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Beyond the call of duty: Reimagining military service through hero narratives in the US Army's 'The Calling' campaign

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Abstract: This study employs Erwin Panofsky's iconographic analysis to decode the 2021 US Army recruiting campaign 'The Calling', situating it against the historical backdrop of military recruitment since the all-volunteer force's inception. Panofsky's framework allows for a dissection of the campaign's layered narrative and its animated aesthetics, which notably diverge from prior campaign's emphasis on the warrior archetype. The analysis progresses from a description of visual and narrative element's (pre-iconography), to an investigation of symbolic meanings (iconography), culminating in an interpretation of underlying societal attitudes (iconology). 'The Calling' reimagines military enlistment as a heroic pursuit, echoing the superhero genre's origin stories, and emerges as a response to waning interest in military careers. The campaign targets the zeitgeist of the young American population, offering a sense of heroism as compensation in a challenging recruitment climate marked by a robust economy and low unemployment. By presenting service as a 'calling', the Army navigates the complex terrain of contemporary cultural values, seeking to resonate with potential recruits on an ideological level, particularly within race and gender minority communities.

Keywords: US Army, superhero, the calling, recruitment, gender, race

1 Introduction

The transition of the US military from a conscription-based model to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973 marked a paradigm shift in its recruitment campaigns, moving from the predictability of compulsory service to

the competitive and voluntary enlistment landscape. The challenges in this new arena have become increasingly pronounced, with nearly 80% of Gen Z – those born after 1997 – failing to meet Army standards due to educational deficits, physical and mental fitness concerns, and legal issues.¹ To address these hurdles, the Army has diversified its approach, leveraging substantial enlistment bonuses, professional recruitment personnel and an advertising budget of \$157 million.²

Faced with what the US Army Recruiting Command (USAREC) describes as the most challenging labour market since the AVF's inception, the Army battles a lack of military awareness among youth, with less than 1% of Americans serving and a disqualification rate of 71% due to issues such as obesity, substance abuse and health problems.³ This issue is compounded by a noted decline in public trust and confidence in the military, as reported by the Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute in 2021.⁴ Against this backdrop, 'The Calling', the Army's 2021 campaign, represents a strategic pivot. This paper explores how this campaign, through its unprecedented use of animation and personal soldier stories, navigates the complexities of military portrayal in society. The campaign is analysed for its alignment with cultural motifs and narratives, particularly the superhero genre, revealing its strategic intent to resonate with potential recruits

¹ Tiron, R. (28 March 2022). U.S. army proposes to cut its troop numbers below 1 million. *Bloomberg.com*, Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-28/u-s-army-proposes-to-cut-its-troop-numbers-below-one-million>.

² Rempfer, K. (20 February 2020). Army to shift resources from bonuses to recruiting ads in future. *Army Times*, Available at: <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/02/20/army-to-shift-resources-from-bonuses-to-recruiting-ads-in-future/>.

³ Facts and Figures. Available at: https://recruiting.army.mil/pao/facts_figures/ [accessed 7 February 2022].

⁴ Gains, M. Public trust in military and police falls double digits, says survey. *NBC News*, Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/public-trust-military-police-falls-numbers-congress-media-are-worse-n1260388> [accessed 7 February 2022].

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and reflect the Army's adaptive posture in a shifting sociopolitical landscape.

The significance of this study transcends national boundaries, offering valuable insights not only for a US audience but for international communities grappling with the implications of military recruitment in the 21st century. As nations globally face the challenges of voluntary military enlistment amidst diverse socio-economic and political landscapes, the US Army's 'The Calling' campaign serves as a critical case study. This analysis illuminates how military institutions adapt their narratives, invoking cultural tropes such as the superhero genre, to appeal to potential recruits and navigate shifting societal values. For countries with volunteer forces, this campaign may reflect a broader trend towards reframing military service within a cultural context to maintain a viable force. Furthermore, understanding the US Army's strategies provides a window into American societal dynamics, which often serve as a bellwether for trends that affect military recruitment worldwide. Therefore, this study's exploration into the symbolic dimensions and the ideological construct of 'The Calling' has broader relevance, offering a template for comparative analysis with other nations' military recruitment efforts and contributing to a global discourse on the cultural intersections of military service and public perception.

2 Methodology

This study adopts Erwin Panofsky's three-level framework of iconographic analysis to scrutinise the 2021 US Army recruiting campaign 'The Calling', providing a nuanced exploration of its narrative and visual rhetoric (Table 1).⁵ Panofsky's method, as detailed in his seminal work *Studies in Iconology*, allows for a nuanced exploration of the campaign's visual, narrative and cultural elements, elucidating their multifaceted implications within the context of military recruitment.

The initial phase, the pre-iconographic analysis, involves a detailed inventory of the campaign's visual and narrative components. This includes an examination of the campaign's poster and the series of five 2-min YouTube videos. In this phase, elemental aspects – such as the portrayal of individuals, brand messaging, slogans, layout, composition and colour usage – are catalogued. Concurrently, this stage situates 'The Calling' within the

Tab. 1: Erwin Panofsky's three-level framework of iconographic analysis.⁶

Object of interpretation	Act of interpretation
I – <i>Primary or natural</i> subject matter – (A) factual, (B) expressional – constituting the world of artistic motifs.	<i>Pre-iconographical description</i> (and pseudo-formal analysis).
II – <i>Secondary or conventional</i> subject matter, constituting the world of <i>images, stories and allegories</i> .	<i>Iconographical analysis</i> in the narrower sense of the word.
III – <i>Intrinsic meaning</i> , or <i>consent</i> , constituting the world of 'symbolical' values.	<i>Iconographical interpretation</i> in a deeper sense (<i>Iconographical synthesis</i>).

historical continuum of US Army recruitment efforts, providing a contextual foundation for the subsequent iconographic analysis without imposing deeper interpretations on the imagery and themes.

Moving to the second level, the iconographic analysis, our focus shifts to decoding the embedded symbols and motifs. This stage critically examines the campaign's thematic reorientation, which frames military service as a 'calling' rather than a mere profession. We assess the chosen narratives and character representations for their potential impact and resonance with both potential recruits and the broader public. This includes interpreting the interplay of individual campaign elements and their collective narrative implications, supported by relevant literature.

The final phase, the iconological analysis, offers a macroscopic interpretation by placing the campaign within the sociopolitical context of contemporary America. This interpretive act delves into how the campaign's use of 'calling' and superhero motifs operates as psychological incentives in a competitive labour market and challenging socio-economic landscape. This level also examines the strategic targeting of racial and gender minority communities by the Army, especially during periods of recruitment challenges.

Through this tripartite analytical approach, the study aims to unravel the complex messages and strategic self-portrayal of the Army within 'The Calling' campaign. We aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how military recruitment intersects with cultural and sociopolitical dimensions in the United States. This methodology illuminates not only the content and aesthetic choices of 'The Calling' but also positions these choices within the broader narratives of societal values, public sentiment and national identity.

⁵ Panofsky, E., & Panofsky, G. S. (1972). *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Routledge, New York.

⁶ Panofsky and Panofsky, 14. Available at: https://libguides.up.edu/chicago/short_form

3 A brief history of US Army recruitment: Soldier to warrior, and now superhero?

‘The Calling’, the 2021 US Army recruiting campaign, represents a significant milestone in the evolution of military recruitment strategies since the transition to an AVF in 1973. This progression reflects a dynamic interplay between societal trends, economic factors and changing perceptions of military service.

Historically, Army recruitment has utilised mass media, with iconic campaigns such as James Montgomery Flagg’s 1917 ‘I Want You for U.S. Army’ poster achieving a lasting place in American culture.⁷ However, the end of conscription demanded more nuanced and persuasive strategies.⁸ The Army’s post-Vietnam War advertising, including campaigns such as ‘Today’s Army Wants to Join You’ (1973–1974) by N.W. Ayer, marked a shift in tone and approach, aiming to portray the Army as adaptable and responsive to the needs of individual soldiers.⁹ Subsequent campaigns such as ‘Join the People who’ve Joined the Army’ (1974–1979), sought to present a more relatable image of the Army by featuring real soldiers instead of actors.¹⁰

Throughout the decades, Army campaigns have oscillated in response to public sentiment and recruitment needs. The iconic ‘Be All You Can Be’ campaign (1981–2001), for example, was celebrated for its motivational messaging but later critiqued for emphasising personal benefits over service to the country.¹¹ This critique reflected a broader debate about the ethos and values that military service should embody.

Economic conditions also significantly influenced Army recruitment strategies. For instance, the prosperous 1990s posed a challenge to recruitment, leading to the ‘An Army of One’ campaign (2001–2005) by Leo Burnett, which aimed to appeal to a generation’s aspirations for

individualism and belonging to something larger than themselves.¹² Despite being grounded in research, this campaign struggled to connect with its target audience culminating in a significant recruitment shortfall in 2005.¹³

In response, the ‘Army Strong’ campaign (2006–2007) refocused on the opportunities for growth and development provided by Army life, moving away from the emphasis on individualism. This campaign sought to align the Army’s image with values of strength, resilience and collective purpose.

More recently, recruitment efforts have revolved around the concept of the ‘warrior’, with campaigns such as ‘Warriors Wanted’ (2018) and ‘What’s Your Warrior?’ (2019–2021) attempting to redefine and broaden the Army’s portrayal of soldier identity. These campaigns aimed to balance the traditional focus on combat roles with the diverse array of careers and opportunities within the Army, addressing evolving societal attitudes and misconceptions about military service.¹⁴

‘The Calling’ campaign, emerging in this historical context, signifies a novel approach by introducing a narrative style reminiscent of superhero storytelling. This campaign seeks to engage potential recruits by framing military service as a noble and aspirational pursuit, resonating with contemporary cultural and societal trends. This study will explore ‘The Calling’ in the context of this historical arc, examining how it diverges from and builds upon previous campaigns, and what its unique approach reveals about the current and future state of military recruitment and public perceptions of military service in the United States.

4 Decoding ‘The Calling’: A tripartite iconographic analysis

In May 2021, ‘The Calling’ campaign was launched by the US Army, introducing a distinct approach to military recruitment through a series of animated films. This campaign features the personal stories of five soldiers, focussing on their individual paths to answering the call of military service. Significantly diverging from previous Army recruitment efforts, ‘The Calling’ shifts away from

7 Flagg, J. M. (2019). I Want You for the U.S. Army. *Archive, National Archives*, Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/ww2/photos/images/ww2-09.jpg> [accessed 18 December 2019].

8 Brown, M. T. (2012). *Enlisting Masculinity: The Construction of Gender in US Military Recruiting Advertising during the All-Volunteer Force*. Oxford University Press, New York, p. 44.

9 Bailey, B. L. (2009). *AMERICA’S ARMY: Making the All-Volunteer Force*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 74.

10 Saucier, J. (2010). *Mobilizing the imagination: army advertising and the politics of culture in post-Vietnam America*. PhD dissertation, University of Rochester, p. 88.

11 Labash, M. (30 April 2001). The New Army. *Washington Examiner*, Available at: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/the-new-army-12567>.

12 Dao, J. (10 January 2001). Ads now seek recruits for ‘An Army of One.’ *The New York Times*, sec. U.S., Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/10/us/ads-now-seek-recruits-for-an-army-of-one.html>.

13 The Associated Press. (10 October 2006). ‘Army Strong’ Replaces ‘Army of One’. *NBC News*, Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wnba15197720>.

14 Moon, H. (1 July 2021). Constructing the modern warrior: The U.S. Army and gender. *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*, doi: 10.21220/s2-2nk6-y107.

the typical ‘warrior’ narrative. Instead, it portrays soldiers as everyday individuals, each with their unique vulnerabilities and life experiences. This change in representation addresses a critical perception challenge where young people view military life as an unattainable realm requiring extraordinary discipline and disconnected from everyday reality.¹⁵

In crafting ‘The Calling’, the Army delved into the diverse experiences within its ranks, choosing stories that resonate with contemporary youth concerns and aspirations. A notable innovation in this campaign is its use of animation, a first in the Army’s advertising history. Unlike previous campaigns that employed actors or real-life footage, ‘The Calling’ combines animated storytelling with the real-life introductions of the featured soldiers, providing a personal touch and authenticity.

Applying Panofsky’s framework, the pre-iconographic analysis focusses on cataloguing the visual and narrative elements of ‘The Calling’, including the unique portrayal of each soldier’s story and the use of animation. The iconographic analysis then delves into the deeper meanings, interpreting the phrase ‘the calling’ and the symbolic resonance within the campaign’s narratives and visuals. Finally, the iconological analysis situates these elements within the broader sociopolitical context, examining their impact on public perception and relevance to contemporary societal values. This structured approach aims to unravel the multi-layered messages of ‘The Calling’, reflecting the campaign’s role in shaping the evolving narrative of military recruitment.

4.1 Pre-iconographic analysis: Unveiling the visual narrative

In the pre-iconographic analysis of ‘The Calling’ campaign, two primary components are examined: a five 2-min series of YouTube videos and a promotional poster.

The YouTube series consists of five 2-min videos, each following a similar structure. These videos begin with a brief introduction to the five soldiers, transitioning between real-life footage and animation, overlaid with the slogan ‘The Calling’ in Army Gold. The core of each video is the soldier’s personal narrative of how they responded to their ‘calling’, culminating in their real-life appearance to affirm ‘...and I’ve answered my calling’. The soldiers featured are:

- Corporal Emma Malonelord (White, Female, Enlisted): Emma’s journey from being a ‘spoiled kid’, involved in ballet and equality marches, to joining the Army is portrayed.
- First Lieutenant David Toguchi (Asian, Male, Officer): David’s story transitions from a military child admiring pilots in Hawaii to becoming a helicopter pilot himself.
- First Lieutenant Rud Sheld Plaisir (Black, Male, Officer): Known as ‘Rickie’, who moved from Haiti to Florida, develops deep love for America and joins the Army.
- First Lieutenant Janeen Phelps (Black, Female, Officer): Janeen, growing up in an Army family, overcomes her father’s initial opposition to pursue her military ambition.
- Specialist Jennifer Liriano (Hispanic, Female, Enlisted): Jennifer, influenced by her experiences in the Dominican Republic and her family’s immigrant background, joins the Army seeking to be part of an organisation of ‘good people’.

Accompanying the videos is the campaign’s poster, which prominently features the animated versions of these soldiers, each with a distinct racial and gender identity, evoking the imagery of Marvel superheroes. The poster captures their pre-military identities, occupying more than half of the space and rendering them in poses suggestive of independence and strength. Above, the caption ‘Five different lives. One life-changing decision’ highlights their diverse backgrounds. The background is a montage of adventurous elements such as flying helicopters and mountains, overlaid with white brushstrokes. The lower part of the poster features the ‘The Calling’ logo in Army yellow, flanked by real-life photographs of the soldiers in uniform, directly engaging the viewer. This design bears a striking resemblance to Marvel movie posters, echoing similar themes and visual styles (Figure 1).

This initial phase of analysis lays the groundwork for understanding the campaign’s visual and narrative presentation, preparing for deeper explorations into its symbolic meanings and cultural connotations in the subsequent phases of analysis.

4.2 Iconographic analysis: Deciphering symbolic meanings

In the iconographic analysis of ‘The Calling’, the campaign’s title is central, signifying a shift in how military service is perceived. Each video culminates with a

¹⁵ U.S Army. (4 May 2021). U.S. Army reveals the people behind the uniform in new animated film series. Available at: [www.army.mil; https://www.army.mil/article/245937/u_s_army_reveals_the_people_behind_the_uniform_in_new_animated_film_series](https://www.army.mil/article/245937/u_s_army_reveals_the_people_behind_the_uniform_in_new_animated_film_series).

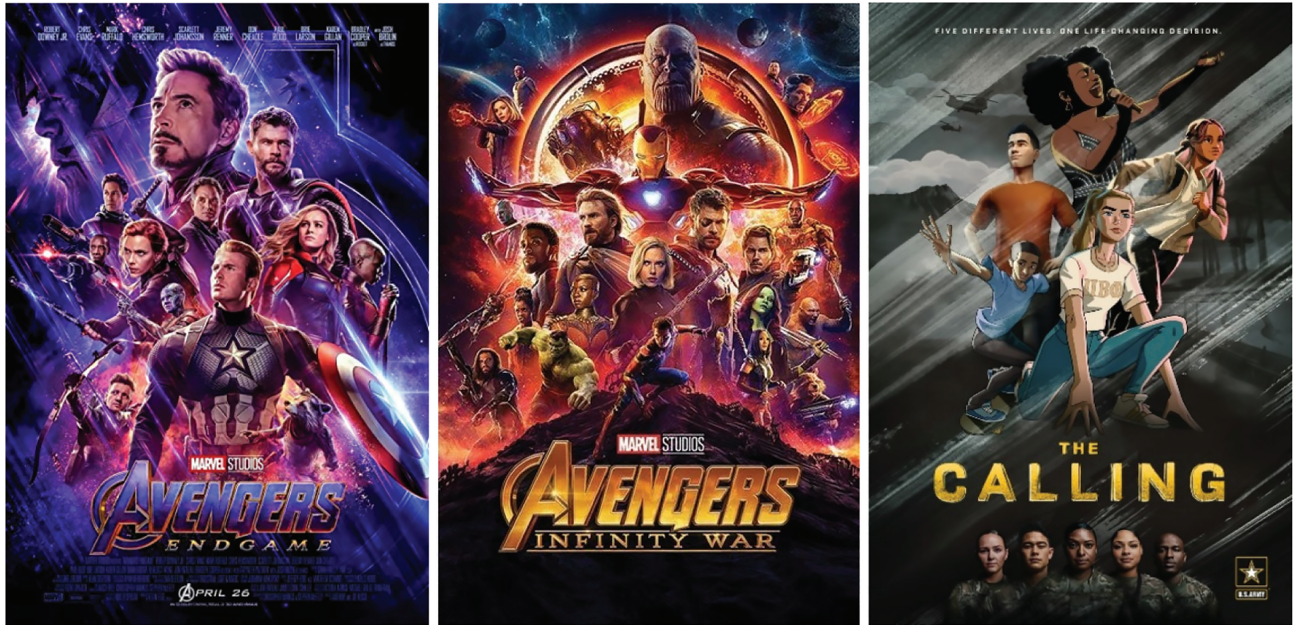


Fig. 1: Avengers posters and 'The Calling' poster.

soldier stating their rank and name, followed by, '...and I've answered my calling'. This choice of wording marks a departure from traditional military narratives, framing service as a personal vocation or 'calling' rather than a mere 'career' or 'occupation'.

This shift in terminology is rooted in the Army's evolution from a conscription-based model to an AVF. Under conscription, military service was viewed as a civic duty and legal obligation, a responsibility inherent to citizenship. With the transition to AVF, however, military service transformed into a voluntary choice, a career path among many.

Half a century post-transition, the Army's embrace of 'the calling' in its recruitment campaign is noteworthy. This term's usage aligns with sociologist Charles C. Moskos Jr.'s analysis in his 1977 article in *Parameters*, a scholarly journal published by the US Army War College.¹⁶ Moskos differentiates between 'calling', 'profession' and 'occupation', noting that a 'calling' implies self-sacrifice and dedication beyond market-driven economics, highlighting a commitment to a higher purpose.

While 'profession' in the military context is often associated with specialised expertise and a potential lifetime career, particularly for career officers, it does not fully encapsulate the military's ethos, where compensation is tied to rank and tenure, not necessarily expertise. The term 'occupation', legitimatised in market

terms, contrasts with the military's equal-pay-for-equal-rank structure and is less aligned with its traditional values.

In marketing the Army as a 'calling' in an era where market-driven terms dominate and the core values of Gen Z prioritise work–life balance and personal fulfilment, the Army confronts a paradox.¹⁷ Gen Z's values, emphasising individuality and alignment with personal values, seemingly clash with the traditional notion of a calling, which demands self-sacrifice and total dedication.

Therefore, the choice of 'The Calling' as the campaign title is both intriguing and counterintuitive, suggesting a strategic attempt to reconcile these conflicting values and appeal to a new generation of potential recruits. This section will further explore this juxtaposition by analysing the content of the recruitment advertisements, seeking to understand the implications of this strategic choice in the context of contemporary societal trends and the values of the target demographic.

Transitioning from the concept of military service as a calling, the campaign also notably challenges traditional gender and racial stereotypes historically prevalent in military recruitment. Political scientist Melissa T. Brown's analysis of three decades of US military recruitment campaigns reveals a persistent association of military

¹⁶ Moskos, C. C. (1977). The all-volunteer military: Calling, profession, or occupation? *Parameters*, 7(1), pp. 2–9.

¹⁷ Francis, A. (14 June 2022). Gen Z: The Workers Who Want It All. *BBC*, sec. Worklife, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220613-gen-z-the-workers-who-want-it-all>.

service with masculinity, despite increasing enlistment of women.¹⁸ Historically, men have been overrepresented in these advertisements, with warrior ideals predominantly associated with male service members.¹⁹

Brown's observation that Army commercials often reinforced traditional gender roles, implying that 'a woman in the Army is still a woman', is particularly pertinent. While the Army has been relatively impartial in its representation of racial minorities, particularly Black males, the inclusion of Black women and other minorities has been lacking.²⁰

'The Calling' appears to consciously break away from these entrenched narratives. It features a diverse group of soldiers, challenging the archetype that men are the ideal warriors. Three out of the five featured service members are women, and four are people of colour, representing a significant shift from previous campaigns. This is in line with the Army's stated goal for the campaign: to bridge the 'relatability gap' between Gen Z and the military by highlighting the diverse and emotionally resonant origin stories of its soldiers.²¹ The emphasis on diversity is unmistakable: among the featured soldiers, three are women, two are Black, with one Hispanic and another of Asian descent, and the only white soldier featured is a woman raised by a lesbian couple. 'The Calling' not only redefines the concept of military service but also reflects a transformative approach in representing gender and racial diversity. It demonstrates the campaign's departure from traditional military advertising narratives, emphasising a more inclusive image that aligns with contemporary societal values and the expectations of a new generation.

4.3 Iconological analysis: Contextualising cultural and societal implications

In the iconological analysis of 'The Calling', the emphasis on diversity and the adoption of superhero tropes present

a complex interplay of societal and cultural implications. The campaign's marked shift from traditional valorisation of hegemonic masculinity to a focus on diversity represents a response to evolving social norms and legal mandates. While women's representation in the Army has grown significantly from 5% of the officer corps in 1974 to 18% in 2017, and non-white racial/ethnic minorities from 36% in 2004 to 43% in 2017, the campaign's portrayal, as mandated by the fiscal year 2021 defence authorisation bill (Public Law 116-283), appears to overrepresent these demographics.²² Despite women comprising less than 20% of the Army's personnel, they represent 60% of the soldiers in 'The Calling'. This has led to criticisms of the campaign being too 'woke', reflecting a clash between evolving societal values and traditional military norms.²³

The choice of a superhero narrative in 'The Calling' is another significant element. The superhero genre, described by media scholar Jeffrey A. Brown as the 'undeniably dominant American film genre' post-9/11, offers a lens to understand America's collective psyche.²⁴ Superheroes, in the wake of traumatic national events such as 9/11, serve as symbols of resilience and justice. The popularity of superhero films such as *Spider-Man 2* and *The Avengers* highlights America's desire to rewrite traumatic narratives with victorious outcomes. This context is critical in understanding the Army's strategic use of superhero imagery in its recruitment campaign.

Furthermore, Google Ngram – a text-analysis tool that shows how a user-selected word or phrase is used in a corpus of books available on Google Books and thus offers an understanding of language usage trend – data shows an increased correlation between the terms 'soldier' and 'hero' since the 1960s, particularly since the Vietnam War (Figure 2). This trend reflects a shift in how soldiers are perceived in American culture, from duty-bound servicemen to heroic figures. However, the hero label can obscure real challenges faced by military personnel, as noted in discussions about healthcare workers during the

18 Brown, M. T. (Spring 2012). 'A Woman in the Army Is Still a Woman': Representations of women in US military recruiting advertisements for the all-volunteer force. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 33(2), pp. 151–175. doi: 10.1080/1554477X.2012.667737.

19 Moon, H. (2021). The US Army 'warrior' and military masculinity: The army recruiting campaigns and evolving warrior. In: Cooper, L. R. (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Masculinity in American Literature and Culture*. Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 177–193.

20 Brown, 'A Woman in the Army Is Still a Woman.' p. 170.

21 Laura, D. (4 May 2021). U.S. Army reveals the people behind the uniform in new animated film series. Available at: www.army.mil/article/245937/u_s_army_reveals_the_people_behind_the_uniform_in_new_animated_film_series.

22 Barroso, A. (October 2019). The changing profile of the U.S. military: Smaller in size, more diverse, more women in leadership. *Pew Research Center* (blog). Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/10/the-changing-profile-of-the-u-s-military/>; William Mac Thornberry, "NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2021," Pub. L. No. 116–283 (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ283/PLAW-116publ283.pdf>.

23 Britzky, H. (20 May 2021). Army disables comments on new commercials amid criticism it's too 'woke'. *Task & Purpose*, Available at: <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/army-recruitment-commercials-woke/>.

24 Brown, J. A. (2016). *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*. Routledge, New York, NY, p. 13.

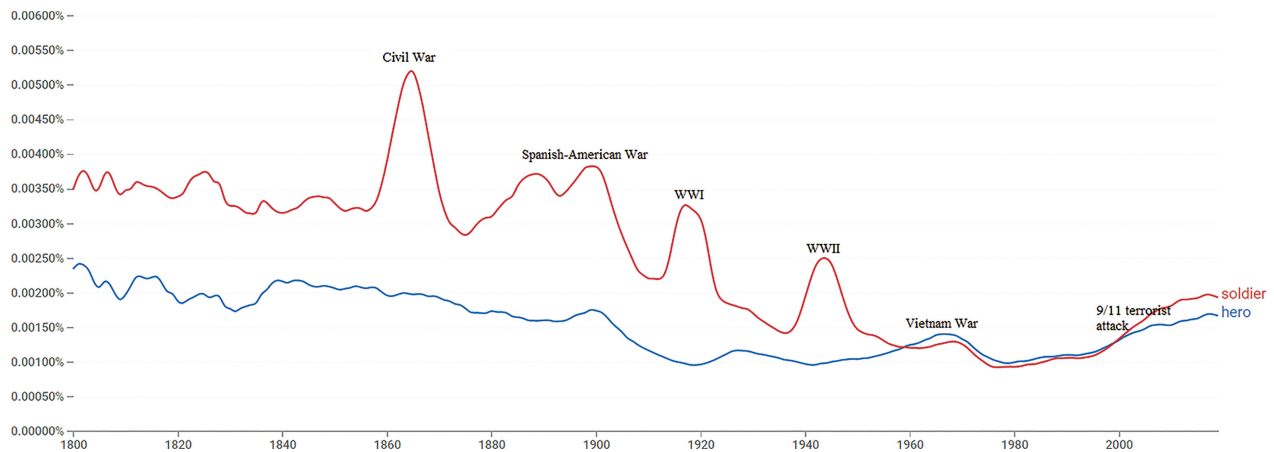


Fig. 2: Google Ngram Index.

COVID-19 pandemic.²⁵ The term ‘hero’ can sometimes be used to silence and exploit, glossing over the actual needs of those it celebrates.

The societal tendency to heroise certain roles, including soldiers, is often met with discomfort by those who serve. For example, Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta, the first living Medal of Honor recipient since Vietnam, expressed unease with being labelled a hero, echoing sentiments shared by many in the military.²⁶ This discomfort reveals a disconnect between public perceptions and the lived experiences of service members.

‘The Calling’ campaign, therefore, can be seen as both an attempt to align the Army with contemporary societal values around diversity and as part of a broader cultural trend of heroising military service. This analysis explores how the campaign navigates these complex cultural dynamics, redefining the image of the soldier in the public imagination while contending with the nuances and contradictions of these societal shifts.

5 Conclusion

In its quest to fulfil manpower requirements under the AVF system, the US Army has historically deployed a range of tactics. These have varied from tangible incentives such as tuition assistance, enlistment bonuses and pensions to intangible appeals, such as the promise of adventure and

a rite of passage into manhood. Traditionally, recruitment campaigns have acknowledged enlistment as a voluntary choice, focussing on what the Army could offer to recruits. However, ‘The Calling’ diverges significantly from this pattern by framing enlistment not merely as a career choice but as a higher ‘calling’, a concept imbued with a sense of destiny and a divinely ordained mission.

This study, applying Erwin Panofsky’s iconographic framework, reveals that ‘The Calling’ employs Marvel superhero aesthetics to resonate with contemporary cultural trends and appeal to a new generation of recruits. The campaign’s soldiers, portrayed as everyday individuals who rise to a heroic calling, mirror the narrative arcs of superheroes overcoming adversity. This approach renders the superhero soldier an attainable ideal, ensuring that potential recruits see themselves reflected in these stories, rather than being intimidated by unattainable standards of heroism.

However, the Army’s emphasis on accessibility and diversity in this campaign – a strategic response to increasing challenges in recruitment and changing demographics – should be viewed critically. While tapping into underrepresented demographics and leveraging the ‘hero’ rhetoric, the campaign potentially serves as a ‘psychological wage’. This term, originally coined by W. E. B. Du Bois, implies a non-material compensation that may obscure the real needs and challenges faced by soldiers. Such hero labelling, while celebrated publicly, often meets with ambivalence among the soldiers themselves, as revealed by their discomfort with the hero moniker.

As the Army navigates a landscape marked by a shrinking pool of eligible recruits and low unemployment rates, it is likely to increasingly rely on hero rhetoric. This paper’s analysis suggests that while such strategies may be effective in attracting recruits, they warrant careful examination. The hero label, if used uncritically, risks

²⁵ Manjoo, F. (15 July 2020). Please don’t call them heroes. sec. Opinion, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/opinion/schools-reopening.html>.

²⁶ Collins, E. M. (23 February 2011). Reluctant hero: Soldier becomes first living MOH recipient since Vietnam. Available at: www.army.mil; https://www.army.mil/article/52257/reliant_hero_soldier_becomes_first_living_moh_recipient_since_vietnam.

glossing over the substantive issues and needs of service members. It is imperative, therefore, to scrutinise who truly benefits from the application of the hero label in military recruitment, ensuring that the rhetoric aligns with the lived realities and needs of those who serve.

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