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What Can Reactions to Veteran Suicide Tell Us About Patriotism in the United States?

SPECIAL COLLECTION: PATRIOTISM

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, patriotism has meant many things. The ultimate definition, though, is one where a military member's death is offered as a sacrifice in service of his or her country: "The irrefutable sign of national faith, which we call patriotism, is making one's body an offering, a sacrifice" (Marvin & Ingle, 1999, p. 15). Every person who signs up for the military knows that (s)he may be required to die in order to complete the mission or ensure one's comrades are safe. When one thinks of military death, scenes of enemy combat first come to mind. But in the United States, there is another, far more deadly, cause of death for current and former members of the military: suicide. From 2003 to 2017, there were just over 4,400 American fatalities from combat; in 2014 alone, over 7,300 veterans killed themselves. Unfortunately, this is nothing new; suicide has long been recognized as a problem in the veteran community. This article argues that perceptions of and reactions to veteran suicide by fellow veterans tell us several things about how early 21st century American veterans interpret patriotism. To better explore this subject, we reflect on themes gathered from qualitative interviews with American veterans about suicide prevention strategies. The interviews revealed that patriotism is conceptualized as three things: as loyalty, as a perfomative value, and as a value that generates obligations from multiple levels of society.

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In the United States, patriotism has meant many things. Perhaps the ultimate definition, though, is when a military member's death is offered in service of his or her country: "The irrefutable sign of national faith, which we call patriotism, is making one's body an offering, a sacrifice" (Marvin & Ingle, 1999, p. 15). Every person who signs up for the military knows that (s)he may be required to die in order to complete the mission or ensure one's comrades are safe. This spectre of death, though not always welcomed, is certainly foreseen and anticipated, and imbues a soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, or guardian's everyday activities with a sense of purpose. Indeed, scholars have argued that this willingness to die for one's country is part of the inherent value of members of the military (Ebel, 2015). When one thinks of military death, scenes of enemy combat first come to mind: getting pinned down by enemy fire, evaporating in an improvised explosive device (IED) blast. But for the United States, there is another, far more deadly cause of death for current and former members of the military: suicide. From 2003 to 2017, there were just over 4,400 American fatalities from combat; in 2014 alone, over 7,300 veterans killed themselves (Faucett, 2020). Unfortunately, this is nothing new; suicide has long been recognized as a problem in the veteran community (Miller, 2012; Sundararaman et al., 2008).

For military members, death by combat is seen as an expected part of the job, whereas death by suicide is unexpected and much more difficult to accept and process (Lubens & Silver, 2019). Though it has not been extensively studied, one survey found that nearly half (47.1%) of all veterans surveyed have been exposed to suicide, with younger veterans being "slightly more likely" to report being exposed to suicide (Cerel et al., 2015, p. 85). Shields and colleagues (2014) theorized, "The phenomenon of veteran and active soldier suicides constitutes an important cultural nexus around which the thanatopolitics of modern national citizenship more generally, and American life more specifically, may be mapped" (p. 429). This article argues that perceptions of and reactions to veteran suicide from within the veteran community reveal several features about how early 21st century American veterans interpret patriotism. This article reflects on themes gathered from qualitative interviews with American veterans about suicide prevention strategies. The results of this study add unique viewpoints about patriotism from people who have been inside the military industrial complex and directly experienced the impact of different political and social policies.

BACKGROUND

Veterans could be considered the ultimate authorities on what is patriotic. Some may even argue that veterans display higher standards of patriotism than their civilian peers (Wagner & Matyók, 2018). The decision to enter the military is a major one that impacts every element of that person's life. Talking to military members and veterans can expose important lived experiences that reveal different facets of patriotism. This paper grew out of a study about American veterans' perceptions of suicide and suicide prevention within the veteran community. Its original intent was to first elicit impressions and thoughts about veteran suicide in general, and then to draw responses to particular measures implemented and proposed to reduce veteran suicide. Interestingly, while conducting these qualitative interviews, several components of patriotism and what it means to be a military service member were brought to light. Examining reactions to veteran suicide using inductive reasoning reveals connections between how veterans interpret the current suicide crisis and what patriotism requires of not only service members, but civilians, the government, and other social entities such as the media.

STUDY DESIGN

This qualitative study used verbal interviews with individual veterans to elicit their feelings about and reactions to veteran suicide and its prevention. A qualitative design was chosen to elicit rich descriptions in participants' own voices from within their specific social context about a common experience within the veteran community (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015). The researcher interviewed American veterans whose lives had been touched by suicide from within the military community. The researcher herself is a veteran, which played a critical role in gaining interviewees' trust and their willingness to be candid about their experiences and feelings. In addition, the researcher is a graduate student, a PhD candidate who has been trained in qualitative research, which made the interviewees confident in her technical abilities to evaluate and present the data to interested audiences.

The goal of these interviews was to solicit "regular" veterans' opinions and thoughts about suicide prevention. The interview schedule contained open-ended questions and was developed through an iterative process with pilot testing to refine it. The study was approved by the Saint Louis University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Since the interviews discussed personal feelings and thoughts regarding other veterans' suicides, the researcher recognized some participants may become emotionally upset while discussing the topic. The researcher was transparent about the nature of the study from the very beginning, including in the recruitment advertisements, initial conversations

with potential interviewees, and general descriptions of the study. The researcher also reminded the participants that they could choose not to answer any of the questions if at any time they became uncomfortable or did not wish to answer. The researcher had crisis help line information and, for local university students, information about institutional counseling resources.

SAMPLE

The researcher interviewed 20 veterans who knew someone within the military community who attempted or completed suicide. The veterans ultimately represented two eras of service: Gulf War (early 1990s) and the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (2001–present) time periods. To be eligible for the study, one had to: (a) be a veteran of US armed forces, (b) know someone within the military or veteran community who attempted or completed suicide, (c) be fluent in English, and (d) be willing and able to consent to be in research and complete an interview. Any potential participant who did not meet the inclusion criteria was not included in the study. There were two potential participants who expressed interest in the study but did not meet inclusion criteria (one was active-duty military; the other claimed not to know anyone in the military community who attempted or completed suicide).

PROCEDURES/RECRUITMENT

This study used purposive sampling, specifically criterion and snowball sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015). Inclusion criteria are discussed above. Recruiting took place primarily by advertising in four separate veterans' groups on Facebook. Some veterans were referred to the researcher from within their own social network (snowball sampling). This type of sampling was used to gain access to a variety of veterans (branches and eras) and to serve as an assurance of the credibility of the researcher to veterans who may be reluctant to talk to civilians about the issue. Additionally, a recruiting flyer for the study was hung in a local gym, with the permission of the gym owner.

DATA COLLECTION

Potential participants contacted the researcher if they were interested in the study. The researcher verbally reviewed the inclusion criteria to have the veteran verify (s)he met them. Then the researcher obtained the veteran's verbal consent to participate in the research. The interviews were done verbally, over the phone or in person. Each interview was digitally recorded, then transcribed. Transcripts were verbatim of the oral interview. The researcher also took notes during the interview. Most interviews were between 45 minutes and 1 hour long. The shortest interview lasted 25 minutes (due to the veteran's personal constraints) and the longest was 2 hours. The wide variation in interview lengths were due to veterans' personalities, enthusiasm about the subject, and level of comfort with the interviewer. One participant requested a copy of their interview transcript.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis in the form of thematic analysis took place in three steps: "individual codes, categories, and researcher-produced themes," beginning as soon as the transcripts were available (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2031). The researcher read each transcript at least twice to ensure sufficient data immersion. Concepts emerged through this iterative reading of the data. These concepts were organized into a list of initial codes; subsequent readings of transcripts focused on passages that had already been identified and were used to make broad categories (Lochmiller, 2021). These categories were then grouped into themes and refined using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Three themes emerged, which are elaborated upon in the next section.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

The reactions to veteran suicide and its prevention produced three themes related to patriotism. The first theme, loyalty, can be seen by analyzing the intense ambivalence about the way veterans who have completed suicide are honored and remembered, as well as disagreements about whether defining suicides as "battles lost" was helpful or not. The second theme had to do with patriotism as a performative value: patriotism requires lived actions and commitments from veterans themselves that extend beyond one's time in service. Finally, veterans indicated that patriotism was not a one-way street: military service generates obligations from one's country, the government, and other elements in society. Examining the following quotations from the study will illustrate several aspects of patriotism as interpreted by some members of the veteran community.

THEME ONE: PATRIOTISM AS LOYALTY

The reactions to veteran suicide and its prevention produced three themes related to patriotism. The first theme, loyalty, is demonstrated by the intense ambivalence concerning the way veterans who have completed suicide are memorialized and remembered. When discussing or describing reactions to military or veteran suicides, there emerged two starkly contrasting views about the way former service members who died by suicide should be

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	SELF-IDENTIFIED RACE	BRANCH	YEARS OF SERVICE	DEPLOYED?	OFFICER OR ENLISTED
Andrew	45	Male	White	Navy & USMC	16.5	Yes	Officer
Brennan	42	Male	White	Army	9	Yes	Enlisted
Catherine	52	Female	White	USMC	12	No	Enlisted
Clarissa	35	Female	White	Army	8	No	Enlisted
Dale	39	Male	White	Army	7	No	Enlisted
Damian	49	Male	Hispanic	Army	26	Yes	Enlisted
Frank	32	Male	White	Army	5	Yes	Enlisted
Hans	37	Male	White	Army	9	Yes	Officer
Jacob	37	Male	White	Army	7	Yes	Enlisted
Julio	38	Male	White	USMC	4	Yes	Enlisted
Kenny	41	Male	White	USMC	7	Yes	Enlisted
Paul	59	Male	White	Navy	29	Yes	Officer
Red	51	Male	White	Air Force	7	No	Enlisted
Rhea	34	Female	White	Army	7	Yes	Enlisted
Rolph	44	Male	White	Army	12	No	Enlisted
Ruby	41	Female	White	Army	4	Yes	Officer
Sarah	45	Female	White	Army	20	No	Enlisted
Simon	36	Male	White	Army	8	Yes	Officer
Thomas	56	Male	White	Army & Air Force	26	Yes	Officer
Tyler	36	Male	White	USMC	4	Yes	Enlisted

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants.

USMC = United States Marine Corps.

honored. On one side of the debate were those who said giving a funeral with military honors is the least one can do for a fellow brother- or sister-in-arms, and that framing suicide as a battle lost on the home front was necessary for understanding, properly mourning, and forgiving the veteran's death. Several suicide prevention organizations for veterans carry this martial overtone, such as the Til Valhalla Project and the Wounded Warrior Project.

On the other side of discussions about veteran suicide were just as vehement comments about how military funerals "glamorize" suicide and sometimes unwittingly offer former service members a way to be remembered in their glory (which is often in stark contrast to post-service life). Ultimately these contrasting views came down to viewing patriotism as loyalty and disagreement about what is in the best interest of both individual veterans themselves and the veteran community. Several veterans said they were anxious about how to best honor their comrades and worried about a kind of contagion or ripple effect on other veterans who were struggling with suicidal ideation. It is important to note that none of the interviewees felt that dying by suicide "negated" a veteran's right to a funeral with full military honors. However, some veterans did wonder if service members' long memories about buddies may be planting insidious ideas about suicide in some people's minds. Frank, a veteran in his mid-30's, explained that suicides are forever etched in one's memory:

> I know right now there's a lot of people that I served with that I just don't remember, that I can't speak of, they don't stand out in my mind. But if I got a report that said, hey, I heard that Private Joe Snuffy committed suicide, I'll say oh yeah, I remember him, he worked down at the motor pool … Now he'll be forever etched in my memory, and that will be the legacy, he'll be remembered. That's what a lot of people want. They want a legacy; they want to be remembered.

Tyler, a former Marine, reflected on how framing a suicide as a "battle lost at home" sets up a potentially damaging precedent:

> I think they're [analogies of suicide to battle] kind of destructive. Yeah, I mean because you're constantly reminding someone that they're in battle, you know what I mean? Like if you've got a guy struggling or a woman struggling at home, then they see men and women are losing these battles, then that's all they think about is how they're in this battle, and I can't imagine that that helps, you know what I mean, as far as like moving on, as far as switching gears, you know, being able to put those experiences behind and see hope, you know, where they won't be in a battle. Yeah, I think it almost glamorizes it.

On the other hand, Kenny thought that framing suicide in war-like terms could be helpful to families and friends in terms of dealing with and understanding the loss:

> I think it's helpful for the family, for the people who have to justify why that person did that [completed suicide]. I think it eases their grief, because they don't know what to say, they don't know what to do. They don't know how to help, and I think trying to justify it in some means makes it easier for them to live with.

Hans, a former officer, also thought that using battle analogies could be constructive, because it helped articulate some of the delayed effects of military actions and policy:

> I think it [analogy of body coming home but mind left in war] can be helpful because they essentially are a casualty of war if their poor mental state was affected because of their experience in war, they are still a casualty of war at that point, in my opinion.

Jacob, an enlisted Army intelligence analyst, cautioned that a "lost battle" analogy should be used sparingly in order to avoid broad generalizations about veteran suicide deaths. When asked whether he thought the suicide-battlefield analogy was helpful, he said,

> Only if you can say that with absolute certainty about the individual in mind, and because we can't know that it's not necessarily helpful to do that at large. On an independent and individual basis … It could be useful to explain for that particular incident, but at large in the community, no, I don't think it helps.

On the other side of the debate, were those who felt military funerals for people who had completed suicide were a positive thing, because they demonstrated loyalty to one's comrades that did not end with one's military enlistment. Ruby talked about the funeral of a Marine she had known who completed suicide, describing how pleased she was with the way he was honored. She felt like honoring his veteran status helped the community and his family heal after struggling with the Marine, who had severe difficulties after leaving the service:

> The only thing that helped me feel good about the whole thing is he had a real hero's welcome. So they were lined up for hours, hours. It was like a hometown hero welcome. They didn't talk about the crazy stuff that he did. He … had the full military burial … people were waiting for 3–4 hours to view him. Flags all over the city … that's how he'd want to be remembered.

This stark disparity between views about whether military funerals and "lost battle" analogies were helpful or harmful for the veteran community reveals an ongoing ambivalence about suicide, with strong feelings and opinions on both sides. This contrast illustrates how one act can be interpreted several ways, while still using the value of "patriotism" to defend one's interpretation. Patriotism is not just a static value, though; it requires action.

THEME TWO: PATRIOTISM AS A PERFORMATIVE VALUE AND ACTIONS TAKEN BY VETERANS THEMSELVES

Other reactions to veteran suicide revealed deeply held beliefs related to patriotism and how patriotism is a perfomative exercise that requires action from veterans themselves. First, during their interviews, some veterans talked about how they found themselves examining the motives behind military action and their own personal roles in the system. Patriotism does not mean going mindlessly into the war machine. Hans reflected on how his personal experiences in Iraq made him question the dominant narrative about the current US wars:

> So I was raised to be sort of right wing, conservative and all that, and I kind of just drank the Kool-Aid and thought I was that way, until I actually experienced stuff. Then I was super bitter, because I would go back and people would say like, "Well, you're doing it for our freedom." I'm like, "No, this doesn't really matter for our freedom at all. This country does not threaten our freedom." [The] overall strategy or failure of strategy in my opinion just really hit me once I was there, and trying to do the mission, and that's when I really was just like, "Why are we here, what are we doing?"

Secondly, several veterans reflected on how their service instilled higher standards for personal behavior that followed them out of the service. Red, who served in the Air Force, described how military values infuse every part of both his life and the lives of veterans he knows:

> Like my boss, John Doe, he's like, "I only know one way to do things, the Marines changed my life, and it's, don't tell me an excuse, that you couldn't do something. It's either done right or it's wrong," and that structure that they inoculate us with is very comforting, it works. There's a logic to it, and the civilian world doesn't always operate by those same standards, and people become frustrated.

This sentiment of higher expectations can also be seen in anger after a veteran's suicide. Some veterans were angry with the person who died. Catherine, a former Marine, said that she felt "sad, angry, pissed off, let down," because "I had different standards for Marines." Similarly, Frank, an Army veteran, said it made him angry that the deceased "did let it get to them."

Additionally, several other veterans related a suicide to a failure in leadership. Ruby, an Army veteran, said she often felt a sense of "ownership, the need to save" the person who died, in light of her position as an officer. Damian, a senior non-commissioned officer (NCO), expressed feeling "guilt" and that "leaders should have helped" the veteran. Hans, also an officer, reflected that when someone he knew completes suicide, "I always just feel like should I have reached out." For these veterans, patriotism means holding onto and carrying with them values and standards they learned in the service. However, patriotism also extends beyond veterans themselves.

THEME THREE: PATRIOTIC ACTIONS GENERATE CORRESPONDING OBLIGATIONS FROM SOCIETY

Patriotism is not something only service members display. Veterans also talked about corresponding obligations from one's communities, country, government, and society. First, there was the perspective that veterans completing suicide meant that the community failed in some respect. One of the primary ways veterans expressed this during interviews was anger. Clarissa, a former enlisted soldier, in addition to being hurt and angry, said that to her a veteran's suicide indicated a failure on the part of society: "That vet was let down; there's something that could have been done." Julio, a former Marine, also interpreted a suicide as, "We didn't get there soon enough."

Brennan, who served as a mechanic, sees veteran suicide as a long-term failure by society to take care of those who stepped up to serve their country:

> Our veterans are our bread and butter. The only reason we still have freedom in this country is because of our veterans, and if we didn't have our veterans, you know, who knows where this country would be, and that's hard cold facts [sic]. To wash our veterans away, and like I said, this has been going on for many years. This is not just Iraq, Afghanistan, OEF, OIF problem. This is World War II, you're talking since we've had a war in this country that soldiers, I've read stories, I have a book that talks about soldier suicide during the Civil War, so this has not been going on for the last ten years, this has been going on for many years and it's never been addressed.

Similarly, Red, an Air Force veteran, specified that the high numbers of veteran suicide indicate a failure by both society and the politicians who engineered military conflicts:

> It makes me feel like we as a country, when I say we, I'm not pointing the fingers at you, I'm saying we as a country, we're leaving them behind. What people need to understand is when you and I signed up, the civilian control in the military means that you and I follow the orders and go where our elected officials and policy makers send us. When men and women feel this way and they feel there's no way out but to eat a bullet or whatever, somehow we collectively as a nation have left them behind on the battlefield.

Secondly, veterans felt the media has an obligation to inform the public about what's happening to veterans. Dale, a 39-year-old former enlisted NCO, said that he is "incensed" at both the death of a fellow veteran and sometimes directs his anger at the media because "It [veteran suicide and the high rates] doesn't make the news."

Brennan, also a former NCO, agreed that the media bears a responsibility to let people know about veteran suicide:

> Well not only do I think they [the media] should be doing it [reporting on veteran suicide], and it's the right thing to do, but I think it's their duty to do that … they're on a certain platform … The exposure they get, the status they have and it [veteran suicide] should be reported in a truthful, honest manner.

Tyler, a former Marine, agreed that while the media should be reporting veteran suicide, it should be done in a truthful, balanced way and show the long-term impacts including how devastating the loss can be:

> I think the media is part of the problem when it comes to veteran suicide. In the military, life is very simple … Those are your brothers and in a lot of cases, that's what suicidal dudes miss the most. In my opinion, it [the media] glorifies suicide and almost makes it a welcoming act to get you back to simpler times with people you love. It [suicide] disrupts so many lives, and I wish you could show somebody that, like the realness, like not the glamorous.

Thirdly, some interviewees felt that veteran suicide rates should be telling policy makers and those who hold them accountable that they are failing in their duty to use US military forces competently and effectively. Even though the US military is an all volunteer force, there is a responsibility to ensure these volunteers are protected and valued. Hans thought that policy makers should be conscious of the effects their decisions have on service members:

> And I think what we saw with the Vietnam soldiers is so many of them were just disheartened because they saw the same things that we're seeing with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. These pretty much unsuccessful campaigns that dragged on and like what did they accomplish? Yeah, so I think just policy makers really need to get more aware of their calculus and going into things, and if they're going to go in, what's their exit strategy?

Red also stressed the importance of military men and women having the support they need, both material and moral, when they return from missions:

> There is a time and a place for violent force of action, and this man defended the defenseless, and he confronted evil head on and dealt with it, which is what we've trained and asked him to do, and now you wants [sic] to hang him out to dry and put him out of the Army? How dare you …. if we send that kind of message to our men and women we are going to have a weak military. When the time comes to defend our people they are going to second guess themselves because if I do this, they are going to leave me and hang me out to dry.

Those who join the military do not do so only out of the goodness of their hearts or love of country. This significant act of patriotism, voluntarily joining one of the branches of the military, requires commitment and support from other entities on all levels of society.

DISCUSSION

THEME ONE: PATRIOTISM AS LOYALTY

> It is in death that the soldier or veteran can regain the status of citizenship, the title of hero, the honor of sacrifice. (Shields et al., 2014, p. 434)

One of the most surprising incidental findings from this qualitative study about veteran suicide was the intense debate about how veterans who completed suicide should be remembered, specifically regarding military funerals. Related to this theme, there were also discussions about whether using battle analogies to describe internal struggles was ultimately helpful for the veteran community. Patriotism, expressed as loyalty to one's comrades even in death, can help explain these seemingly incongruent reactions. Arguments on both sides of the issue were passionate. On the one hand, some veterans quite painfully questioned whether burying people with full military honors might "glamorize" or "romanticize" suicide. This concern about a contagion effect is mirrored in civilian discussions about suicide prevention (Edwards-Stewart et al., 2011; Linehan, 2017; Radden, 2016). In the case of suicidal veterans, interviewees saw completing the act as a choice; not necessarily a rational or correct choice, but one made by weighing what one's future might look like. This tension is explained a bit more by anthropologist Ken MacLeish (2019): "Among soldiers and those close to them, suicide emerges as a not-unreasonable response to the parallel constraints of military biopolitics: the ongoing exposures of war and the ambivalent care to which those who produce it are subject" (p. 286). A full discussion of military biopolitics is beyond the scope of this project, but the point is that for some individuals, particularly military veterans, suicide can seem like a viable, imaginable option.

Unfortunately, for some veterans there seems to be a very clear scenario and script for what happens when a veteran dies: that veteran seemingly leaves temporal problems behind, "Taps" is played,[1] and buddies gather to drink and remember the good times at a grave. Because veterans are practiced and good at keeping the memories of their buddies alive, this predictable scenario may offer comfort to those who are experiencing difficulties and feeling suicidal.[2] Similarly, extending the combat zone to one's life after service and framing suicide as a "battle lost," can allow veterans to re-claim their martial identities (as well as ensuring they get into Valhalla). Some veterans were worried that this nostalgia distracted from building and enjoying one's current life. Sometimes the ties to the past can be too powerful: "For soldiers, power relationships are alive even in the realm of death. Even in death, soldiers are entangled in the sets of relations that were part of their ontological generation" (Moss & Prince, 2014, p. 224).

On the other hand, several veterans also felt that when one of their buddies is gone, that person's greatest and most significant part of their life, which is often military service, should be honored. In some cases, referring to a completed suicide as a "battle lost" or an after-effect of war can be comforting to families and make it easier to understand or accept the horrific loss of a loved one. Being buried and remembered as a warrior was incredibly important to interviewees. Ultimately, there were divergent opinions about how veterans demonstrate loyalty to their buddies. While military funerals and war analogies can help one process the death of a loved one, some veterans worried that the pageantry and ritual surrounding one's death might be an inadvertent incentive.

THEME TWO: PATRIOTISM AS A PERFORMATIVE VALUE AND ACTIONS TAKEN BY VETERANS THEMSELVES

Throughout the interviews, veterans identified ways in which patriotism required individual action from veterans themselves and could be demonstrated via different exercises. First, some veterans equated patriotism with being a good soldier and leader. Effectively fulfilling these roles involved thinking critically on a strategic level as well as tactical and operational levels. Being part of the military should not mean one is merely a cog in the war machine. Leaders at all levels should have a clear picture of different levels of command and the ability to critically analyze and respond to their situations (Vandergriff, 2014).

As an Army officer, Hans experienced a great deal of moral distress during his time in Iraq. He felt it nearly impossible to simultaneously fulfil his obligations to both his troops and his country. His own moral code and his oath as an Army officer required him to complete his assigned missions while also protecting his soldiers' lives, but lack of a coherent strategy often made it seem like he was forced to take unnecessary risks. For him, part of being a good patriot is examining one's place and role in larger systematic issues: who are we really serving? The government? Our soldiers? These interests seemed to be competing and conflicting in the on-the-ground war. This finding supports Jerry Lembcke's (1998) observation about the importance of examining the political logic of war and paying particular attention to the experiences of those who were in the war. Being patriotic means asking hard questions and taking action to implement solutions that best serve one's subordinates, leaders, and peers.

Secondly, there was the recognition that the military instilled "roles and values … into the veterans, including structure, identity, responsibility, purpose, unity, and belonging" (Krause-Parello et al., 2019, p. 50). Part of patriotism involved preserving, carrying, and enacting these same values in civilian life. There is a stigma that sometimes surrounds those who complete suicide: that suicide is "giving up" or a form of defeat, which was at odds to how some veterans expected their peers to act (Finley, 2011). Service members pride themselves on being cut from a different cloth than civilians: this band of brothers has grit, a dedication to success, that others do not. Some interviewees interpreted suicide as a failure to live up to these more rigorous standards of how a veteran should act. No one said that transitioning back into civilian life was easy, but part of being a "good veteran" means one always drives on. In addition, veterans carry some responsibilities into post-service life. For those who were leaders, the suicide of one's peers or subordinates also indicated a failure in one's duty to take care of their people. This living performance of martial values is an integral part of patriotism for veterans.

THEME THREE: PATRIOTIC ACTIONS GENERATE CORRESPONDING OBLIGATIONS FROM SOCIETY

Finally, the interviews revealed the sentiment that patriotism comes at a price—not that it can be bought, but that service to and sacrifice for one's country is not solely an altruistic, one-way street. People sign up for the military with the expectation that if they become injured during their service, they will be provided medical treatment and rehabilitation (Adler, 2017; Kinder, 2015). Rehabilitation and medical benefits have been framed as governmental social obligations for several decades (Adler & Gates, 1954).

Unfortunately, these obligations are not always met in the eyes of veterans. Clarissa, Julio, and Brennan expressed disappointment and anger that society's obligations to take care of veterans when they return to their communities were not being met. This point of view is not exclusive to veterans. There is tacit recognition of deficiencies that veterans face in current health policy. As Zoe Wool (2015) wrote,

> In a nation haunted by its own shameful and guilty stories of civilian and institutional mistreatment and neglect of Vietnam veterans (draftees and volunteer alike), this also seems to have anxiously narrowed and intensified the form that civilian recognition of soldier suffering is supposed to take in the Post-9/11 era. (p. 102)

This obligation to provide care is often viewed as a contract between the state and the veteran that concerns what the state owes the veteran after she renders her service to the state (Damron-Rodriguez et al., 2004). The general public and press agree with this reciprocity claim: In their analysis of New York Times articles between 1851 and

2011, Wolbring and colleagues (2015) discovered that certain positive themes around disability were found in articles exclusively on injured veterans. These themes included that veterans "deserve" to have good health care, "should feel well taken care of," and should be afforded all rehabilitation technologies available (Wolbring et al., 2015, p. 154). Overall, interviewees made the point that the nation and its government have obligations to veterans once they leave active-duty military service.

Secondly, interviewees of this study identified another facet of patriotism for the media specifically: an obligation to inform the general public about what is going on with veterans after they discharge from service. Many veterans felt the media wasn't living up to this "duty" and were angry that there wasn't more realistic, accurate coverage or discussion about veteran suicide on the news or in popular entertainment. Media coverage is particularly important because it dominates a major part of what Gupta and colleagues (2017) call the suicide archive—an ever-growing collection of texts, images, reactions, clips, etc. that shapes how each individual suicide is interpreted or framed and its political impacts. Media coverage attracts the attention of the general public, who can then put pressure on policymakers or institutions to change harmful policies. Military service inevitably takes a toll on the individuals who choose to enlist or accept a commission, which means that those who benefit from this service have some sort of obligation to those who served (Selgelid, 2008). Military members voluntarily set themselves apart from the rest of society and take up a role based on being willing to do what others will not or cannot. A common quote circulated on social media reads, "A veteran is someone who wrote a blank check made payable to the United States of America for an amount up to and including their life" (Hughes, 2017). This invocation reminds citizens exactly what they have been given. Serving in the military leaves no part of the human person untouched. Whether or not the US actually cashed the check makes little difference. Veterans gambled with their lives and have therefore earned something. In light of these expectations, it seems particularly galling that veterans should be driven to suicide, especially when they leave notes that explicitly blame a lack of good health care and services for their fatal actions.[3]

Finally, some veterans talked about the obligation that policymakers have to veterans. In their recent article about patriotism and why Americans serve in the military, Krebs and Ralston (2020) wrote, "the enduring popular faith in the patriotic citizen-soldier may have fed US politicians' penchant to reach reflexively for the military tool" (p. 3). In other words, the perception that military members join for primarily altruistic reasons means that political decisions about when and where to use military force are made with more enthusiasm. Participants Hans and Red explicitly called out US policymakers for their lack of support and attention to veterans who have difficulties after leaving the service. In their eyes, patriotism requires politicians and policy makers to weigh the long- and short-term effects of military action in terms of battlefield loss, future potential problems, and the current high veteran suicide rates. Responsibility for troops requires more than gratitude when they come back: "Thanking soldiers for their service symbolizes the ease of sending a volunteer army to wage war at great distance — physically, spiritually, economically" (Richtel, 2015, para. 8). Actually delivering resources and support for veterans are a critical component of patriotism.

CONCLUSION

When trying to articulate what patriotism means, military veterans are a valuable resource. Veterans are sometimes seen as the embodiment of patriotism itself. Analyzing veteran reactions to suicide reveals several facets of patriotism to consider. First, patriotism as loyalty and acting in the veteran community's best interests was very important to veterans. There is an ongoing, passionate debate around whether military funerals and framing suicide as a "battle lost at home" is helpful or harmful to the veteran community. Part of being a veteran involves having a long memory and keeping the image of members of your unit alive. Some veterans worry that the solemn, emotionally laden ceremonies and poignant battle analogies may unintentionally offer a way to go back to a simpler time in life, when one knew who was at one's right and left. Other veterans see these explanations for death as an easier way to understand why someone is gone and an appropriate way to honor someone who may have actually given her life for her country.

Secondly, veterans see patriotism as a performative value requiring them to carry certain values and priorities with them back into civilian life. Part of this involves asking hard questions about who one is actually serving. Another part requires one to hold on to the higher standards that were instilled in the military, both in terms of one's own performance and in one's duty to take care of others. Finally, patriotism on the part of society contains certain obligations. The community and government owe veterans good health care. The media has a duty to keep the general public informed about what's really going on in the veteran community in a truthful way. Finally, policy makers and citizens should be required to recognize and learn about both short- and long-term impacts of participating in military conflicts and be ready to provide meaningful and helpful support when issues arise from these policy decisions.

NOTES

1 "Taps," originally a lights-out bugle call for the US Army, is an official part of US military funeral honors for all branches of the military (Nix, 2016).

2 Moss and Prince (2014) wrote about how sometimes veterans "search for recognizable scripts to ground themselves in order to reestablish stability and fixity," but that these scripts are not always helpful (pp. 116–117). Based on responses from the researcher's interviews, this paper argues that the way people who have completed suicide are remembered could qualify as one of those unhelpful scripts.

3 From October 2017 to November 2018, there were 19 suicides on Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital grounds, seven in parking lots (Wax-Thibodeaux, 2019). The Military Times noted, "At least some of those deaths [suicides on VA campuses] appear to be in protest of problems with veteran benefits or care" (Shane, 2019, paragraph 4). The late Marine Colonel Jim Turner left a note specifically linking inadequate VA care to the suicide crisis. He wrote, "I bet if you look at the 22 suicides a day you will see VA screwed up in 90% … I did 20+ years, had PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and still had to pay over $1,000 a month health care" (Altman, 2018, para. 3).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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