cost trillions of dollars in financial terms, cost hundreds of thousands in human lives, and has instilled a state of perpetual fear among the population, with it being unclear if we are any safer today than we were on September 11, 2001 or anytime since. In many ways, we may actually be worse off. In response to these circumstances I provide a potential solution that consists of two successive stages. The first is practical existing within the current state of war, while the second arises out of the application of the first and is more radical and potentially paradigm altering in reference to war and peace. To begin we must look to American philosopher Mary Parker Follett in order to help us develop a new way of thinking about and acting toward veterans.

According to Follett's philosophy, contrary to the neoliberal, masculinist idea, the notion of radically separated, pre-existing, static individuals is incorrect and arises from a specific abstracted view of reality. What is real is not individual entities, but rather reality is in the relating itself. There is not first an "I" that exists, and then meets and interacts with a "you" that exists previously in isolation. Rather, the notion of an "I" and "self" only arises out of a relation with another. The relation is what is real and foundational and that to which



all actions respond, i.e. “reaction is always reaction to a relating.”<sup>65</sup> We are not individual entities that react and respond to other individuals. In this way of viewing reality the relational aspect is added on after the fact. For Follett, the “I” that is in relation to another is not simply an isolated “I” but is rather an “I” already in relation to another, and it is this entity, the I-in-relation-to-another, that is then responding to the other, which is not simply an isolated other, but is an other-already-in-relation-to-me. “[T]he responding is not merely to another activity but to the relating between the self-activity and the other activity.”<sup>66</sup> When a father is being active with his daughter, he does not come to that interaction as a separate thing, rather he comes to the activity as already in relation to his daughter. The notion of “father” only arises out of a relation. The relation is the real. The isolated individual is the abstraction.

The hero designation that is applied universally to all veterans erases this relational component Follett is addressing. The veteran is frozen in time and space as a result. The focus on the heroic choice of the veteran removes the relations to her material conditions prior to joining the military and to her ever-changing interrelated reality following this decision to join the military. When we treat veterans in the abstract, as embodying the universal characteristics and identity of veteran-ness, rather than as a person with unique and ever-changing relations to the people in her life, her military service, and the wars in which she fought, we disconnect the veteran from all those relations and connections that actually make that person’s reality. We can look to Follett’s examination of the social worker’s activity in order to better understand the problems in veteran utilization and treatment, which will then lead us to the first step in a solution.

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<sup>65</sup> Follett, *Creative Experience*, 62.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Follett states that a social worker working with a client is not simply fixing an individual, static person. Rather, the social worker is working with a “total situation” in which the client is being fit to her environment, an environment that is always changing due to its relation with the person, who is also always changing due to the relation between environment and the person (and the social worker). As she states: “We must therefore in the social sciences develop methods for watching varying activities in their relatings to other various activities. We cannot watch the strikers and *then* the mill-owners. We cannot watch France and *then* Germany.”<sup>67</sup> In the same way, we cannot watch politicians and then veterans. We cannot watch civilians and then veterans. We must look at the “total situation” in which the veteran is intertwined and in constant relation. Just like in Follett’s example, Germany is not responding to France in isolation, but rather to the relation between France and Germany. So too, the veteran is not relating to his being a veteran as a fixed identity, but to an identity that is in constant change and in relation with the nation, civilians, fellow veterans, not to mention friends and family. To fully understand the veteran’s situation, we cannot relate to this person as a static, separate individual, as is done in all the fanfare, commercials, and “thanks for you service.”

Throughout I have demonstrated that the current honoring of veterans and the negative effects that result function through an extremely nuanced and delicate application of Foucauldian disciplinary techniques and technologies of power. The application of Follett’s relational ontology to these interactions would work against these normalizing and restrictive effects, helping to open up and widen the possible outcomes leading to more fulfilling and authentic identities. Let’s imagine what it would like to apply Follett’s relational ontology to veterans. What would we do differently, and what would be the effects?

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 68.

First, and most basically, applying Follett's nuanced notion of relationality to veterans would keep us from thanking veterans in the abstract. Thanking a veteran for their service ceases to make sense when we come to the individual veteran not as an isolated entity, but as a network of ever increasing relations of which we may be completely unaware. If a particular veteran is working through moral injury and PTSD as result of his time in war, thanking him for his service is not speaking to him based on his particular relation to his combat service. When speaking to student groups about veteran's issues, I have often been asked what we should say to veterans if not *thank you for your service*, and I have yet to come up with a clear answer. However, I think this difficulty in coming up with an alternative illustrates the problem with *thank you for your service* as a generic, one-size-fits-all response. The reality is that there is *not* one way to respond to veterans, and we should avoid searching for that next and better singular response. Maybe in one situation *Welcome Home* is the best response, in another maybe it is *How are you?* The focus should be on being fully present and interacting with the person in front of you as best fits the given situation. Labels of *hero* and *thank you for your service* do not accomplish this and should be dropped from use.

Secondly, if we take Follett's account to heart and realize we are dealing with a total situation of ever more expanding relations, we would avoid the very public displays of gratitude for veterans and service members at sporting, political, and educational events. These events are totalizing in a restrictive way. Instead of dealing with the total situation in the Follett sense, these hyperbolic displays of appreciation reduce nuance and difference by necessitating a unified response by the veterans present. I have personally been at events like graduations and sporting events where veterans and service members were asked to stand in order to be honored for our service. However, the veterans and service members present are never asked if they so desire this very large, public recognition. I, myself, don't actually enjoy

it. Let's think of one of the many thousands of veterans that are dealing with psychological issues as a result of their time in combat. Does asking this person to stand and be applauded really address his or her unique relational experience? Imagine if we did the same with some other group that has experienced trauma. We would never think to take a moment out of a graduation or football game to have all sexual assault survivors stand and be applauded for what they went through. This would exacerbate the trauma, rather than assist the individuals in working through it. Instead of actually interacting with veterans on a personal, interactive level, these large displays are meant to conceal nuance, to keep invisible that which is difficult to see. The fanfare is not about veterans, but is about making everyone else feel good about themselves. The exciting halftime show gushing with patriotism and support of our troops masks the selfish acquiescence of political involvement by the majority of the population. As such, real interaction with and knowledge about our nation's military activity and its consequences is hidden, and thus fails to account for all the relations and aspects present in the situation, as Follett might say. These public displays of veteran appreciation should cease in favor of more nuanced, difficult, and real interactions between veterans and civilians.

Third, we must acknowledge the full extent of the harm and issues experienced by veterans. This includes the psychological, moral, social, and emotional harms, as well as the physical. Failure to do so, as is the current practice, does not place the veteran in his full reality, but rather removes him from the full set of relations he is experiencing. Simply approaching someone as solely a physically wounded veteran is an abstraction that denies the full range of connections present. Fully recognizing this much wider range of harms will enable veterans to get the actual help they need upon return from service and combat. The recognition of these wounds must not be used for political purposes that further the

likelihood of war as is described in Chapter III. The acknowledgement and care of these wounds must be genuine, personal, and individualized.

These three steps would assist veterans given the current state of affairs. They are remedies that should be done even if the current War on Terror continues unabated. They represent solutions within the given paradigm of U.S. foreign policy. However, if we actually apply these prescriptions and they become more deeply ingrained, they could actually work more radically to alter the present ideology of the War on Terror as the U.S wages it. First, removing the universal and totalizing label of hero would enable veterans to more fully express genuine and unique viewpoints and inhabit authentic and nuanced identities. The hero worship and warrior identity ascribed to veterans pushes them to a place of moral purity outside the realm of political engagement. However, those that fight in war and have experienced the violence firsthand are in a unique position in order to work for peace. Every veteran is a war protester to some degree, but the reduction to the specific veteran identity described here reduces this anti-militarism aspect of each veteran. A hero doesn't criticize. This is the proper veteran identity being fostered through the current practices. Undoing universal hero worship and public honoring of veterans would enable more genuine and potentially critical thoughts and actions to come about. We need to let this happen, and not destroy it. Veterans should function as a check on war, not be used as the symbol for the continued beating of the war drums.

A more complete understanding of veterans and the costs of war would allow all of us to slip down the barrel of the gun, to use Scarry's analogy from Chapter V. The current disconnect between civilians and the wars fought in their name is enabled by the hero worship of veterans. It keeps the population falsely secure on the safe side of the weapon further fostering a sense of moral righteousness. The world is not dichotomous, neatly split

into the wholly just and the wholly evil. Removing the hero worship of veterans would allow us to slide down the barrel of the gun to the violent end and realize that the idea of an entirely safe end of the weapon is an illusion, an illusion only maintained through the efforts described in this work. A more full engagement with the violent actions of our nation freed from these illusions would foster a more hesitant propensity to engage in these violent acts. Not only would these steps that I propose work to make veterans' lives better, it might actually work to create fewer veterans in the first place.

“It is the beginning of peace politics to realize that war is an activity for which human beings plan, in which they consciously engage, and in which, therefore, they can anticipate the suffering they later mourn”<sup>68</sup> In the current use of physically wounded veterans as political props, the suffering that has occurred is all too often approached as circumstances that just happened or as something for which *the enemy* is solely to blame. In order to move past this current state of affairs, we, as members of this nation, must make ourselves aware that we, and the leaders of our country, play an active role in bringing about this suffering. When the suffering is celebrated and used as political collateral it is of even greater injustice.

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<sup>68</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 157.

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