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Constructing veterans : women military veterans, VA and society

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CONSTRUCTING VETERANS: WOMEN MILITARY VETERANS, 
VA AND SOCIETY

By

Cecilia Ferradino

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VA and Society

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Abstract

Despite having honorably served in the U.S. military, many women do not see themselves as veterans. In so doing, they may miss out on much-needed benefits to which they have rightfully earned and deserve. But, the question goes beyond benefit claiming. If women who served in the military do not see themselves as veterans they are also relinquishing power that comes with membership in a politically and socially esteemed group. If women who served in the armed forces do not see themselves as veteran, then what is a veteran? Therefore, this research centers on the question: who, or what entity, defines veteran? As the evidence will show, “veteran” is a construct co-created and defined by the state and society. Thus, although “veteran” is a legitimate political classification granting certain individuals public benefits—a policy constituency—it is also an identity that has been largely predicated on deeply held social beliefs about gender, militarization and most importantly, power. With a well-documented history of American women holding considerably less social and political power than men, a disparity even more pronounced in the hypermasculine atmosphere of the military, we are challenged to reconsider how policy constituencies are established and how individuals understand their identities as members of such groups.
Acknowledgements

Martial artists believe that the highest rank, a black belt, is a representation of competence, but not necessarily mastery. Once the belt is earned, the student begins the true journey toward enlightenment. The sentiment is an apt comparison for graduate study. Akin to the black belt, completion of this project marks the beginning of my next journey. But the truth is, I could not have gotten to this point without the help from countless others: veterans who spoke with me, even though I was a virtual stranger; Veterans Affairs officials; and members of the American Legion Family all provided information needed to bring the project to fruition. However, the research in these pages would have been only random thoughts had it not been for the following individuals.

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Chapter 1: What is a Veteran?

We had only spoken for about ten minutes when Rhoda, a 24-year Army veteran, recalled how she made an appointment to see her local tax assessor to appeal the decision denying her a veteran’s exemption on her land bill. Assuming the problem lay in missing paperwork, she arrived armed with official documents, certain the error would be corrected once she could verify her service. Rhoda explained the situation, demonstrated she served honorably in the Army, showed the pertinent documents and requested the veterans’ tax exemption. The assessor, an older gentleman who held the position for a number of years, said matter-of-factly, “Women are not veterans.”

Appeal denied.

She continued to tell me that each year she had to fight for the exemption and each year it was denied. It was not until the assessor left office that Rhoda finally received the tax exemption and has been granted it ever since with no problems.

Now consider Georgette, a 46-year-old combat veteran with over two decades of service, who, when asked if she considered herself a typical veteran, said, “I feel like I’m a proud veteran who served [but] I have a hard time identifying as a veteran.” When I asked why she replied, “They [society and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)] almost dismissed our service,” adding that when she tells people she was in the military, the common reaction is “you?!”

Both anecdotes are indicative of the reality that seems to be part and parcel of being a contemporary woman military veteran. Some, like Rhoda, are disregarded as veterans solely because they are women. Others, such as Georgette, also felt society’s
sting of rejection, but internalized it to the point at which she did not identify as a military veteran. At first, I was shocked. Since the Second World War, women have formally served in the military, eventually securing a permanent place under the Women’s Armed Forces Integration Act in 1948. Could Rhoda and Georgette’s experiences been the norm, I wondered? Not so. After the data collection phase of the research ended, I learned Georgette was not the only one who found herself on the receiving end of a surprised “you?” after revealing her military service. And, like Georgette, other women veterans who served after World War II also felt excluded from the larger veteran population, thanks, in part to the strongly held conception of a veteran being male. Even Rhoda, whose tenacity helped her fight city hall and win, admitted that she, too, had moments of doubt because the prevailing conception of the male-only veteran. “I never considered myself a veteran until I worked at VA,” she admitted later in the interview.

How was it possible that two women who each honorably served over 20 years in the military, and were employed by the U.S. Department of Defense or Veterans Affairs, did not readily identify as veterans? As it turns out, they were not alone in their thinking. In her study of post-World War II America, historian Lizabeth Cohen (2003) found that many women who served did not see their military service in the same way as they did men’s. A former Navy Nurse Corps member explained, “‘Women’s sense of themselves as veterans seems to be different from that of men….Somehow many of the women didn’t place their contributions on an equal level with men’” (Cohen 2003, 139). Such was the dominant attitude long after the war’s end that it affected political behavior. Specifically, many women did not claim VA benefits, even though they had earned them, because they did not identify as military veterans. To illustrate, in 1989, the head of a
state Advisory Commission on Women Veterans discovered that locating women veterans so that they may be apprised of their benefits was a much greater task than expected because of self-perception. “They [women] don’t categorize themselves as veterans. They don’t feel entitled to any benefits” (Qtd. in Cohen 2003, 139).

It would be a reasonable assumption to think that as women have continued to gain privilege and power in many areas of socio-political life, including the armed forces, attitudes and behaviors would change, especially among those who wore the uniform, and as a result trepidation about being a veteran would wane over time. Yet, this is not necessarily the case. Other scholars found the same feeling of uncertainty regarding identity among some twenty-first century women veterans. For example, a female Iraqi War veteran said:

I do not feel that I have earned the status of “veteran” and it is difficult for me to justify. I try not to think about it much. I do not overtly tell others that I am a veteran although I may bring up my Iraqi puppy in casual conversation. I do not talk about military and political affairs in general because it is not in my character. I have been on active duty, as a reservist, for more days than I have been on the job as a civilian. I have had great unrest with my soldier/civilian role. (Quoted in Murdoch, et al. 2006, S10)

The feeling of not having “earned” the status (“veteran”) to which this woman veteran legally held, added another important dimension to what was developing into a more difficult and multifaceted puzzle. What would lead a woman who served in a twenty-first century combat zone to lead her to believe that she was unworthy of the title “veteran”? Had her story been the only piece of evidence to surface, I would have surmised the disconnect was a result of an anomalous experience that most women who wore the uniform did not encounter. But, when I considered her story with the other anecdotes, I realized her story was not anomalous. I began to think that the explanation was not just a
matter of women still having to struggle in the masculine world of the U.S. military. What was it about being a veteran that produced similarly themed experiences among completely different women? Certainly, their military service played a role. But what other factors influenced their perceptions to the extent that it carried over to their civilian lives? If these women, who honorably served their country in the military, were not seen or did not self-identify as veterans, than who is a veteran? I began to suspect the problem could be rooted in interpretation. “Veteran” is such a ubiquitous term that perhaps over time multiple meanings had developed. If so, then maybe that was why the tax assessor denied Rhoda her exemption or why the Iraqi vet felt her veteran status was unearned.

To verify my suspicions, I designed my research around the question: who, or what entity, defines “veteran?” As I would eventually come to learn, and will explain in the forthcoming chapters, “veteran” was, and continues to be, a legitimate political classification granting certain individuals public benefits—a policy constituency—but it is also an identity that has been largely predicated on deeply held social beliefs about gender, militarization and most importantly, power. With a well-documented history of American women holding considerably less social and political power than men, a disparity even more pronounced in the hypermasculine atmosphere of the military, we are challenged to reconsider how policy constituencies are established and how individuals understand their identities as members of such groups.

As a starting point, I framed the research with a more pointed inquiry designed to extract meaning and help explain why some women veterans do not see themselves as such. The next section, therefore, opens by examining the definition of “veteran” and
follows with a discussion of why it is important to expand the inquiry beyond the letter of law to include the socio-political meanings embedded within the language.

*Semantics Count*

To be able to deconstruct the term “veteran,” I initially turned to the policy itself. If government has established and continually funded an agency designed to serve such a specific slice of the population, then surely we could look to the state for a definition of the word veteran to see if it was gendered with a clear bias against women. If the definition was gendered, then perhaps that would explain why some women who served in the military were either not seen, or did not see themselves, as veterans. If, however, the meaning was gender neutral, then maybe dynamics were taking place beneath the surface of the text. In this case, the latter proved to be true. According to Title 38 of the U.S. Code, which governs Veterans Benefits,

> The term “veteran” means a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable. (38 U.S.C. §101(1)[2006])

Under this legal definition, women are unequivocally military veterans and entitled not only to public benefits, and by extension, recognition from the state and society. Yet, as their stories show, despite the code’s gender-neutral language, the fact remains that society, including some females who served, have a difficult time seeing women as veterans, a troubling finding when considering how revered veterans are within political and civil societies (Schneider and Ingram 2007, 1993). Thus, to intentionally exclude women from the larger policy group, as Rhoda’s annual dealings with her assessor demonstrated, or to foster a culture where some members feel excluded, as Georgette expressed, creates an unnecessary and unfair internal hierarchy within a group whose
members are supposed to be equal. Regardless of whether the imbalance of status and power is an unintended consequence or not, it is a critical part of this story because, as I will explain next, veterans are seen as one of the most worthy policy constituencies by lawmakers and the general public. However, it is equally as important to confront the often-forgotten reality that a segment of the constituency, namely women, have been, and to some extent continue to be, marginalized on a socio-political level.

American military veterans may well be the highest regarded (Altschuler and Blumin 2009; Humes 2006; Gambone 2005; Jensen 2005, 2003; Katznelson 2005; Schneider and Ingram 2007, 1997; Mettler 2005, 2002; Amenta and Skocpol 1998; Bennett 1996; Skocpol 1992; Levitan and Cleary 1973; Cumming 1958) and rewarded policy constituency, compared to others receiving public benefits. Veterans, or “military” as Schneider and Ingram (1997, 197) classify them, are among the most deserving and powerful groups, a distinction shared with historically advantaged policy constituencies such as business, the middle class and the elderly. Laura Jensen (2005) reminds us, “U.S. military forces have been considered deserving of public benefits for so long that veterans’ entitlements seem an almost natural part of the American social policy landscape” (35). Reverence for soldiers has also extended to civil society, which, for centuries, directly linked martial service with full citizenship, specifically, the privilege to participate and govern the polity (Brown 2012, Ritter 2006, Mettler 2005, Feinman 2000, Snyder 1999, Mink 1995). In fact, American voters put a veteran in the White House almost 60 percent of the time, indicating high regard for men who wore the uniform. Yet for all of the praise society and government offer servicemembers, the uncomfortable question still remains. Why would some women—who, themselves, have been
marginalized throughout history—not identify as a member of one of the most deserving and therefore powerful policy constituencies within the United States? To put it bluntly, why the disconnect and why is it important?

When certain members of a policy group are not afforded the same opportunities as the whole, then the policy has failed at its most fundamental level, the provision of programs and services to those who qualify. The inequity is more than a simple breach of contract, though. Excluding or ignoring members of a policy group based on a criterion unspecified by law violates democratic and ethical principles and sends messages that a faction of the constituency is not valued to the same degree. In the case of post-War women military veterans, sex is not a determining factor for claiming veterans’ benefits, pursuant to Title 38. Therefore, a woman may not be denied benefits because of it.

Gender\(^1\), however, may be a motivation for denial of benefits, according to my research; witness Rhoda’s treatment by her tax assessor. Consequently, when government or society fails to view women as equal members of the veteran policy constituency, it hinders socio-political progress and perpetuates discrimination. In so doing, democratic principles such as equity, justice and citizenship are in danger of being negated. The unfortunate irony in this scenario, of course, is that we are speaking about women veterans, members of an elite political group whose main function is to protect the nation and its citizens from inequality and injustice. Just as disconcerting is the fact that the situation is not new. Many African American veterans from the southern states encountered a similar fate upon returning home from the Second World War. Despite their many contributions as members of a military responsible for helping liberate non-

\(^1\) For this analysis I am distinguishing between sex and gender. Sex is the biological differentiation that classifies a human as male or female. Gender is more complex in that it encompasses social roles and treatment (Schneider and Ingram 2005), including political and institutional meanings (Keiser, et al. 2002).
American citizens from dictators and oppressive regimes, once back on American soil, the rules governing a racially segregated society were back in full swing.

Women’s reluctance to identify as veterans becomes problematic when placed in a similar socio-political context. If women veterans continue to feel distanced from the larger group of veterans, then they are more likely to remain removed from aspects of the democratic process, particularly those that seek to close gender gaps among what should theoretically be a homogenous policy group—military veterans, rather than women or veterans. Regrettably, inaction perpetuates and legitimizes a culture of gender inequality simply because no one, or no group, is demanding change. Furthermore, as long as women stay on the periphery, they relinquish the power associated with being a member of a politically strong constituency currently represented and served by VA, an equally powerful, cabinet-level agency.

To be fair, for as much as the current state of affairs for women veterans is flawed, it is important to also acknowledge the progress women veterans have made in the political and societal realms. For example, with the passage of time, we have witnessed society slowly loosening its grip and accepting the new reality where mothers and daughters can wear the uniform with the same honor and success as their fathers and brothers, and applauding those who do. But, because existing ideas, messages, beliefs, and even laws regarding women in the military, society is able to remain anchored to the past long after laws are passed. This is not to say that society is incapable, or does not want to, change. Unquestionably, the United States has an impressive history of bestowing rights upon marginalized groups. However, the conferral of rights also requires a transfer of power, and rarely does anyone or any group like to share or
relinquish power, no matter how small the degree. Consequently, this research is a story about how the parameters of power are defined and implemented, as much as it is about creating identity.

Therefore, in determining who, or what entity, defines veteran, including how power is distributed and identity manifested, this project makes the case that some of the answers may be found within narratives and social constructs about gender and martial pursuits. Often forgotten because of how well they have been embedded in collective attitudes and behavior, a deeper examination of such constructs have the ability to reveal dimensions of the American veteran that linger beneath the letter of the law. If public policy is an expression of values (Strach 2007; Katzenelson 2005; Schneider and Ingram 2005; Mettler 2005, 1998; Soss 2002; Stone 1997), the school of thought to which this research subscribes, then it becomes critical to know what these values are and how government and society will operates within them. The next section expands this discussion by explaining how this research adds to the wider body of literature and a current understanding of gender and public policy.

**Significance of Research and Contribution**

Military veterans and VA present an opportunity to reevaluate the relationship between policy and constituencies and government from both a focused (veterans only) and wider perspective (all policy groups). In this research, I argue that the social and cultural constructs lie beneath the surface of every policy and are worth exploring because they convey important messages about how society and government perceive policy constituencies and to what degree these groups are valued, a premise that becomes
especially important when attempting to help shift marginalized populations, such as women veterans, from the periphery to the center. History has demonstrated that integration alone does not always change conditions, at least not immediately, and it rarely alters preexisting attitudes at a comparable rate.

For example, Affirmative Action was designed with the intent of balancing what was an unequal arrangement for women and minorities in the public labor force. To that end, programs were established and applicants placed in jobs. Whereas many citizens succeeded as a result of Affirmative Action, there were just as many who were met with resentment and resistance. The intensity of the issue was so great that the debate is still alive today, albeit to a lesser extent. This is not to say that Affirmative Action was poorly designed or implemented, but rather to point out that when government seeks significant policy change, particularly ones that challenge traditional customs and beliefs, a consideration of prevailing attitudes and constructs in the design phase may help increase its chances of achieving success with the intended results.

The stealth nature by which social constructs become embedded in the collective consciousness and part of everyday life leave them largely overlooked. This is unfortunate because they reveal important clues and messages about a polity’s shared values. To understand its importance we can look at public policy, which, at its very core is an expression of values (Strach 2007; Katzenelson 2005; Schneider and Ingram 2005; Mettler 2005, 1998; Soss 2002; Stone 1997). For example, when women were originally prohibited from joining the military or, when admitted, disqualified from holding high military ranks, implicit messages about gender roles (i.e., women’s inferiority) were legitimized because they were government sanctioned. Taking these two examples a step
further we are also able to see how power is distributed based on gender and can unequivocally say women did not hold the balance of power. However, as women in the armed forces continue to move from the periphery to the center, there is the potential for power shifts in their favor; for example, the new policy allowing women in combat making them eligible for ranks that were formerly closed. That policy represents a significant societal and governmental value change where current power arrangements have the potential to be modified.

Based on the nature of the job, veterans are influenced by multiple institutions during and after their military service: the Department of Defense (DoD), the specific service branch and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Therefore, what messages are women veterans receiving and from which organization are they coming? Are the messages competing or do they reinforce a constant belief about gender, war, power, citizenship or a combination thereof? Keiser, et al. (2002) point out, “Institutions are the products of gendered behavior as well as the environment in which behavior takes place and is (or can be) transformed” (555). The power of the bureaucracy to influence culture, which in turn, can affect political choices and identity as member of a political group(s), cannot be overstated and thus is a significant part of this project. More specifically, I look at how government and society define “veteran” beyond its legal and colloquial definitions by examining social constructs about gender, war and militarization to see what they can tell us about being a woman veteran.

This project also looks at the degree to which institution values come into play, another aspect of policy research, which, similar to social constructs, could provide scholars with a new set of clues about institutional behavior, especially why, and under
which conditions, bureaucracies buck convention and change. Although there is a significant body of literature examining institutions available, there is still a need for a subsection of scholarship that examines bureaucratic organizations and the process by which they change—and change people—over time. Daniel Carpenter (2001) asserts:

> Although administrative agencies undoubtedly occupy a smaller place in American political institutions than in other nations, the neglect of bureaucratic organizations in studies of administrative development is unfortunate. First, it reduces political development to institutional creation, to the neglect of institutional transformation. Second, it leaves the most important political outcomes—the impact of policies on citizens—unstudied. Only by focusing on administrative outcomes can transformations in the relationship between state and society be properly analyzed. (11)

Knowing that bureaucratic change is often slow, “if at all,” says Wilson (1989) and met with resistance from internal and external forces (Warwick 1975) it is important that we document and analyze what occurred. This project, then contributes to a currently underdeveloped literature.

With more women joining the armed forces each year, the study of women veterans is timely and relevant. Not only are women capable of engaging in all aspects of the military, but they have also proven to be assets because of their gender, an area of military life that is currently undeveloped. For example, in the Mideast, American women soldiers have been specifically called upon to interact with local females and children because of perceived gender roles (i.e., women are expected to be softer, calmer and maternal compared to men, who may be viewed by locals as hostile and domineering). Rarely, if at all, have women been utilized in this capacity, so we are presented with a tremendous opportunity to witness a development in military engagement where women may take center stage. The next test will be whether or not
more women exert their governing power as citizen-soldiers and take their rightful places on the political stage upon returning home.

Citizenship, including the ability and duty of the individual to participate in government, is also an important aspect of this research, as citizenship and power go hand-in-hand. A classical era norm, citizenship was often conferred upon those men who fought on behalf of the state (Feinman 2000, Snyder 1999, Elshtain 1989), rendering citizenship both a reward and sacred obligation. Therefore, if military service is linked to citizenship, a necessary condition for sustaining democracy, and women veterans have been excluded from full participation in the armed forces for the greater part of the nation’s history, does that mean that women are unable to govern once they return home as a citizen-soldiers? From a legal standpoint, of course, the answer is yes. Since women received the vote, they theoretically have the same opportunities to govern civil society as men, regardless of veteran status. But the bigger question is, where are women citizen-soldiers? For example, of the 107 veterans serving in the 113th Congress (89 in the House, 18 in the Senate) there is only one woman (Tammy Duckworth, IL-D). Whether the low number of veterans of both genders in federal office is a function of voter preference, the all-volunteer military structure, or disinterest by veterans, the fact remains that women veterans are notably absent from decision-making bodies on all levels of government. Whereas we currently cannot show a definitive link between women veterans and legislative representation by women, it is still significant because of the degree to which the narrative tying citizenship and military service is a part of the extended definition of veteran.
Although women veterans have a much shorter military history compared to men in uniform, the fact remains that we could know more about them than what we already do. Historians and social scientists have set the groundwork and, as the next chapter will explain, have collectively produced a chronological record of women’s progress in the military. This project uses the history as a foundation, but also as a launching pad for a new avenue of study in which I seek to ascertain what it means to be a woman veteran. To do so, however, required an investigation in tandem with male veterans, rather than in isolation, so that there were some comparative measures from which to draw fair conclusions. The next section, therefore, explains why I chose to study veterans and the Department of Affairs.

**Choosing Veterans and VA**

Of the 22.2 million veterans currently living in the United States and Puerto Rico, 1.8 million, or a little over eight percent, are women. This number represents a steady growth in the percentage of female veterans since 2000, a cohort that is expected to continue to incrementally increase between now and 2035, when VA estimates that women will comprise approximately 15 percent of the total veteran population. The increase of women veterans necessitates more VA-administered services. To illustrate, between 2000 and 2009, the number of women using VA health care increased by 83

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2 Also see Chapter 3 for a discussion of comparative measures and why they were appropriate and necessary for this research.
4 The data represent females ages 17 and over.
percent,\textsuperscript{6} suggesting that capacity, which is already a concern, will continue to be important to VA and its constituents (Philpott 2012).

Yet, the past is also an important consideration that could help in understanding the present. History has shown that women have been called upon to assist in war efforts only in the direst circumstances and in limited capacities (Holm 1992). Even after proving their worth as military personnel in World Wars I and especially II, when everyone came marching home, the armed forces ceased to be a career opportunity for women. It was not until three years after the war when women finally were fully integrated into America’s military. In 1948, after a year of heated debate, P.L. 625, the Women’s Armed Services Act, became law with a 73-vote margin (206 to 133) (Holm 1992, 113). Passage of the law did not guarantee equality, however. In fact, it codified many traditional gender attitudes beneath a legislative title suggesting equity. For example, women had to wait until the 1970s before they were allowed entrance into military academies; pregnancy in uniform meant an immediate separation from service; the type of jobs females could perform were limited because of gender; and, until recently, women were barred from combat which has resulted in the inability to achieve the same high ranks as men (Borlik 6/17/98, Holm 1992).

\textit{VA and Veterans’ Policy}

Veterans policy is administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), a bureaucracy that may be classified by what Wilson (1989) deems a “client agency” (79), for its narrow constituency, or client base. It is the only federal agency specifically dedicated to a single group (veterans) and has a great deal of political support from

lawmakers, for example, being elevated to cabinet status in 1989 by Republican president George H.W. Bush. Compared to other administrative agencies, particularly non-cabinet level, VA\(^7\) has, and continues to be, perhaps one of the most generous federal agencies in providing for its primary and secondary constituencies, veterans and their dependents and/or spouses. Demonstrating a pattern of being more munificent during times of war or conflict, veterans from all eras are rewarded for their sacrifices to varying degrees. For example, depending upon eligibility, a veteran may be able to obtain an education, career training, a low-rate government backed home loan, life insurance, health benefits, rehabilitation services, a pension and a final resting place in a National Cemetery paid for, in part or wholly, by the government. Even after death, spouses and children of veterans may be eligible for VA benefits. In that respect, the government largesse may be viewed as a tangible measure of how much the state reveres veterans. Furthermore, unlike other administrative agencies, VA is entirely dedicated to a single policy group in which membership is based specifically upon service in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps or Coast Guard. In addition to claiming VA benefits, veterans may also be eligible for benefits administered by other public agencies whose constituencies include non-veterans with seemingly disparate needs, such as the Department of Agriculture, which assists farmers and food stamps recipients. The non-veteran, by contrast, does not have that mobility. Therefore, because these characteristics are unheard of in other areas of the bureaucracy, VA is an appropriate institution to examine. Yet, for all of VA’s resources and political strength, an important question still remains. That is, if VA, whose mission it is to serve all veterans, regardless of gender, cannot reach a certain segment of

\(^7\) Until 1989, VA was formerly known as the Veterans Administration. In 1989, the agency was elevated to cabinet-level status and renamed the Department of Veterans Affairs.
its constituency—in this case, women who do not identify as veterans—then which agency can? Furthermore, what responsibility do institutions have to ensure that its policy constituencies are served?

Of course, it is also fair to concede that as long as public bureaucracies continue to provide benefits to those who meet the established criteria, they are nonetheless fulfilling their legal obligations. For example, if a VA facility does not have the proper equipment or personnel to treat a veteran’s ailment, he or she is eligible to have the procedure conducted in the private sector and billed commensurate with the veteran’s VA rating, or health classification. In essence, VA becomes no different than any other public sector organization, which utilizes third-party private sector providers, more commonly known as “contracting out,” for services. Under that structure, women veterans requiring gender-specific services, for example, may still be eligible for care at the same cost if the service was conducted at VA, with the only difference most likely being location. Thus, from that perspective, it may be unfair to claim that VA is short-changing its constituents, especially women. In fact, such an arrangement could be viewed as a highly efficient use of taxpayer dollars and resources, as well as a means to expedite care for those who need services more quickly than others or at a facility with better equipment.

However, there is more than efficacy at stake. How a bureaucracy treats its constituents is also a good measure of how much the policy group is valued in the larger socio-political structure, a point emphasized in the welfare state (Howard 2007; Gambone 2005; Katzenelson 2005; Mettler 2005, 1998; Schneider and Ingram 2005; Soss 2005; Jensen 2003; Gordon 1994; Skocpol 1992) and citizenship (Brown 2012, Ritter 2006, Feinman 2000, Snyder 1999) literatures. VA, the only federal agency exclusively
dedicated to a single policy group, has legitimized and rewarded men veterans for years through its wide array of benefits and high level of government and taxpayer support. But what happens when women enter the picture? How does a male-centric institution deal with the integration of a population whose differences are more than just biologically based? Moreover, how would VA benefit by accommodating a population that comprises less than ten percent of the whole? For years, the relationship between VA and women veterans has been strained. The lack of gender-specific health services and established beliefs about who is a veteran has deterred some women from using benefits, whereas others were simply unaware (Washington, et al. 2006).

But, change sometimes comes from an unlikely ally, and in this case, it comes from an organization that was once presented as being at odds with women veterans. Currently, VA is in the midst of an agency-wide culture change campaign that they hope will filter outside of the organization to the public. To have an institution whose origins are rooted in serving a masculine constituency where the prerequisite for benefits is engaging in masculine pursuits (e.g., militarization, war) invest resources to ensure inclusion for a marginalized group that is the theoretic polar opposite, is a powerful and rare development. Not only is bureaucratic change often difficult and slow (Wilson 1989), when organizational values change, they are usually met with deep resistance (Warwick 1975). So far, though, my research shows little political or public pushback regarding VA’s culture change campaign. Should VA’s campaign succeed—and my research suggests that it most likely will—it may become a model for how public agencies can be proactive and, in some instances, responsible for paradigm shifts within and outside of its walls.
As I will discuss in Chapter 5, VA’s culture change campaign challenges the millennia-old construction of the male warrior in its campaign to bring females into the fold as equal players. This is no small feat, as VA serves a large male constituency who interact with VA because of their participation in a masculine institution. Part of this strategy, therefore, will be dependent upon women’s acceptance of the new construction. If women do not buy into the proposition that they are also military veterans, then the plan essentially fails. Nevertheless, VA an interesting institution to study in that to make the culture change campaign succeed, it has to reframe an old narrative—men are veterans, women and children are dependents—that they were largely responsible for keeping alive by virtue of its history of overlooking women veterans.

VA’s culture change campaign also illustrates an active bureaucracy using publicly funded resources and political leverage to achieve equity for a marginalized group. What distinguishes VA from other agencies is that it is working toward achieving their goal by changing the narrative, a strategy often not utilized in environment that relies heavily on metrics to gauge success. Additionally, VA has gone from being a completely male-centered organization to one that not only recognizes women, but also incorporates gender and biological differences as part of its transformation, a feat unachieved by most other administrative agencies. Hence, both scholars and practitioners could benefit from a better understanding of the conditions that make bureaucratic and socio-political change possible.
Overview of Research

In the chapters that follow, I explore how government and society define veteran, including how each makes the concept real for those who served in the armed forces, particularly women. The next chapter discusses the project’s theoretical contributions, while Chapter 3 outlines the research design. The following two chapters, 4 and 5, present empirical data and are the nucleus of the project.

Chapter 4, which is based primarily on interviews I conducted with women and men who served, demonstrates that “veteran” seems to hold much more weight than just a policy classification or descriptor. Instead, it is a powerful social construct that encompasses centuries-old norms, expectations, beliefs and customs about gender, warfare, civic rights that has changed very little over time. As a result, many post-War women veterans I spoke with were reluctant to identify as veterans, despite expanded military roles, more veterans benefits and socio-political progress in areas of American life outside of the military.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the bureaucracy and examines the relationship between the Department of Veterans Affairs and its female constituency, who were often ignored based on their small numbers, compared to men. The disparity produced a gender gap in the provision of services, especially healthcare, but more importantly, reinforced the idea that veterans were exclusively male. Today, however, VA is making measurable progress toward closing that gap through increased offerings targeted at women veterans, most notably an organization-wide culture change in which they seek to redefine the social meaning of veteran to include women.
The final chapter situates the research in the broader context of gender and policy. In response to the question who or what entity defines veteran, I conclude that it is a product of both the state and society to the extent to which the individual veteran has very little control. Additionally, I find that incorporation of marginalized groups into a more powerful existing framework for the purposes of equity is only one half of the equation. The other necessary and often missing half is cultural equity. That is, laws can change with the stroke of a pen, but beliefs take longer. Therefore, if lawmakers want to increase the chances for policy success, then perhaps they may want to follow VA’s lead and consider preexisting constructs that impede meaningful change.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Overview

The question in Chapter 1 asking why some women who served in the military did not identify as veterans is part of a larger theoretical concern. Specifically, who or what entity, defines “veteran?” The parameters government sets through definitions becomes an important consideration because it determines how policy groups are delineated and subsequently who is included or excluded. Thus, if policy and policy groups are expressions of collective values (Strach 2007; Jensen 2005, 2003; Katznelson 2005; Schneider and Ingram 2005; Mettler 2005, 1998; Soss 2002; Stone 1997), then definitions, including how they are derived, become important because they show who government believes matters. Therefore, this research adds to the literature by taking a closer look at what constitutes a veteran and how such factors influence women policy constituents. To that end, I draw from a variety of scholarly works within and outside of political science. This chapter discusses the related scholarship in more depth and how this research contributes to the wider body of literature.

Military Veterans: The First Public Policy Beneficiaries

Since the early days of the republic, government has rewarded its military veterans for their service, thereby making them the nation’s first policy constituency (Jensen 2005, 2003; Skocpol 1992). Beginning with Plymouth colony in 1636 and eventually shifting to the newly formed government after the Constitution was ratified, lawmakers on the local and federal levels assisted men who were disabled in the line of duty through pensions as a way to compensate for the loss of wages due to war injuries (VA History in Brief, n.d., 1-2). By the early part of the Nineteenth Century benefits were
expanded to surviving widows and children in order to supplement the lost family income (Jensen 2003, Skocpol 1992, *VA History in Brief*). As the nation expanded and were involved in more military operations, veterans’ benefits expanded as well. Presently, veterans’ benefits are administered through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the only federal agency devoted to one policy group. Equally as impressive as the development of a comprehensive benefit system, was government’s ability ingrain the belief among the polity that veterans were “deserving” members of society (Schneider and Ingram 2005) early on. Given such political and societal esteem, it was surprising to discover that the body of literature concerning American veterans is fairly small.

Although the amount of literature devoted to veterans’ policy is small, it has not been completely ignored. Theda Skocpol (1992) and Laura Jensen (2003) offer different, but important, scholarship regarding the development and significance of veterans’ policy in the United States, which helped inform my research. In her paradigm-shifting treatise, Skocpol (1992) shattered the myth that the American welfare state originated during the New Deal era and effectively silenced critics who claim the U.S. was a “laggard” when it came to social policy. Contrary to popular belief, she explained, strong government commitment to social policy, and in particular, veterans, existed long before the establishment of the modern administrative state. Instead, veterans were policy beneficiaries as far back as the Civil War, many receiving pensions for their service, and thereby marking the beginnings of the U.S. welfare state. Similarly, Laura Jensen (2003) also traced the history veterans’ policy, but maintained that its origins predated the Civil War. Government, she argues, rewarded veterans as far back as the Revolutionary era, through pensions and entitlements (the latter being a benefit Skocpol ignores, says
Jensen). Although each scholar approaches veterans’ policy with a slightly different emphasis, they share an important common theoretical bond that is central to this research. Both Skocpol and Jensen demonstrate that early implementation of veterans policy established their place as a “deserving” (Schneider and Ingram 2005), group within civil society. In being seen as deserving by the state and society, military veterans acquired considerable political power.

Deservedness and power are at the heart of this research. Like Skocpol and Jensen, I also examine veterans and their relationship with the state as a deserving and powerful policy constituency. However, this project departs from what has been established by focusing on women veterans. As Chapter 1 explained, just because a woman served in the military does not necessarily make her a veteran in everyone’s eyes, including, in some cases, her own. Therefore, the question becomes whether women veterans are perceived as being equally deserving and worthy of power as their male counterparts by government and society at-large? More importantly, do women veterans feel deserving of the power that goes along with being in an elite group? One way to tackle these questions, I argue, is to determine who or what entity defines veteran to see where the power originates, how it is distributed and under what criteria. If that can be learned then it may help explain why some women veterans, who for so long have been marginalized in other socio-political areas by virtue of their gender, are not identifying as members of a powerful and influential policy constituency to which they have rightfully earned membership. Thus, the next section takes a closer look at veterans within the institutional framework of the contemporary American welfare state.
Unlikely Welfare Recipients

American veterans constitute a unique population of the welfare state that is markedly different from its non-servicemember counterparts. In stark contrast to many non-veteran groups that comprise the welfare state, military veterans are held in high esteem by government and the general public (Mettler 2005; Jensen 2005, 2003; Cohen 2003; Kohn 1981; Amenta and Skocpol 1988, Levitan and Cleary 1973, Cumming 1958). Risking one’s life in order to protect the “greater good”—the nation, its democratic principles, and people—is viewed by the vast majority of Americans as the ultimate sacrifice. Therefore, veterans are entitled to publicly administered benefits such as healthcare, low-interest home loans, vocational rehabilitation, educational funding, insurance, and a host of specialized programs administered through VA and other federal agencies (e.g., Department of Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, Small Business Administration), as well as private-sector rewards (e.g., discounts on goods and services). Further solidifying the public esteem for those who have served, veterans are also publicly honored through symbolic gestures: Veterans’ Day, monuments and memorials, and legislative proclamations and resolutions. The non-veteran welfare recipient receives none of these.

Once someone has served in the military, he or she is always a veteran. By comparison, once an individual leaves the “visible” welfare state, as Christopher Howard (1997, 3) terms it, particularly programs that are means-tested, he or she is able to abandon the “welfare recipient” identity. This is not to suggest that one’s past experiences do not shape the individual, but rather, that many non-veteran welfare recipients are generally all-too-happy to cast-off a facet of their identity that is often
viewed negatively by the public at-large. Although the two groups belong to the American welfare state and receive some of the same services, such as healthcare or education, government regards each as vastly different. Howard (2007) explains, “Welfare recipients are uniformly poor, most of them are in single-mother families, many of them are black or Hispanic, and some of the adults do not work for wages. These individuals do not have much political power, and the rest of the nation is not always sympathetic to their plight” (176). In contrast, veterans cut across all economic, social, and racial groups and are not as monolithic, in theory, as members of the visible welfare state. Moreover, because American ideology places veterans in a positive light, those returning from military service are seen as “deserving,” as opposed to many non-veteran welfare recipients, who are generally seen as “undeserving” (Schneider and Ingram 2005, 1997, 1993). Consequently, veterans’ collective political power is significantly greater.

The practice of bestowing primacy to one group, while excluding another, is not new. Schneider and Ingram (2005, 1997) explain that government has used public policy to classify citizens as either deserving or undeserving based on gender, race, physical traits and socio-economic status for years. Since the boundaries are government sanctioned, such stratification becomes legitimized and part of the political fabric. Yet, more often than not, these cleavages run counter to the fundamental aim of public policy, which is to equalize rather than divide.

Scholars have confirmed sharp divides in policy design and implementation based in large part upon established gender roles and expectations (Soss 2002, Mettler 1998, Mink 1995, Gordon 1994; Skocpol 1992). The American welfare state is entrenched in a paradigm that often subjugates women and reinforces traditional gender roles in which
females are responsible for tending to the home and children and males are charged with financially supporting the family (Mink 1995). Under that arrangement, we would expect women to be treated as second-class citizens (Katznelson 2005, Soss 2002, Mettler 1998, Mink 1995, Gordon 1994), an accusation levied against VA in the past and substantiated by government, media and constituents. Recently, however, the agency has made remarkable progress in serving women veterans by embracing gender rather than ignoring it (see Chapter 5). Although it is too early to tell, the question remains as to whether or not VA will continue on an inclusive path or revert back to old ways.

We cannot discuss the deservedness associated with veterans without mentioning the G.I. Bill. Over the past decade, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or the G.I. Bill, generated bursts of interest from political scientists (Katznelson 2005, Mettler 2005) as well as historians (Altschuler and Blumin 2009, Bennett 1996, Gambone 2005, Humes 2006), suggesting that veterans’ policy has had important and measurable effects on democratic society. In particular, scholars have centered their research on themes such as citizenship (Bennett 1996, Humes 2006, Mettler 2005), racial equality (Humes 2006, Katznelson 2005), and economic opportunity (Bennett 1996, Gambone 2005, Humes 2006, Katznelson 2005, Mettler 2005). Although my research examines post-War veterans, scholarship on the G.I. Bill remains important not only for setting a precedent of government largesse as an incentive for military service (although such generosity has waxed and waned considerably since 1944), but also because it cemented veterans’ permanent place as deserving beneficiaries.

From a scholarly perspective, though, Suzanne Mettler’s, Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation (2005), offers the most solid
theoretical framework from which to understand the power of public policy to define and transform. Mettler’s study asked whether the education and training component of the 1944 G.I. Bill influenced beneficiaries’ civic participation. Data gathered through surveys and interviews with veterans said yes. Many veterans who used the G.I. Bill for post-military learning or training increased their socio-economic standing and eventually became community leaders. Through her research, Metter demonstrated that the citizen-soldier in the classical sense was alive and well, and much of the credit would go to Uncle Sam. In addition to being able to explain how the G.I. Bill helped make the “Greatest Generation” great, she also showed what could happen when government and society’s interests align. For World War II veterans, the G.I. Bill created an identity.

To understand how, if at all, policy shaped contemporary Americans, I turned to Joe Soss’ (2002) research, which compared experiences between Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) recipients. Similar to my project, the bulk of his data were acquired through interviews with welfare clients and what emerged was a rich, ethnographic account which demonstrated that policy beneficiaries had diametrically opposed feelings regarding welfare based upon the program to which one belonged. Soss found that SSDI clients had a much more positive experience because of the treatment they received from local level program administrators. For example, when asked about encounters with caseworkers, the majority of clients reported that they were made aware of their rights, found waiting periods acceptable, thought that workers were courteous and helpful, and expressed an overall feeling of satisfaction. In contrast, many AFDC clients—some of whom also received SSDI—classified their experiences as negative; that the caseworkers were
uncaring and clients felt powerless over decisions that would affect their lives. Soss concluded that the type of program, including its level of deservedness, contributed to a pointed to a sharp distinction in clients’ attitudes.

Although Soss focuses his work on non-veteran policy, the important takeaway applicable to this study may be found in his inferences about the American welfare state; specifically, that the assumptions that go into policy design affect implementation. How a program is administered, particularly on the “street-level,” appears to be a direct product of society’s deeply ingrained beliefs about who should be considered “deserving” and who should not. This project was designed based, in part, on Soss’ research design, but also on his findings about meaning. For Soss’ interviewees, meaning was a product of institutional design, which Soss maintains, is sometimes created on assumptions. The next section explains how narratives, or constructs, become ingrained in socio-political attitudes and behavior.

**Social Constructs**

Since the classical period, militarization has been embodied by the male warrior archetype (Snyder 1999, Elshtain 1989), a model that honors men who take up arms for their homeland. Provided the soldier successfully transitioned from the battlefield to the home front, he became a “citizen-soldier” and was rewarded with the benefits of citizenship, meaning he was expected to actively participate and govern in civic life (Ritter 2006, Mettler 2005, Feinman 2000, Snyder 1999, Elshtain 1989). Important to understanding this model is recognition of the differences between the sexes. Male and female physiologies have always been essential for understanding the scientific principles
behind how the human body functions, yet it has also served as justification for how a human body should function in society. Below, I compare men and women according to classical assumptions to show how gender constructions have been woven into Western society’s conception of militarization and war.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male/Men</th>
<th>Female/Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combatant</td>
<td>Non-combatant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard physique</td>
<td>Soft physique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take life</td>
<td>Give life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expendable (as a “life-taker”)</td>
<td>Non-Expendable (as a “life-giver”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start wars</td>
<td>React to wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect nation</td>
<td>Protect family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As each column shows, the characteristics assigned to women suggest, in no uncertain terms, a sense of vulnerability and a weaker constitution based primarily on biology. In contrast, it appears that men were assigned their roles because of the male physique, implying that physical strength translates to strength on the battlefield. But when women do don a military uniform they challenge the existing archetype of the male soldier and, by extension, masculine power (Brown 2012, Mettler 2005, Snyder 1999, Elshtain 1989).

Of all the facets, perhaps the one that creates the most discomfort, even today, is the “life-taker/life-giver.” Although an over-simplification for illustrative purposes, this aspect of the “biology-equals-gender-roles” construct still carries considerable weight when thinking about women soldiers. For example, the 2013 legislation permitting women in combat, forces society to confront the sacred notion of women being confined to the “life-giver” (Elshtain 1989) or “nurturer” (Blacksmith 1992). Although physically capable, can society come to terms with the fact that those who are responsible for producing life can also eradicate life? Furthermore, are women prepared to assume both identities? What makes this particular aspect doubly interesting is that it has applicability

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8 Adapted from Elshtain (1989) and Brown (2012).
to men. If women can be both life-givers and life-takers, we should be also prepared to view men as life-givers to a certain extent, who, like women, have the right to eschew militarization without derision while also wanting to contribute to the creation and preservation of human life. In effect, women’s equal participation in the military and accepting their veteran identities could be instrumental in shattering binary constructions that have limited both sexes to an either-or setup that is insufficient for fully understanding human behavior.

For feminist scholars who examine women’s participation in the military, equality, especially its relation to citizenship is paramount (Brown 2012, Feinman 2000, Elshtain 1989); how scholars approach this concept, however, greatly differs. Ilene Rose Feinman (2000) explains that among feminists there are two schools of thought regarding women and the military. There are those whom she calls “egalitarian feminists” (1) for their belief that women have the right and responsibility to serve in the military because it is the path to full citizenship, the epitome of equality. An egalitarian approach reminds us that women are no strangers to war and conflict, as they have been involved in these pursuits for centuries. Yet, the gendered nature of martial service forced many women to be covert participants, thus receiving no credit for their contributions. Additionally, scholars who subscribe to this approach believe that women have the potential to transform military culture from a strict masculine environment to one that is more inclusive and equitable. For egalitarian feminists, women’s full participation in the military is long overdue.

The competing approach, says Feinman, comes from “feminist antimilitarists” (1), who, as the name suggests, oppose women’s participation in the armed forces for its
patriarchal underpinnings, which advocate violence and aggression to achieve domination and oppression (e.g., political, economical, sexual), especially over women. The military, they assert, hinders fundamental and necessary humanitarian goals such as peace and justice. In contrast to the egalitarian perspective, which views women’s involvement as a way to temper the military’s hypermasculinity, antimilitarist feminists maintain that women’s participation perpetuates the institution’s masculine culture.

Separately, the egalitarian and antimilitarist approaches are too reductive and absolute to fully explain women veterans’ behavior. Also, if the armed forces are as unequal and oppressive as theory suggests, then we would expect no women to join, a claim easily refuted by the increasing numbers of women volunteering for military service. Collectively, though, the feminist literature adds an interesting dimension to the research in that it challenges us to think about what gender really means and how it is conceptualized and eventually actualized through policy.

**Conclusion**

Although there is a small body of literature in political science devoted to military veterans, this project’s theoretical framework was influenced by the scholarship discussed in this chapter. I draw heavily upon the welfare state literature for its analyses linking social constructs and policy. As Soss (2002) demonstrated, how a policy is designed matters. However, the intended recipients also matter. Although Soss shows how design can affect identity, he does not fully consider whether identity plays a role in policy design. By comparison, this project looks at both angles.
I also look to Mettler’s (2005) study of the G.I. Bill and its effect on veterans for methodological and contextual guidance. However, Mettler’s analysis does not consider women. It is true that VA did not keep many statistics on benefit claiming for women veterans so tracking down the data would be extremely difficult; even today, obtaining consistent data sets on women veterans is a challenge. But, that is exactly what makes the study of this group important. If she included women veterans, perhaps the research would become complicated, but it would be more realistic.

The omission is not just with Mettler, however. Other scholars chronicling the G.I. Bill (Altschuler and Blumin 2009, Bennett 1996, Gambone 2005, Humes 2006) admit defeat, giving women veterans a few paragraphs, footnote or maybe a few page. Although these works helped inform my research, most notably in an historical sense, their stories are solid, clean, but incomplete.

Therefore, unlike the scholars mentioned above, my project diverges from the norm in that the complication and messiness are what fuel the research. There is a reason, or reasons, why many women veterans did not identify as veterans. Is the military’s history of exclusion and discrimination the culprit? It would be tempting to say yes and consider the matter closed, but I suspect there is more going on that has yet to be uncovered. Rarely, if ever, is a single factor to blame. Therefore, this project presents an opportunity to wrestle with a issue that few have attempted.

Finally, although a relatively smaller aspect of the research, this project includes VA in the conversation. Considering the large number of policies and programs devoted to veterans compared to other bureaucratic agencies very little is known about an organization whose sole mission is to care for America’s oldest policy group. Levitan and
Cleary (1973) point out that other areas of the welfare state have been examined in great depth, while the portion devoted to veterans has not. Instead, what is known about veteran policy is primarily discussed in the context of a larger policy area (e.g., housing, education) and does not receive much analysis. The smattering of data concerning veterans and veteran policies has left scholars with an understudied area that deserves scholarly attention, particularly now, when federal and state institutions are being called upon to increase its capacity to serve veterans of both genders, whose tours of duty go as far back as World War II and as recent as Iraq.

In the next chapter I explain the project’s research design, including a discussion of the approach and methodological tools that helped answer the research question. As I discuss in more detail, the nature of my inquiry is ultimately rooted in meaning—what does it mean to be a woman military veteran—so an interpretive study based largely on interviews with veterans, was used.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter covers the research design and methodological choices used to determine how veteran is defined and what “veteran” means to the women who served. I begin with an explanation as to why I took a qualitative approach, followed by my rationale for using specific methods. The chapter closes with a discussion of the data collection and analysis. Together, the approach and methodology I used helped produce findings instrumental in answering the research question.

Approach and Methodology

Chapter 2 described how there is a small body of political science literature concerning military veterans, with even smaller selection devoted to women veterans. The scarcity was not a hindrance, but a rather an opportunity to explore a new and what I believe to be a burgeoning and important area of scholarship. Because of this exploratory nature, an interpretive approach was the best way to answer the research question, which at its core, is question of meaning. I believed that by getting a better handle on who or what defines a veteran, I would be in a stronger position to determine what it meant to be an American woman military veteran in a post-World War II society and how, if at all, it factored into their identity as members of a policy constituency. More specifically, I reasoned that the etymology of “veteran” might be able to offer just as many valuable clues as the interviews and secondary data (e.g., law, reports, scholarship) I would be examining. In examining the definition of veteran, I discovered that social constructs were at the heart of the matter. For as much as “veteran” signifies a former service member entitled to public benefits, it is also a construct created by government and
society that carries with it messages and expectations about gender and militarization (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). Therefore, examining the social constructs embedded in “veteran” became a major aspect of the research that proved fruitful. Examining the effect of social constructs on veterans is a promising area that may be able to shed light on policy constituencies, particularly those encompassing marginalized groups, more generally. For these reasons, a qualitative approach made sense in that it could produce the most accurate and rich data.

With a qualitative approach underpinning the project, I used complementary methodologies that would allow some of the more abstract humanistic measures embedded within meaning, such as context, circumstance, perception and emotion, to come to the surface (Bryman 2001, George and Bennett 2004, Rubin and Rubin 2005, Yin 2003). Following in the footsteps of social scientists that employed a qualitative approach to produce compelling findings about policy constituencies (Strach 2007; Jensen 2005, 2003; Mettler 2005, 1988; Soss 2002), I relied heavily upon interviews. “Interviews,” says Soss (2006), “can be used to pursue questions that are difficult to locate in documentary sources or everyday interactions and to explore such questions in intricate detail” (141). As a guide, I drew heavily upon Mettler (2005) and Soss’ (2002) studies, which used in-depth interviews to show how individuals make sense of their roles as members of a policy constituency. Finally, to add another layer of context to the interviews I also relied upon governmental documents (e.g., testimony and reports), news stories and artifacts (e.g., VA-issued posters). These measures would also require a high level of interpretation on my part (Cramer Walsh 2004, Yanow 2000, 1996), so it was
important to utilize methods that were both flexible in its ability to decipher multiple meanings and perceptions, but also systematic.

There were multiple benefits in approaching the project qualitatively. First, because the time frame under investigation spanned over half a century and encompassed a great deal of social, political and economic events, context was critical. For example, a woman who served at the beginning of the Cold War era would most likely have had a vastly different experience than one who served at the tail end, even if we just considered the armed forces. As some members of my sample alluded, serving in the Army when the letter “W” (Women’s Army Corps) distinguished (segregated) women, led to different experiences and perceptions than those who entered after the WAC was decommissioned and everyone was called “soldier.” Context was an important aspect of the study because it helped capture detail and gave shape to what initially seemed amorphous (Bryman 2001), for example, how it felt to be one of the few women mechanics on base. Once context was established, I was then able to make fair comparisons because I had already considered historical events and attitudes that may or may not have had a bearing on interpretation (Rubin and Rubin 2005, Munck 2004).

Deciphering meaning from context also meant that I had to be aware of subtext and nuances embedded in the narratives, including body language, gestures (when interviewing in-person), breaks in speech, inflection and tone. For example, many women who were victims of military sexual trauma (MST) often paused before responding, perhaps looked away, or exhibited a noticeable change in tone. Attention to the non-spoken details was important because they became as much a part of the story as the words. Bryman (2001) reminds us that a key assumption in qualitative research is
individuals and their social world matter, a key assumption in my research as well. For that reason, the project looks at what it means to be a veteran “from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections” (277). Thus, I devoted a great deal of time peeling back the various layers entrenched in a variety of responses.

In this research, I follow scholars’ (Katzenelson 2005; Mettler 2005, 1998; Jensen 2005, 2003; Soss 2002; Gordon 1994; Skocpol 1992) lead in examining how social constructs can influence policy constituencies, design and implementation. With the exception of Mettler (2005) and Jensen (2005, 2003), this perspective has been not yet been applied to veterans, a constituency with considerable power, but also one in which scholars lack deeper knowledge. Further, when the sexes are separated women are completely left out. To remedy the omission, I apply concepts found in the welfare policy literature and see if they may be applied to women veterans. In so doing, I was in a better position to help facilitate the generation of new concepts and theory development (Bryman 2001, George and Bennett 2004, Rubin and Rubin 2005, Yin 2003).

The next section describes the research sample, including the time frame under investigation, how the sample was constructed, criteria for participation, length of study and demographic characteristics. I follow up with a discussion on my methodological choices, as well as the rationale behind specific questions and processes.

Sample: Women and Men Veterans

To make the project manageable, I confined the study to the post-War period—specifically 1948—to the then-present day (2011) because that is where women gained the most ground within the military with regard to duties, rank, regulations and overall
acceptance as fully incorporated members of the armed forces. These parameters were also chosen because they encompassed legislative and political milestones directly affecting women, including the Women’s Armed Forces Integration Act of 1948, the end of conscription and the establishment of the all-volunteer force (1970s), and ending with the most recent Mideast wars (Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan), which saw the highest number of women in uniform (VA Office of Policy and Planning 2007).

In total, my sample consisted of 44 American military veterans: 24 women and 20 men veterans from throughout the United States who had separated from active duty (the full-time military) with a discharge other than dishonorable and were not, or no longer a member of, the reserves. I excluded individuals with dishonorable discharges because, in most cases, they are ineligible for veterans’ benefits. I also omitted veterans who were in the reserves because they had semi-regular contact with the military and therefore not completely removed from the everyday culture of military life. All five of the U.S. armed forces branches—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard—were represented and included enlisted personnel and officers, although officers constituted a much smaller proportion of the whole (two women and four men officers). In addition, race, age and educational levels varied among participants (see Methodological Appendix).

The majority of veteran participants were obtained through a snowball sample where I began by asking people I knew for potential interviewees. This led to a pool of women and men with whom I had never met, but had a connection to via a mutual third party. To broaden my search for women veterans, I also set up a Facebook page called “Women Who Served in the Military” and solicited interviews through posts to the entire
group, which produced two additional women participants. Both sampling methods allowed me to speak with people from across the United States with varying demographic characteristics so that the sample was diverse. I am aware that I could have had a larger pool of potential interviewees and sample if I had worked with major veterans’ service organizations (VSOs) such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars, but I intentionally refrained from doing so. Because I wanted to examine identity I reasoned that women and men who were (or are) active members of VSOs probably had a stronger connection to their veteran identity than those with whom I made contact via friends and family. Although I was unable to demonstrate the validity of that proposition, I felt that it helped make the measurements more reliable.

In addition, also created a Facebook group targeted at women veterans. My main reason for doing so was because of the vast disparity in numbers between the sexes. At the time the research was initiated, women comprised about eight percent of the total living U.S. veteran population, a figure that has remained fairly stable. Because of this extremely wide gap, I wanted to increase the chances of finding women veterans to interview, so I utilized social media. Did that bias the sample to the extent of invalidating the data? Based on the similarity of responses among participants I found through both methods, I do not believe so. Additionally, when seeking interviewees, I made sure to frame the project in general terms (e.g., “veterans” or “service”) rather than specific (e.g., “women veterans” or “identity”) as a way to avoid influencing responses.

9 Membership in the Facebook group, “Women Who Served in the Military,” is restricted to females and subject to approval from the administrator, who, at the time of the research, was another women veteran and myself. After the interviews ended, I kept the group active and turned over the bulk of the duties to the co-administrator. The group currently has 175 members.
Interviews typically lasted 45 minutes, but some ran as long as two hours, and were conducted either face-to-face or over the telephone. With just about half of the total sample living outside of New York State, and approximately the same percentage of those residing in the state were outside of my region or unable to meet in person, necessity dictated telephone interviews. When possible, however, I met with veterans in person. Although the geographic aspect of the sample made remote interviews necessary, I was initially concerned that I would lose some of the benefits that come with in-person interviews, such as body language or eye contact. Happily, this concern was unfounded. Despite being unable to make visual assessments, I was still able to capture important nuances, such as long pauses, laughter, or changes in intonation, which helped shape the story. Thus, both face-to-face and remote (telephone) interviews worked extremely well in the data collection process, convincing me that the medium did not seem to influence this group of participants’ responses.

Since the research focuses on the social constructs within the broader category of gender, it was important to have comparative measures. Therefore, I included men veterans in the sample and, for consistency, asked them the same set of interview questions as I did women veterans. I also interviewed both sexes because of social differences between genders (Siegel 1996). Specifically, I want to hear each gender’s “language”—that is, the words, gestures, intonations, and codes that each uses to describe his/her military experience. To that end, I interviewed each veteran individually. In the end, including both sexes was extremely beneficial to the project because not only were different issues raised—an expected outcome when using dissimilar groups—but some surprising similarities between genders came to light. For example, I discovered that
many women and men Vietnam and post-Vietnam Era veterans I interviewed were reluctant to share their veteran status with others, a point I had not considered until the research brought it out (see Chapter 4 for more discussion). Therefore, I was able to see that identity may not be entirely tied to gender, but in some cases, generation may also be a factor. This is just one example of the type of finding that an interview was able to produce. The next section, therefore, discusses my rationale for using interviews, as well as the reasoning behind each question.

*Interviews*

The bulk of my data were the product of one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with post-World War II women and men American military veterans conducted between October 2009 and April 2011. I chose the semi-structured interview format because of the method’s flexibility (Soss 2006, Bryman 2001), which allowed for the probing of responses when additional clarification was necessary or a new and potentially relevant avenue of inquiry opened up. Because of such flexibility I designed the majority of the questions to be open-ended, but more so because it gave participants the opportunity to elaborate on points that he or she felt were significant (Rubin and Rubin 2005, Yin 2003). As hoped, this type of interview produced some unique and important themes and issues that may otherwise have been missed in a close-ended design. Perhaps best seen in Chapter 4, the semi-structured interview made it possible for unexpected themes and issues, which eventually became key findings, to surface (Bryman 2001).

I also intentionally built in some redundancy into the interview protocol. The purpose for doing so was twofold: to mitigate the potential for omissions, inconsistencies
or fabrications (Rubin and Rubin 2005) and to explore core issue more deeply. Whereas some participants balked a bit when I asked them similar questions, the strategy helped produce rich data. For example, my very first question asked each veteran to give me some adjectives or phrases he or she would use to describe a veteran. For some participants, the task was easy and the words came effortlessly. For others, the question caught them off-guard and I was met with long pauses or nervous laughter before receiving an answer. Cognizant that I would most likely not get the full meaning of what “veteran” meant through a few adjectives or phrases, depending upon the respondent, the next question asked the participant to create a picture of an American veteran for me. In most cases, the answer from that question was much more detailed and explanatory, quite often generating more enthusiasm and additional conversation from some of the more reluctant participants. For example, when I asked a woman veteran in her mid-40s to offer a few phrases or adjectives that she would use to describe veterans, her response was gender neutral, vague and was laced with hesitation: “Uhhh…veteran…brave, um, I guess everyone’s different, so it’s hard for me.” However, the next question, which was somewhat similar to the first, produced a different answer with little to no hesitation:

**Researcher:** Building upon what you just said, if you were to create a picture of an American veteran, what would it look like?

**Participant:** In shape, strong looking…I would make it male…Metaphoric-looking road behind. In front of him, education—opportunities.

This veteran was not the only one to respond in that manner. Both women and men I spoke with exhibited a pattern of offering more specifics, even though there was repetition within some questions. Of course, a case could be made that as the discussion progressed, the participant became more relaxed and open, therefore more willing to
expand the responses. However, because I noticed a pattern of more detail occurring within the first few questions, I would attribute it to the method’s ability to probe deeper. Although I did not detect any fabrications, another benefit of redundancy, I was able to fill in some gaps among responses and find new avenues of inquiry. Therefore, based on the scope of the larger research question, redundancy served as an additional safeguard that helped me mine valuable data (see Methodological Appendix for raw data).

I also believe that my status as an American non-veteran helped, rather than hindered, the project when it came to interviews. As Soss (2006) explains, the role of outsider\textsuperscript{10} has its benefits. Specifically, the lack of familiarity with the population and/or situation places the researcher in a position to notice what insiders may take for granted. Thus, what may be commonplace to the group under study, for example, may be for the researcher a valuable piece of the analysis. It is true, however, that as I became more familiar with what the participants discussed some of the wonder ebbed (as Soss also warns). But by that point, familiarity with various aspects of the population’s experiences paved the way for me to ask more complex questions because I achieved some degree of mutual understanding with the informant. I determined the saturation point when I recorded similar comments or themes among respondents to the point at which nothing new was being added to the research. At that stage, I closed the interviews and moved into the data analysis phase (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

In addition to veterans, I also interviewed two public officials (“elites”) from state and federal divisions of the Department of Veterans Affairs as a way to understand the institutional perspective. Elites were chosen based on their affiliation to VA’s women

\textsuperscript{10} It should be noted that Soss’s (2006) commentary on outsider versus insider status was discussed in the context of his research role as participant-observer. Nonetheless, Soss’s point is applicable to other forms of interview-based methods, particularly the ones used in this research.
veterans’ programs and their accessibility. For example, I interviewed the Women
Veterans Program Manager at my local VA healthcare facility because she has been
instrumental in coordinating programs and services for women and could provide insight
into the daily efforts in which VA was engaged. She was more than happy to speak with
me and because she was located nearby, I was able to get a face-to-face meeting.

I also sought an interview with VA staff in Washington, D.C., so that I could
understand the agency’s priorities from someone in the agency. In the early stages of the
research, I spoke off-the-record (i.e., pre-IRB approval) with a deputy at VA’s Center for
Women Veterans (CVW) who offered feedback on the research prospectus, which helped
move the project in the right direction. For example, I was apprised of the larger issues
that needed to be in the research such as the problems women veterans faced inside and
outside the institution, such as not being acknowledged as a veteran; VA’s then-current
initiatives for assisting women; and was e-mailed a series of scholarly articles addressing
women veteran’s healthcare. Thus, although the conversation was off-the-record,
speaking with a VA official at that stage in the process helped shape the scope of the
research so that I knew what to ask when I requested an on-the-record interview. When
the time came to speak with VA from in an official (IRB-approved) capacity, I contacted
the woman with whom I had the fact-finding conversation. I then was forwarded to Dr.
Irene Trowell-Harris, the Director for the Center for Women Veterans (CWV).

Although comparatively a smaller piece of the empirical work, interviews from
VA officials (“elites”) offered insight into high-level bureaucratic behavior that I could
not obtain from veterans in my sample. For example, I learned some of the rationale
behind the agency’s current institutional culture change (see Chapter 5) and directed to
meeting minutes and reports from VA task forces responsible for improving conditions for women veterans across the nation, information that I would probably have not obtained had I not spoken with agency officials. Elite interviews were also beneficial in that they helped confirm some of my inferences regarding the relationship between VA and women veterans. For these reasons, it was important that I included policy administrators in the conversation.

As intended, the interviews with veterans and VA officials produced a substantial amount of data. However, the project needed more than just anecdotes to adequately understand meaning and identity among women veterans. Therefore, I supplemented the interviews with methods that I saw as complimentary based on their ability to generate new data, corroborate existing data, or simply present information from a different perspective. As the next three sections will discuss, I administered a questionnaire to veterans, performed content and context analyses of veterans’ responses and examined secondary sources such as historical data, governmental resources (reports, testimony, informational publications, web pages and electronic media) and news stories. Combined, these methods helped me conclude that “veteran” is an identity defined by both government and society.

*Questionnaire*

To learn determine whether or not there is a connection between individual meaning and institutions, I administered a one-page written questionnaire for veterans approximately halfway through the interview as a way to shift the discussion from individual identity to VA (see Methodological Appendix). The questionnaire was close-ended and asked participants to check a box next to a selection of VA benefits and
services only of which they were aware. Since VA offers a wide range of benefits, I took a sampling of some of the more common (e.g., home loans, health care) and lesser known services (e.g., domiciliary, nursing home and community-based residential care) listed throughout the 2009 edition of the *Federal Benefits for Veterans: Dependents and Survivors* handbook produced by VA. The form also included an “other” category, which interviewees could check and then list benefits or services that they were aware of that were not listed.

The purpose of the questionnaire was twofold. First, I wanted to obtain measurable data regarding awareness of VA programs and services so I could gauge whether or not the women I interviewed connected with the institution. If they did—that is, if they demonstrated any level of familiarity with VA benefits—then perhaps they would also identify with their veteran status. If they did not, then that opened the door for a dialogue as to whether or not VA played any role in their identity as a veteran. Because open-ended interview questions followed the questionnaire, I was able to delve deeper into issues such as identity and meaning. Second, the questionnaire was another way to systematically obtain and measure veterans’ perceptions about how VA policy did or did not contribute to their identity as a citizen-soldier and member of a policy group.

While in the analysis phase, I realized that a good portion of the questionnaire data did not help answer the research question. Although this will be discussed in more detain the following chapter, the reason the data did not add a great deal to understanding what it means to be a woman veteran, compared to the interviews or historical data, was that the scope of the research changed over time as I received more information. Whereas the questionnaire was a good way to shift the focus from the individual to the institution,
as I had originally intended, in retrospect, I believe the questions themselves addressed issues that, by the analysis stage, were no longer relevant, an observation I discuss in more depth in Chapter 6.

Content and Context Analyses

As a way to see if gender differences were prevalent among interviewees, I conducted both a content and context analysis. In the beginning of the interview, I asked veterans to offer adjectives or phrases to describe what the word “veteran” signified to them. The rationale behind this question was to determine if there was a common language or thought process among veterans as a group and/or by gender. I was also looking to see if masculine or feminine references were used, and by whom, to determine if there was a widely held conception of a “veteran” as male.

To manage and analyze the data, I conducted what Brymer (2001) refers to as an “ethnographic” or “qualitative content analysis” (180, 381) for its potential to uncover meaning buried within verbal or written text (Hardy, Harley and Phillips 2004; Brymer 2001). First, I gathered the data and then created categories based on aggregate responses. By using this procedure, I was able to refine the categories as I collected more data and see what themes came forward. The advantage in utilizing an ethnographic content analysis compared to a quantitative one is that it allows for “more movement back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, analysis and interpretation” (Brymer 2001, 380). Nevertheless, I still employed the fundamental technique of a content analysis in that I recorded the words and noted frequency with which they appeared, including if a female or male gave the adjective or phrase. But because the research
question sought to ascertain *meaning*, the ethnographic content analysis showed to be the stronger variation of the method.

Once all of the interviews had been conducted I moved into the data collection and analysis stages. It was here in which I was able to reflect on the responses and formulate an answer relating to the definition of veteran. Moreover, these two phases helped bring what it meant to be a woman veteran into focus.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I organized and analyzed the data in a very methodical and repetitive manner as a means to maintain consistency. The processes described in this section not only helped me manage a large amount of information, but also compare and contrast what I found.

To respect privacy and anonymity, before engaging in interviews I assigned each interviewee an alphanumeric code to which only I had access. Because I wanted keep the participants’ identity hidden, the data are presented anonymously (e.g., “A woman veteran said…”), with the minimum amount of descriptors necessary for the reader’s understanding (e.g., “An Army veteran in her mid-40s noted…” or, in the case of a more involved story, with pseudonyms (e.g., “Rhoda explained…”). Although some veterans gave me permission to use their name(s), I decided against it for those who did not give express consent and for consistency throughout the research.

After each interview I engaged in a 10- to 15-minute process where I sat down with the interview notes and jotted down comments and observations with a red pen. This process allowed me to visually distinguish my thoughts from the respondents’, fill in the blanks when needed, and keep track of emerging themes. Once the interview data were
collected and transcribed, I searched for patterns and themes and created two separate data files based on gender. I looked at each file separately so that I could compare answers among members of the same sex and then compare the answers between women and men. To see the data from a different angle I also read each individual interview as a whole as a way to try and understand what was important to each respondent. Both processes proved useful in drawing out concepts, patterns and themes, some of which emerged directly from the interview questions (e.g., reasons for joining the military) and others that did not, but became notable parts of the story (e.g., military sexual trauma) (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

I began the selection process by first examining the answers to the interview questions. As suggested above, some issues that I wanted to address with everyone, such as their beliefs regarding young women joining the military, were predetermined and would most likely be in the narrative due to its relevance to the research question. For topics that were the by-products of the semi-structured interview format, frequency became the first consideration with regard to inclusion. For example, although the interview protocol did not ask women or men veterans about sexual trauma that occurred while serving, the issue was raised a number of times without any prompting, signaling that the issue deserved extra attention and exploration.

**Conclusion**

Given the nature of the research question and its goal to understand meaning for a policy group, a qualitative approach and methodology worked extremely well. For example, the interviews provided valuable insight that I would have missed, had I chosen
another method. With so much popular commentary and historical data in which the subject is examined from a distance, I found that by going to the source and asking veterans for their perceptions provide another angle from which scholars and policymakers can use to better serve one of the nation’s most powerful, yet enigmatic, constituencies. The following two chapters present the empirical data, which form the nucleus of the project. Chapter 4 shares insights from women and men veterans as to what it means to be a member of the armed forces, and Chapter 5 takes a closer look at VA and its relationship with women veterans through an historical lens, current information and interviews with agency officials.
Chapter 4: Through Veterans’ Eyes

In this chapter I make the case that many women veterans did not identify as such in part because of the mixed messages they received from society, government and the military. The meaning of “veteran” on the individual and collective levels has been defined in part by traditional attitudes and customs associated with gender. Whereas Title 38 clearly states that women are military veterans and entitled to the commensurate benefits, the social construction of veteran, which excludes women, has appeared to trump the law.

Therefore, this chapter identifies and explores more deeply the amalgam of definitions and messages women veterans have received from government and society as to what constitutes a veteran. What I discovered was that government and society agree that the fundamental definition of a veteran is an individual who has served in the armed forces, but the interpretation of “veteran” varies. The multiple and, at times, conflicting understanding of the word borders on dangerous because, as this chapter will show, there is more than just benefit claiming at stake. How veteran is defined and interpreted decides who, or what group(s), are seen as deserving by not only the state, but also society. Similar to other U.S. social policy, veterans’ policy relies upon an interdependent relationship between government and citizens for it to work properly. Therefore, if one component is out of sync, then the mechanism begins to break down and the democratic ideals, which underpin the policy, are compromised. With women veterans, the breakdown has manifested in uncertainty regarding identity and their place as legitimate members of a coveted policy group.
To explore these ideas more fully, I begin the chapter in the same manner in which I interviewed women and men veterans: with a general inquiry in which I ask veterans to describe veterans. I felt it was a logical starting point for the discussion of my findings because of its fundamental nature. The remainder of the chapter presents interview data according to theme, rather than by order of the interview questions, and shows that many women have yet to embrace their veteran identity, in part because of the confluence of competing societal and political definitions of veteran.

**Being Veterans**

In trying to determine who or what entity defines veteran, I felt it was necessary to ask those with the title, the men and women who served in the military. The law said they were veterans, those who connected me with them said they were veterans, but did they—or would they—say they were veterans? It was important to know what they thought not only because they were part of a policy constituency, but also because their manifestation of “veteran” would be instrumental (although not the sole factor) in how the rest of the country perceived the American veteran, including themselves.

Specifically, “Let’s start with some free association—the first thing that comes to you. Please give me some adjectives or phrases that you would use to describe a ‘veteran.’”

The rationale behind the question, including why I asked it first, was to test whether “veteran” had a sex and, if so, were the corresponding gender roles also part of the conception. With little existing empirical data to draw from, my expectation—that women and men would see a veteran as a male figure—was based on historical and cultural constructions such as wartime propaganda, recruitment media (historic and
contemporary), civic events (e.g., Veteran’s Day parades), coupled with the fact that the military has been and continues to be overwhelmingly staffed by males. What I found was a testament to constructions, but not necessarily gendered ones. Despite my predictions, most men and women servicemembers saw “veteran” as a non-gendered entity, which embodied longstanding military and cultural ideals.

To determine patterns among respondents, I classified answers into six broad categories: 1) Literal, 2) Military Ideals, 3) American Ideals, 4) Positive Connotation, 5) Negative Connotation and 6) Multiple Meanings, and then grouped the data. The subjectivity of the method meant that some terms or phrases could be placed in more than one category or differ, based upon one’s perception. With that in mind, the decision rule guiding the categorization was based on context. For example, “team player” could be placed in either the “Literal,” “Military Ideals” or “Positive Connotation” categories. However, I grouped it with “Military Ideals” based on the direction of the conversation.

To compare responses by gender, I placed a numeric notation next to the word (e.g., Camaraderie [0/2]) to signify that zero women used the word or phrase, but two men did. My rationale for breaking the data out by gender was to see if a common language among all veterans emerged. If not, then was there a shared language by gender? The reason I looked for linguistic patterns was for the simple reason that a common language among members of a group or organization shows some degree of cohesion and by extension, inclusivity.

Among the 60 adjectives/phrases offered, women and men’s language mirrored each other a dozen times, or 20 percent. The top three agreed-upon adjectives and phrases were: “honor/honorable,” 17 percent; “someone who’s been in the military,” 13 percent;
and “pride/proud,” with 8 percent. There was also a small group (five women and three men) whose response was literal: “someone who’s been in the military” (See Table 1 in Methodological Appendix). Although many were quick to mention that what it means to be a veteran is dependent upon a host of factors—social, political, cultural, institutional, familial, and individual—that vary from person to person, the data suggested some patterns between the sexes, nonetheless. Veterans in my sample saw “a veteran” in more abstract and idealistic terms that captured military and cultural constructs. In Table 1 below, I present two of the six categories—Military Ideals and American Ideals—with the most adjectives or phrases.

**Table 1. Adjectives and Phrases Veterans Used to Describe the American Veteran**

*Question: Let’s start with some free association—the first thing that comes to you. Please give me some adjectives or phrases that you would use to describe a “veteran.”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Ideals</th>
<th>American Ideals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camaraderie (0/2)</td>
<td>Allegiance (0/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (0/1)</td>
<td>Brave (5/0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependable (0/1)</td>
<td>Dedicated/dedication (2/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline (2/0)</td>
<td>Duty (2/2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have our own language (0/1)</td>
<td>Freedom (0/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilient (1/0)</td>
<td>Hero (0/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect (0/1)</td>
<td>Honor/honorable (4/6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk-taking (1/0)</td>
<td>Independent (1/0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team player (1/0)</td>
<td>Loyal/loyalty (1/2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remolding (1/0)</td>
<td>(A) Patriot (0/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging to a group (0/1)</td>
<td>Patriotic/patriotism (2/2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough (1/0)</td>
<td>Pride/proud (4/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust/trustworthy (1/1)</td>
<td>Sacrifice (1/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrior (0/1)</td>
<td>Public servant (0/1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample: 23 women, 16 men  
(n/n) = Frequency: Number of women/number of men reporting adjectives/phrases  
*Bold italics* = Adjectives/phrases that both women and men reported

Although the semantics differed between the sexes, Table 1 shows more congruency than not in that both women and men in the sample perceived “veteran” as possessing certain
intangible, but familiar, qualities. For example, “trust/trustworthy,” “brave,” or “patriotic.” The data suggest that “veteran” is much a conceptual identity as it is an actual identity (e.g., Title 38).

Perhaps the most surprising commonality was the majority of the responses were gender-neutral. I had expected to hear the pronoun “he” or “his” used with more frequency by both men and women; it was reported only once by a male veteran. Instead, I was offered adjectives and phrases that may be applied to any individual. For example, “strong,” “self-directed/self-sufficient” and “generous.” Additionally, many of the non-gendered terms had positive connotations, suggesting that anyone who wears the uniform can possess these traits. However, as this chapter will discuss in subsequent sections, gender neutrality seems to be primarily in name only. Although a woman can be a “war hero” just as easily as a man, for example, both society and the military have effectively quashed any widespread practice of it, instead keeping the “war hero” construct distinctly male to the point at which some women who served are reluctant to identify as veterans.

The gender neutrality trend continued throughout the research, but not with the same frequency. For example, to determine whether women and men associated only males with being veterans, I asked participants to create a picture of an American veteran for me, my expectation again being that cultural constructs would lead to a male figure. Again, though, the male veteran was neither the dominant, nor sole, conception. Quite often, the request to depict “an American veteran” was met with nervous laughter, sighs, and slight frustration because of the question’s broad nature. For example, one veteran began with, “relatively patriotic,” but then paused and said he was unable to group everyone into one category, adding, “I don’t see any one typical thing that applies to all
people.” A career veteran also had a difficult time. After hearing the question, he paused and then replied, “Well, I mean, the first image [pause]...it’s so generic that it could be anybody.” Of the 16 men whose data were complete, only two used male-specific language or images in their depiction of the American veteran. For example one said, “A man in uniform with a suitcase next to him” and the other replied, “Of a soldier, obviously. He would be in red white and blue.”

Other men associated the portrait with images that placed males in the forefront. For example, one veteran in his 50s referenced the photograph of the (male) soldiers raising the American flag at Iwo Jima, while another veteran in his late-20s said that when he thinks of veterans his mind immediately goes to the presence of service organizations such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), of which the majority of the members are male. A third veteran said that when he thinks of a veteran, his mind conjures up the World War II illustration of a soldier “with a cigarette [and] a steel pot [helmet] on his head.” The mention of Iwo Jima, the soldier and the veterans’ service organizations is also interesting in that both have become an integral part of the American narrative. To reference an image that is now an historical monument, and two organizations, each on either end of 100 years old, shows how symbols and traditions can have a profound and enduring effect on a pair of veterans, even when separated by generations.

Despite the use of the masculine pronoun and/or imagery, 47 percent of male veterans created gender-neutral images. Some of the more expressive answers included: “Groups in civil society: VFW, American Legion” or, “Mostly white, mostly Midwestern…country, NASCAR—in the Navy, at least.” For the most part, though,
gender-neutral words such as “individual,” “people,” “somebody,” or “they” were used. Because the question was framed in a gender-neutral manner, I did not ask the respondents to specify male or female. In addition, I did not want to bias the conversation by insinuating I was looking for gender-specific answers.

As expected, no male veteran specifically referenced a female as his model of the quintessential U.S. veteran. Although, one Vietnam-era male veteran expressed a distinct sense of inclusivity otherwise unseen in this sample: “It’s men, women, blacks, whites….Very multi-cultural, multi-gender.” It is important, however, not to assume that gender-neutral or -inclusive identifiers translate into gender equity. Instead, I argue that the lack of a gender pronoun suggests, at least for the men in my sample, a conscious or subconscious recognition, and perhaps acceptance, of a changing society that is working toward equality between the sexes. Even one veteran, a former Military Police officer now in his early-40s, whose picture of the American veteran was clearly male, evidenced by his frequent use of “him” in his answer, strongly believed that at the end of the day, “whether you’re a male or female, a veteran’s a veteran.” Thus, the image may be masculine, but the reality suggests openness to progress.

By comparison, two women interviewed distinctly identified a veteran as female. The first time in the research where a woman associated a veteran with another strong female, the interviewee, a woman in her mid-60s, made a connection to popular culture. “Something like Katherine Hepburn. Someone who has command. Someone who is, y’know, a pillar of strength.” Another veteran described an individual dressed in a uniform. “Female,” she added, “standing at attention.” When I asked her why a female, she replied, “The majority of the people I work with at the VA hospital—groups—are
female.” The participant later disclosed that she was not a VA employee, but rather one who took part in female-specific programs. Her perception, she later confirmed, was a result of her interaction with women at a VA facility. This finding shows that at least one woman’s perception has been influenced directly by the bureaucracy, in this case, women-only groups for military service-related issues.

The two women mentioned above notwithstanding, most other women who did reference gender were more apt to see veterans as males. Taken as a whole, women veterans in my sample responded that a veteran could be either female or male, yet there appeared to be distinct gender divisions when compared to men veterans. Six women, or 26 percent, specified that their picture of an American veteran is male. One young woman in her 20s created the following image: “In shape, strong-looking….I would make it a male….Metaphorical-looking road behind. In front of him education—opportunities.” Given the woman’s age, I expected to hear a gender-neutral, if not overtly female-themed, answer. A veteran over twice her age helped clarify. When asked about the gender of the person in her picture, she responded with no hesitation, “male,” quickly adding, “When I tell people I’m a veteran, they’re shocked.” When I asked why, she reasoned that it is because in her mind, the stereotypical veteran is male. So, even though she was speaking to me as a woman veteran, her existing conception of a veteran being male superseded even herself. She is not alone. A 48-year-old woman with over 20 years in the military explained, “It would actually be a man—and this is terrible—in an armed forces uniform. In the shadow you’d see women because that’s how the world sees women in the armed forces.” This is particularly telling. Despite the fact that only one female depicted an image of she and her sisters-in-arms as being “in the shadow” in the

11 Discarded one member of the sample for this question.
eyes of the military, when you place the comment in the larger context of a history of male warriors and firsthand experiences from women veterans, the assertion that women are still seen as secondary is troubling.

The depictions of the American veteran by those who are considered veterans, at least by government and society, demonstrate both traditional and modern thinking. On the one hand, images of World War II soldiers or propaganda or men who advertise their membership in the American Legion, imply that the standard is male. However, the gender-neutral descriptions suggest that perhaps the standard is changing, a promising step forward, if the pattern my sample exhibited can also be found in the wider population. Thus, the next question becomes how women veterans process an identity that has feet in both the actual and conceptual realms. The law unequivocally says that women are veterans, but do those charged with implementing the law agree? The next section presents data that examines veteran life before, during and after military service and maintains that perhaps women’s reluctance to identify as veterans stems from the mixed messages they receive.

**Mixed Messages**

I argue that one explanation as to why some of the women I spoke with did not identify as military veterans is because of they were receiving conflicting messages about gender from society and government. For example, the military has repeatedly asked for women’s assistance on a temporary and permanent basis and, in turn, have offered invaluable opportunities for personal, educational and career growth that earlier generations of women were denied. Yet, it appears that once women are part of the ranks,
many are met with resistance and/or resentment, which get reinforced by the masculine institutional culture that is the armed forces. Then, upon separating from service, women reenter a society where they are eligible for public and private veteran’s benefits, including the many accolades and gratitude society shows servicemembers, but are faced with a culture that has a difficult time seeing a veteran as anyone other than a man. Such inconsistency between words and actions has contributed to a mindset where women veterans are not quite sure where they fit in. As a result, many women in my sample seemed to distance themselves from their veteran identity. For example, when a question was directed to them, some women downplayed their military achievements or experiences, seeming almost apologetic at times. By comparison, when speaking about veterans in gender-neutral and/or broader terms, the tone often became authoritative and confident. To put it in today’s parlance, women did not take ownership of being military veterans. This section, therefore, looks at some of the more common messages women veterans received and demonstrates how the convergence of differing socio-cultural norms with policy can sometimes produce competing attitudes and outcomes. Structured according to each stage of a veteran’s service, beginning with recruitment and concluding with separation from the military and reintegration to civilian life, the following subsections look at the variety of messages women and men veterans received at various stages in their military careers.

Recruitment: Uncle Sam Wants You…Sort Of

Often perceived by society as a rite of passage in which boys become men, all of the branches have relied heavily upon thematic devices such as duty and honor in their recruiting campaigns, but perhaps none as pervasive and successful as the exploitation of
manhood. Lou, a former Marine in his early-40s chuckled as he recalled his recruitment. A 17-year old high school student at the time, he went to the recruiting station prepared to join the Air Force because he wanted a “challenge more than anything else.” When he arrived no Air Force recruiters were to be found, but there were four Marines. Taking notice of his football-player style build, the Marine recruiters appealed to his ego and masculinity by praising his physique and taking pot shots at the Air Force. The Air Force was for old ladies, they said, and asked why a man his size would want to waste his time being a part of that. Instead, they told him, he should use his strong build to become a Military Police officer for the Marine Corps. Lou was sold. The prospect of “play[ing] police,” which eventually would help him fulfill his civilian career goal in law enforcement, coupled with the public challenge to his manhood in the recruiting station, resulted in a delayed entry enlistment where he would ship out as soon as he turned 18.

Lou’s story captures the gendered nature that is part and parcel of the American military. If the Air Force was inferior to the Marines, and old ladies were in the Air Force, then ladies were inferior. Ladies, so the social convention goes, are demure, well mannered, wear white gloves, sip tea, have husbands and children and spend any free time volunteering on behalf the less fortunate. Under no circumstances do they join the manly Marine Corps. Although today we know this to be a fallacy, the meaning behind the reference is nonetheless powerful enough to challenge a teenage boy’s sensibilities. The Marine Corps’ reputation as the most overtly masculine branch of the armed forces (Brown 2012) notwithstanding, this example is also indicative of an institution (military) dependent upon selling and celebrating masculinity as early as the recruiting process.
The next section presents interview data revealing that despite the hyper-masculine culture, it did not seem to play a significant role for many women when looking at motivations for joining the armed forces. Instead, women were similar to men in that both groups reported practical reasons, such as college tuition or job training, as the impetus for enlisting.

**Practical Patriots**

Current scholarship argues (Feinman 2000, Moskos 1992) that opportunity has replaced patriotism or civic duty as the number one reason for joining the military, especially since the inception of the all-volunteer force. According to Moskos (1992), males were drawn to the military primarily because they saw fewer employment opportunities in the civilian labor force. In contrast, he found women were likely to join for noneconomic reasons, such as adventure or as a means to escape the boredom of home. Although I did not classify the reasons for joining in the same manner as Moskos did, I was able to confirm that for many women in my sample, economic reasons trumped noneconomic ones. Therefore, when asked what factors motivated their military service, similar proportions of men and women gave nearly identical answers, citing what I categorized as practical reasons, such as career training or economic opportunity. Indeed, many veterans expressed a belief in the idea that the military is a noble duty, but the post-War economic and social climate pushed patriotism further down the list of reasons for joining. For example, a 40-year old woman told me that she came “from a really poor family and…wanted to go to college….I wanted to challenge myself.” Or, the 52-year old female whose rationale was “to get special training for work later.”
Within this category some women and men specialized career training was significant. For example, one woman recalled that she was in college during the air traffic controller’s strike during the 1980s and thought that may be an interesting career that could not be learned in a traditional university. After a few phone calls to her father and family friends, she traded in her dorm room for barracks and became one of the first female air traffic controllers in the Air Force. A 69-year-old, male, ex-Navy officer exclaimed, “I got to do a whole bunch of fun stuff—diving and blowing stuff up—and they paid me for it! Others were less specific in their vocational aspirations, but knew that the military could offer them skills that would transfer to the civilian labor force. Men also expressed similar intentions, for instance, wanting to pursue a post-military career in law enforcement, a common path for many in that field.

I also noticed a slight pattern that I would classify as an offshoot of “practical” and “self” because of the highly individualistic sentiments that make a sharp break from the myth that service is a selfless, patriotic endeavor. Note the response from a female veteran in her early-40s: “I didn’t join because I was a patriot, but because my family was blue collar.” Based on her belief that most others were, or had family members who were “patriots,” she felt different than her peers. Although very willing to talk and open with her responses, her tone leaned toward cynicism for much of the interview. As the first person in her family to have the opportunity to attend college, the military was a means to an end. She said, “I kind of discount my work [in the military] because I was like a trained monkey…but, I did get money for school.”

A young college-aged man also expressed a sense of self over country. “There were no delusions of grandeur. I think it [motivations for joining] should be more
personal than ‘patriotism.’” He then shared a story from his own experience. “The Commanding Officer (CO) asked, ‘How many of you are willing to die for your country?’ Ten or twelve guys stood up. The CO said, ‘You are stupid. You should be here because you want to better yourself.’” Although the tone and content of these responses were the exception rather than the rule, they illustrate a change in the societal and veteran narratives that could have real implications for the military and policymakers if similar attitudes continue to proliferate. This is not to suggest that patriotism is dying. Rather, we may be witnessing a new conception or strain of patriotism that is indicative of a nation that is more inclusive, diverse, perhaps more discerning and outspoken when it comes to government decision-making, and less willing to blindly follow the crowd. Should the U.S. return to a peacetime climate, we may see such values becoming more prominent and possibly have an influence of the numbers of women and men who join the military.

As Table 2 below shows, I found four main trends with respect to why individuals joined the armed forces, the most frequently cited reason being the promise of tangible gains such as college tuition, health benefits, or career training, to which I classified as “Practical.” Other respondents pointed to internal motivations, such as personal growth, challenge and adventure, or what I designated as “Self.” Patriotic and/or family influences touting military service as a noble calling, or “Socialization,” were also at work, although to a much smaller degree. The least frequently mentioned reason accounted for men whose sole reason for enlisting was because they were legally bound to serve in the armed forces by order of conscription, or as it is more commonly known,
“the Draft,” and would not have otherwise joined\textsuperscript{12}. Approximately 50 percent of the men in the sample served under the era of conscription (see Table 3 in the Methodological Appendix), but only one male veteran I spoke with cited that reason. The remainder of men who were draft-eligible reported a desire to join the military regardless of the law, so I placed them in the category which more closely matched their motivations. For example, one man said, “I wasn’t drafted….I was about to be drafted [laughs]. I went because I wanted to learn a trade and the Air Force offered me the largest training [opportunities].” Therefore, this participant was accounted for in the “Practicality” classification. Regardless of the draft, many veterans of both sexes could have fallen into multiple categories, but I placed each participant in the group that he or she emphasized throughout the dialogue.

**Table 2. Primary motivations for joining the military**

*Question: What led you to join the military?*

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<th>Men (n=20)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Draft</td>
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As Table 2 shows, practicality was the most common reason for joining the military, followed by personal motivations, socialization and the draft.

A deeper look at the data showed some additional patterns within the broader categories, some of which had both gender-specific and cross-gender appeal. Under “Practical,” for example, educational benefits were often cited as playing a large role in a

\textsuperscript{12} The reason for not categorizing all draft-eligible men in that category, or creating a dual category, was because a number of veterans in my sample made it a point to tell me that they most likely would have joined despite the mandate and/or that they enlisted prior to receiving their draft notices because they wanted more control over which branch, career skills, educational opportunities, etc. Therefore, I felt that they were better represented in one of the non-draft categories.
veteran’s decision to join the military, a finding mirroring existing scholarship (Moskos 1992). Said a 44-year old women Army veteran: “My first reason was I was in college and I was running out of money. I didn’t want to live under my parents’ control.” Or, as a career Army man simply stated: “Nineteen-eighty-two recession. Needed college money.” But, it was the women in my sample that took advantage of the education benefit more than the men. Of the 24 women veterans I interviewed, 19 had an Associates Degree or higher, two were currently attending college and the remaining three had high school degrees. Among the 20 men I spoke with, 10 had Undergraduate Degrees or higher, four were in college and six held high school diplomas. These data become relevant when examined in a broader historical context. Similar to Mettler’s (2005) findings that World War II male veterans used the G.I. Bill of 1944’s education benefit as a means of upward mobility, we now see women following the same path. As members of a marginalized group, women’s educational attainment places them in a much better position to compete with men in the workplace and civil society, and by extension, has the ability to shift the balance of power toward equilibrium.

Personal challenges associated with military service also had some cross-gender appeal, but women reported it more often. For example, one woman told me that while in high school she did a lot of drugs, so her motivation for enlistment was self-betterment. First joining the reserves, she “fell in love with the discipline” and then honorably served in the active military for over two decades. Another woman laughed as she recalled, “I wanted to grow up, learn a skill and get away from the one-horse town.” So she went “right in at 18 years, 18 days. I decided it was the only way to get ‘out-out.’ My parents were not happy. It was probably because it was Vietnam time.” A 38-year old officer
with a decade in the Army took the ultimate challenge when she joined because her sister dared her to go. “I thought about leaving many times, but it was easier to stay,” she said, chuckling.

In contrast, men seemed to be motivated more by patriotic socialization. A 48-year old Navy veteran who attended a military school with four years of Junior ROTC under his belt, he “always had tremendous amount of respect” for the military and said, “It was always something I wanted to do.” A Vietnam veteran noted that had he not enlisted, he would have been drafted, but family history came into play: “My father served, my brother served. It seemed to be the right thing to do. To do my part.”

Interestingly, the idea of doing one’s civic duty appeared in some younger veterans as well. A 36-year old officer reported that his Korean background dictated military duty for young men. So, when he moved to the U.S. with his parents, he was raised in a pro-military household. “I never had a bad image of the military,” he said.

Two younger male veterans fresh out of the military also expressed a similar sentiment, but viewed seemed to have a stronger connection to some of the more abstract ideals. An Iraq veteran in his 20s said, “I don’t know if it’s general or normal, but I felt the need and desire to protect people.” While an Afghanistan veteran wanted “to pay back the people that came before me.” These comments hearken back to bygone eras, when individual needs were superseded by the greater good. In an age where young people are accused of being entitled and individualistic, sentiments such as these give use reason to question current thought. Veterans in this group came of age during September 11, 2001, one of America’s most vulnerable periods in the modern era. Raised with the recognition that destruction can happen on U.S. soil, we may see a resurgence of such thinking among
young Americans. To see socialization patterns among men as a group makes sense, considering that it has been so much a part of the male coming-of-age story.

Whereas women in my sample did not specifically cite the need to protect people or repay those who came before, they, too, were influenced by socialization and the desire to serve. “I grew up in a military family and I had close relations with the American Legion and VFW,” said one woman. Another stated, “I joined the military because I wanted to—to join the Army…I always wanted to join, to serve somehow.” Yet others explained that parents or relatives also served in the military, so the idea of a woman joining was not unusual.

But, for one woman, the dignity of the military itself played a significant role. She explained that she grew up in a very poor area and “didn’t see a Volvo or BMW until I was away [from home].” Primitive living conditions such as dirt floors and outhouses were the norm in a community comprised mostly of migrant workers. “But,” she emphasized, “we were American citizens.” She continued, telling me that two of her cousins were U.S. Marines. When one was killed while serving, he was given a military funeral. The reverence and veneration the Marine Corps showed her fallen cousin irrevocably changed her life. “[They] did it with such honor…like he was the richest man in town,” she said. “I knew I wanted to be a part of that.”

Militarization is built upon a distinctly masculine narrative, which, up until recently, has left very little room for women, despite the thousands of females who honorably wore the uniform. Yet, the gendered nature of the armed forces did not seem to deter the women in my sample from joining, implying that there is some aspect(s) of military service that transcends gender. According to the sample in this research, women
appear to have the same desires as men: the need to serve others, structure, challenge, compensation, and self-betterment and self-fulfillment. The next section addresses life in the military and demonstrates that many of these needs were met, but unlike the recruiting phase, gender mattered considerably more.

**Active Duty: Gender Matters**

Scholarly literature (Brown 2012, Feinman 2000, Holm 1992, Hicks Stiehm 1989) and my sample confirm the prevalence of gender bias in the military. For example, resentment from men passed over for promotions that went to women, sexual comments and the tolerance of gender violence by some men in command. Yet, it is also evident that despite the gendered environment, women continue to successfully participate in all branches of the armed forces, proving that they are just as capable as men, but eminently aware that their journey will be much tougher. Women I interviewed also expressed feelings of accomplishment, increased self-confidence, making lifelong friends, and being a part of a noble organization to which fewer and fewer seem to be called—aspects of military life that compelled them to join in the first place.

Nevertheless, the military remains an extremely challenging endeavor, regardless of gender; women and men unequivocally said that it is not a job for everybody. However, for the woman in uniform the road has been considerably tougher because of gender. In essence, penalized by the institution for social beliefs based mainly on biological differences, women were ineligible for certain military jobs, excluded from combat (until 2013), and could not attain the highest ranks because they lacked combat experience. Women’s history also includes social penalties such as being ostracized by
society and the military for wanting to serve in what was considered a man’s pursuit—
being a soldier.

Given the paradoxical nature of being a woman soldier, how would women
classify their time in active duty? Based on the frequency and intensity of some of the
negative incidents, I expected most women to report their time in the military as negative.
However, as Table 3 indicates, my prediction was considerably off the mark. Not only
did I find another parallel with men veterans, who also said they enjoyed their service,
but also saw that approximately two-thirds of women I spoke with considered their time
in uniform as positive.

Table 3. Evaluating military experience

Question: How would you describe your time in the military?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women (n=24)</th>
<th>Men (n=20)</th>
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A deeper look at interview data in conjunction with the quantitative measures revealed a
more interesting and multi-dimensional story about women veterans. Although the data
between women and men may look similar, gender norms and practices resulted in each
group having distinctive experiences. For example, the majority of the men I interviewed
touted military service for its ability to help them mature and teach them life skills, such
as self-sufficiency and leadership. Similarly, women also mentioned acquiring the same
skills, but they also reported experiencing gendered behavior, such as discrimination and
abuse, more frequently and spoke about it in more depth than men, suggesting that what
may appear to be non-gendered universalities associated with military service may be
more complex than expected. The following subsections identify themes hidden beneath
the quantitative data and show that although women and men may engage in the same activities or raise the same issues, gender and gender constructs still matter for females to the extent that they may not even recognize that they are part of what should be a homogenous and very powerful policy constituency with a great deal of societal support.

**Brothers-in-Arms or Friends-in-Arms**

Both men and women veterans pointed to interpersonal connections when recalling active duty experiences; an expected finding, considering how part of the military myth is connections and bonds formed with others in uniform, especially during war. However, I noticed differences in how each gender presented this aspect. Men tended to speak about others in terms of brothers-in-arms, rather than close friends, as women did. For example, a 59-year old Army veteran told me the reason he enjoyed the service was because of the “camaraderie of troops in my outfit.” Another way men framed their experiences that differed from women was through militaristic contexts. For example, a 74-year old ex-Marine said that he assesses a person by asking himself, “Would I want to go to war with this guy?” Similarly, an Air Force veteran in his late-50s remarked, “When you’re in combat, the only thing you’re thinking of is the person next to you. You’re not thinking about politics.” Interestingly, the one common denominator among the respondents is that none were combat veterans, yet combat and war themes were dominant. Age could account for the observations, as all three veterans lived through periods of war and conscription where the obligation—that all able-bodied young men were expected to serve in the military, regardless of whether the nation was at war—was presented to them as an important step in the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. The responses could also be a product of military socialization, in that all
veterans were and are trained to be able to perform, at minimum, the most rudimentary combat techniques so that they could protect their literal and figurative brothers-in-arms.

Only two younger, All-Volunteer Force (AVF), non-combat veterans, 34 and 27, respectively, referred to those they served with as “friends,” but not in a militaristic context. The first classified active duty as being up and down, depending upon those you were with. “[It] depends who you went with…buddies. It’s like you have your friends in school.” The second veteran looked at active duty from a more removed perspective where friendships seemed more of an afterthought in a string of descriptive phrases: “On a one to ten—a seven to a seven and a half positive….Structured, self-dependent; it teaches you something….I got friends.” Because the sample is small, I cannot say with certainty that generational differences is an adequate explanation for the two differing sets of comments, or whether military training has become less militarized and, in the acerbic words of Lieutenant Colonel Philip Calahan (2002) of the U.S. Army War College, a training ground for “a kinder, gentler breed of soldier” (1), accounts for the disparity.

Women, on the other hand, were much less militaristic—if at all—and presented their associations with others as friendships and bonds, implying a deep connection that comes from serving in the military together at a certain point in time. A former Marine in her early-40s said, “Lifelong friends….That veteran bond you have, it’s just not the same thing [as college].” She then referenced her friend from the Corps with whom I had spoken with just a few days prior.

In fact, when soliciting women veterans for this research, I often interviewed sets of friends who either served together in the same unit or branch, or attended the same
high school, and now despite the miles between them, frequently speak to one another on the telephone, send e-mails, visit or vacation together. By comparison, I did not see this among the men I spoke with (see Chapter 3 for more about selection). This is not to say that men veterans do not participate in the same friendship rituals, but rather that women veterans were much more expressive and open about how much they valued the friends they made while in the military. Interestingly, though, in their interviews, women veterans did not specify gender when recalling friendships. As the comments will show, many used non-gendered words such as “people” or “friends.” Therefore, it is unclear as to whether or not women were referring only to women or to both sexes. For example, an Air Force veteran stated, “People, not the policy, made it [positive].”

What is clear, however, is that women of all ages spoke more often about the bonds they forged and with a more animated affect than men veterans. Note the frequency with which women used superlatives to describe their time on active duty. “The best time of my life. Incredible.” When asked why, she replied, “The people that I worked with, that I met—just unbelievable people. Some of the most gracious, generous, most selfless people I’ve met.” Another woman exclaimed, “I loved it. I loved it….I wouldn’t trade it in. Me and my friends had a ball!” A veteran in her early-30s said, “My absolute experience in active duty was amazing, I wouldn’t trade it in for the world! I’ve been in contact with [friends from the service] ever since.” As a group, these comments speak to the idea that women veterans place a high value on collaboration and shared experiences. With regard to collaboration and its applicability to performance, because the military operates largely as a team-based organization, it seems reasonable to infer that inclusivity among all personnel and in all occupational specialties, particularly in
areas which women were once prohibited, could result in a more efficient and stronger
military force.

Friendships also seemed to be a way for women to endure some of the tough
times as well. A 20-year Army veteran, who described her overall experience as
“awesome,” said her career had “lots of ups and downs,” but “the people I got to work
with, the things I got to do” helped make her tenure positive. A women in her early-40s
also credited friends with helping her get through an extremely difficult experience. “My
times on active duty were not good. The time spent in the National Guard itself was,
overall, a good experience...I made friends—that was positive...A lot of things happened
to me in the active” force that were very negative. Finally, there was one participant who
specifically mentioned the importance of women friends while in the military. This 30-
year old Air Force veteran said:

I would do it again. I learned a lot about life...saw a lot of the world by the time I
was 21....There were people—men—who took me under their wing....[But,] I
never knew who I could trust. “Are you my supervisor, friend, or are you trying to
screw me?” I learned the hard way, in the military, that I needed women as
friends....I grew a lot. I grew a backbone.

With respect to friendships, the data hint that it may be a product of socialization
from being raised as women in an American society. Women were never seen as soldiers,
but society has consistently portrayed them as “sisters,” connected to each other by sex
and gender norms on a deeper, more personal level. Taking this assumption one step
further, the data could also suggest that as the minority, it is critical that women cultivate
alliances and networks—regardless of gender—to succeed in an organization whose
division of labor has been determined largely by socio-cultural gender constructs.
When Sex, Sexuality and Gender Become Weapons

Women’s entrance into any male stronghold, but particularly one such as the military, in which masculinity is built into the cultural foundation and actual mission (i.e., militarization), can often blur the lines between sex and gender. Societal constructs and chromosomal arrangement—two distinct aspects of humanity—frequently become intertwined to the point at which they may be used as weapons rather than tools. In fact, much 21st century news coverage about women soldiers document a pattern of sexual harassment and violence against women as an ongoing problem within all branches of the armed forces. That being said, gender-based discrimination is not a problem endemic to the 21st century military. The preservation of socially established gender divisions was a part of military protocol well before the new millennium, and in some cases, codified.

Perhaps the most prominent indicator of a sanctioned gender divide was the armed forces’ use of segregation according to sex. A holdover from World War II, the military continued using “women” as a prefix for female soldiers, regardless of rank until the 1970s. Whereas men could join the Army, Navy, Marines, or the newly formed Air Force, women were given a choice of acronyms. They could be WACs (Women’s Army Corp), WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service [Navy]), or WAFS (Women in the Air Force). Or, if she did not like acronyms, there was always the Women Marines. By referring to female personnel as “women” first, the military perpetuated what Holm (1992) calls the “support structure,” which in turn, reinforced the belief that women served in secondary roles. This also held true for the few females who achieved higher ranks. For example, whereas Navy men were simply referred to as officers,” women were WAVE Officers. It was not until the 1970s that the military, including the
U.S. Coast Guard,\textsuperscript{13} dropped the “women” designations and adopted the gender-neutral terms normally assigned to men.

Segregation was only part of the story. Despite women’s contributions during World War II, popular thought still dictated that nice girls did not join the military. I was reminded of this on an overcast July afternoon as I sat on the front porch with Rosie, a gregarious 75-year old Navy veteran. After giving a glowing review of her time in the military, adding that her only bad experience was the she “had to leave,” I began to think that maybe the literature missed the fact that some women had not been subject to gender discrimination. The thought quickly dissipated when she added, “You know what the stigma of being in the service was, right? You were either a whore or a lesbian.”

The phrase’s supposed origination, although no one has been able to verify the date, was approximately during the World War II era, when a well-known general reportedly made an off-the-record remark claiming that only “whores or lesbians” joined the military was leaked to a military newspaper. Despite his public denial, the claim stuck and haunted women servicemembers long after the controversy (Willenz 2000 [1983]). Those displaying lesbian tendencies were investigated (Hicks Stiehm 1989) and most likely, discharged, a practice that was in place for both sexes until the Clinton Administration. For those who did not suggest sexual deviance, the military made sure that females who entered remained distinctly feminine. To illustrate, until the mid- to

\textsuperscript{13} The U.S. Coast has had a sporadic history with women compared to the other four branches insofar as divisions of it have been activated and deactivated. According to Tilley (1996), the Women’s Armed Forces Integration Act of 1948 did not mention the U.S. Coast Guard, most likely because the Department of the Treasury, rather than the Department of Defense, operated it (9). Further, the Women’s division of the Coast Guard Reserves that had been active during World War II, nicknamed SPARs, was deactivated in 1947, only to be reactivated in 1949 (http://www.uscg.mil/history/uscghist/WomenChronology.asp). Thus, although women were allowed to serve in the Coast Guard during the post-War era, the branch made very little effort to recruit women until the 1960s (Tilley 1996). The Coast Guard is now operated under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, after being overseen by the Department of Transportation from 1967 to 2003.
late-1960s (Holm 1992), women soldiers were given instruction on the finer points of grooming and appearance, how to properly enter an automobile, apply makeup, style their hair and maintain an overall ladylike presence (Brown 2012, Willenz 2000 [1983], Holm 1992, Hicks Stiehm 1989).

Gender-based scrutiny occurred before a woman reported for duty. As an added measure to ensure selection of what they believed to be the highest caliber of women, the Army and Marines held female recruits to higher mental, physical and educational standards than males (Holm 1992). The Air Force went one step further and used physical appearance as a determinant. “Each applicant was required to pose for four photographs: front, side, back and full-face. Civil rights leaders assumed the photographs’ purpose was to determine race, but this was not the case—it was a beauty contest, and the commander of the Recruiting Service was the final judge” (Holm 1992, 181). It was not until the 1970s when the double standards for all of the armed forces came under review and slowly began to disappear (Holm 1992).

As women’s power in the military increased, the power of the “whore or lesbian” insult decreased (Willenz 2000 [1983]). Unfortunately, the slur was replaced with a more modern iteration. In her 2005 memoir, Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army, Kayla Williams, an Iraqi War vet, wastes no time in having her readers confront a reality some women soldiers, including herself, had to (or have to) endure, especially when deployed overseas with men.

Sometimes, even now, I wake up before dawn and forget I am not a slut. The air is not quite dark, not quite light, and I lie absolutely still, trying to will myself to remember that that is not what I am. Sometimes, on better mornings, it comes to me right away. And then there are all those other times. Slut.
The only other choice is a bitch. If you’re a woman and a soldier, those are the choices you get….If she’s nice or friendly, outgoing or chatty—she’s a slut. If she’s distant or reserved or professional—she’s a bitch. (13)

The bitch/slut categorization is not reserved to women in combat, nor exclusively for the enlisted. A 36-year-old former Army officer I spoke with explained how women, especially those in charge, are subject to gender-based criticism and double standards. He began by saying that he worked with “one of the most amazing Generals I’ve ever met.” She logged more hours in the office, was more physically fit and knew more about her subordinates than any male General, he said. She pushed her subordinates harder and got them to produce more than what they would have for a man. But “at the same time, we called her our mom because she would talk to us as our mom. You could talk to her about personal problems. You couldn’t—[no] male General would take that.” He was quick to point out, however, that she was “a very rare case,” and continued, “I have worked with other female officers and they were classified in one of two ways: ‘the B-word’ or ‘inefficient.’” Adding that most of his interactions of were with female officers, many on base perceived them as an “inefficient, emotional bunch that you wouldn’t want to go to war with.” Or, as he added softly, after a momentary pause, “the B-word.”

Regardless of whether a woman was branded a whore, lesbian, slut or bitch, the inference is that at one time, a culture of sexual discrimination and harassment was tolerated. More notably, even though each of the military branches has policies prohibiting such behavior, veterans I spoke with confirmed that it still exists. Sometimes the harassment was verbal. A 29-year-old Navy veteran remembered how a female colleague and friend had to deal with what he termed “jock behavior,” sexual references and innuendoes, while on duty. He explained that there are usually “two-hundred-fifty
dudes and forty women on the boat. Most of the divisions had one woman for every ten to twelve guys. [So] she had to deal with a lot of harassment.” When I asked how the behavior was tolerated, given the Navy’s anti-harassment policy he replied, “A lot of it is because the people in charge have been in the military twenty or thirty years,” suggesting that reporting the incident to a male superior would be a losing battle.

Phyllis, a 30-year-old Air Force veteran demonstrates the difficulty some women encounter when trying to battle sexual harassment. “I was in a man’s career field and they didn’t like it, especially the old-timers,” she began. I asked how that could be when the prevailing belief among civilians and veterans is the Air Force was known to treat women extremely well. In fact, I had just interviewed a woman about sixteen years her senior who also worked in a then-exclusively male field and considered the Air Force “the best equal opportunity employer in the world,” in part because they had “no tolerance for any sort of discrimination.”

“But, this is maintenance—a different kind of animal,” said Phyllis. She explained that her job was the Air Force equivalent of the Navy SEALs so she worked with “proud and cocky men” who carried themselves with the same kind of swagger. “I was expected to go in, do my job as good as any other man and I was knocked down a peg.” As one of a handful of women, Phyllis and some of her female colleagues endured their share of lewd comments and behavior. She recalled working with a man who made inappropriate remarks about her and her friend’s breasts and, at one point, going as far as brushing up against latter’s breasts. Then, “one day, he grabbed my ass!” Phyllis exclaimed. Self-described as “mouthy,” she and her friend approached their superior to lodge a complaint. The superior, “a man with seventeen stripes,” compared to her two, heard their stories
and said, “Well girls, you have to understand that this is a high-stress job. Because you’re attractive, you have to expect things to happen.”

“Something changed that day,” said Phyllis. “I learned to be a bitch. I stuck up for myself and became a bitch.”

Phyllis remained in her job, but ultimately described it as a love-hate relationship because there was “always this undercurrent that I was a girl on their turf.” When she received an award for her work performance, a male colleague remarked, “You won that because you have tits.”

Seeking justice from verbal or physical harassment can be an extremely arduous and draining process for soldiers. Once gender discrimination surfaced as a key theme, I addressed it with certain participants with whom I felt I had forged a level of trust. Take, for instance, Thelma, a Marine, who, before I could finish sharing my preliminary findings, interjected, “It happened to me,” in a matter-of-fact tone, saying that when she was in the service a male officer made sexual remarks to her. Thelma immediately told the officer his comments were unacceptable and that she was, in no uncertain terms, going to stand for it again. Fortunately, the sexual remarks stopped; an outcome that appears to be the exception, rather than the norm. It is fair to assume that some women and men are able to quell gender discrimination in this manner and if successful most likely do not report the incident. Yet, it is also fair to assume that some veterans do not handle the situation as Thelma and continue to work in a hostile environment. When I asked Thelma why many women do not report sexual harassment, she replied, “You can’t go forward unless you want to go all the way.” Relating it to her branch, but one that could be applied to the others, she explained, “Marines are very close; a close-knit
family…[but] some topics are taboo.” Although sexual harassment may be a taboo subject that military brass would rather not have to deal with, the bigger taboo seems to be turning in a fellow soldier, which for some symbolizes ultimate act of betrayal. Although many women do not experience harassment while serving, a great deal does. Georgette’s story represents the all-too common manifestation harassment in verbal form. Phyllis’ encounters illustrate how gender-based assaults can progress from verbal to physical and, in many cases, how lack of support from leadership can derail a promising career and create permanent scars. Although the military is trying to eradicate gender discrimination, it is still an all-too common occurrence. The next section continues the examination of harassment in the military, but shifts the focus to Military Sexual Trauma (MST), another form of gender discrimination, which has recently gained a significant amount national media attention as being pervasive throughout the armed forces.

Corroborating media findings, women I interviewed reported having experienced MST as well, but it was the way in which I discovered it that was also compelling. As I will discuss next, the interview protocol did not ask women about MST, but one-third of the sample raised the issue without any prompting from me. At that point, it became clear that it was an important facet of the contemporary woman veteran.

**Military Sexual Trauma (MST)**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, considers Military Sexual Trauma (MST) as:

Sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred while the Veteran was in the military.\(^{14}\) It includes any sexual activity where someone is involved against his or her will—he or she may have been pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied faster promotions or better treatment in

\(^{14}\) Source: [http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp)
exchange for sex), may have been unable to consent to sexual activities (for example, when intoxicated), or may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other experiences that fall into the category of MST include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person’s body or sexual activities; and/or threatening or unwelcome sexual advances….The identity or characteristics of the perpetrator, whether the Servicemember was on or off duty at the time, and whether he or she was on or off base at the time do not matter. If these experiences occurred while an individual was on active duty or active duty for training, they are considered by VA to be MST.

Emphasizing that MST is an experience, rather than a diagnosis, VA reports that one in five women and one in one hundred men have answered yes when asked by a VA health care provider if they have experienced MST (VA, “Military Sexual Trauma,” August 2012). On its own, the data are troubling; twenty percent of women and one percent of men experienced MST while serving in what should be a safe environment. Now consider that the data only represent those who have reported MST and sought treatment through VA health care. Then, bear in mind that most incidents involving MST go unreported, misdiagnosed, or, in some cases, unrecognized by the veteran, so the thought of what the actual statistic may be is staggering.

Among my sample, no men reported being a victim of, or knowing someone who was affected by MST, but seven women did so without prompting. Six other women addressed the topic after I raised it, either directly when sharing preliminary findings or indirectly when I sensed that the participant hinted that she wanted to discuss the issue (e.g., “Some stuff happened while I was in…”), but needed some prompting from me (e.g., “Was any of this ‘stuff’ related to being a woman?”). Conversely, if a woman specifically mentioned MST, as one did when she cited it as being the most negative aspect of her service, but then did not continue with the story, I did not press further. Combined, thirteen women veterans from my sample—a little over half of the female

respondents—addressed MST as a significant problem within the military. A 48-year-old career Army veteran told me that in order to protect herself she “became very book smart. I learned the regulations inside and out.” In my sample, all the women that shared this with me were enlisted, corroborating findings (Moskos 1992, Hicks Stiehm 1989) that incidents of MST tend to decrease as rank increases. Also, among my sample, many MST incidents took place during basic training, which may be coincidental considering its pervasiveness, but still notable in that it occurred during a time where all soldiers are vulnerable and mostly young in age. For example, one young woman, Vivian, told me that while in basic training—on her nineteenth birthday, in fact—she was date raped, meaning that she knew her attacker.

Then, there was Bess, another young woman going through basic training, who was raped by someone she knew, a man in her unit. Upon reporting the rape, the military gave her two choices: “Stay and prosecute or go home.” As Bess struggled with which route to take, her attacker would repeatedly find opportunities to get her alone and tell her that the assault was her fault, adding that if she decided to prosecute and his career ended, it would be her fault. After consulting with a non-military attorney, who advised Bess and her family that the best plan would be for her to return home, she did not pursue the matter any further. “I never thought anybody would do that to me,” she said. “You think they [military] have your back, but they don’t.”

Twenty years later, she is still suffering some of the aftereffects of MST, such as guilt and shame. “I reported mine [rape] and was told it was still my fault. I came home at 19 and knew what happened and I had to live with it,” she recalled. She did not even tell her husband about the incident until years later. It is only recently, she said, that she
finally was able to get help through VA. Whereas she is grateful for the treatment, she remains adamant that the military and VA give MST more attention. “It’s frustrating because what makes me even madder is that it was my responsibility to make it better.”

Finally, there is the story of the women who considers “myself a veteran, but not a typical one.” When asked what she considered to be typical, she replied, “Four years in the military, DoD, may or may not have gone to war, but chances are they did—some war-type action. Um…I think most of them were somewhat scarred by that experience.” When I probed deeper, hoping to get a clearer picture of what her “typical veteran” looked like she shifted gears and recalled her own time in active duty. “I was the first female in the [branch intentionally omitted] to do what I did. I paved the way,” she said. As a result, she faced “a lot of discrimination [because it was] an all-male society…and I was invading that.” She then recalled two separate incidents of gender-based discrimination that may not be the norm for most women soldiers, but exemplify a chilling reality. Similar to the women discussed above, she, too, was raped during basic training. After she completed basic training and was working in her military field, she almost lost her life because of sabotage.

She explained that part of her job required that she be a helicopter passenger. One evening she was scheduled to work, but at the last minute, switched shifts with someone else, so her name remained on the schedule. Later that night, the helicopter crashed, killing all passengers. A military investigation confirmed the helicopter was sabotaged. She continued, telling me that whomever sabotaged the plane thought she was going to be on that flight. Shortly thereafter, she separated from the military upon her marriage to another soldier.
Although the respondents in the aforementioned examples are all between 40 and 50 years old, these three anecdotes make clear the misogynistic aspect of the armed forces. Given that, I would have expected these women to classify their time in the military as negative, yet none did. One said her time in was “mixed,” whereas the other two classified their tenure as very positive, adding that despite what happened to them, they were still extremely proud of what they accomplished in the service. In fact, of all nine women in the sample who reported experiencing MST, six classified their tenure as positive and three said both positive and negative.

With twice as many women who experienced MST classifying their active duty as wholly positive, to the point of using superlatives (e.g., “excellent” or “I loved it”), we see that MST did not seem to define them as soldiers. Certainly, MST is now a part of their identities to varying degrees, but what is interesting is that these women did not look at the military that much differently than those who did not experience MST, suggesting that the pride associated with the military, combined with the human capacity for resiliency, is itself a powerful construct.

A Promising, but Cautious, Future

Based on the array competing messages and gendered experiences they shared, it makes sense that as a group the women in this research did not fully recognize or adopt their veteran identity. Further, with so many women reporting having been victims of MST or other forms of violence or discrimination while on active duty, I was certain that when I asked whether or not they would support the prospect of their daughter, granddaughter, niece—that is, specifically a young woman currently in their lives—
joining the military today the answers would trend toward “no.” But, as Table 4 shows, the opposite held true.

**Table 4. Young women and the military**

*Question: What if your [daughter, granddaughter, niece] wanted to join the military today—what would be your reaction? Why is that?*

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<th></th>
<th>Women (n=24)</th>
<th>Men (n=20)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes, with qualifiers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
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I was particularly surprised to discover some women who suffered gender-based discrimination, including MST, were also the military’s most ardent supporters. For example, on more than one occasion, the first reaction was, “Go for it!” Although the answer may be, at first, counterintuitive—as humans, it is logical to expect victims of any type of wrongdoing to oppose, or at least be wary of others taking the same path—it should not be seen as the norm. Other women veterans were supportive, yet pragmatic, cautioning young women to “know what you’re getting into” and reminding them think about career choice before enlisting.

Other recurrent themes that emerged from women and men veterans who advocated a young woman’s desire to enlist were trust in the individual and the belief that military training enriches a person. Note the following comments from two male veterans: “My take is, she’s an adult; she’s pretty intelligent, has a four-year degree. But, I think the decision is up to her. I think she’d make the right decision.” And, “Absolutely, absolutely. Each kid’s different.” A female veteran agreed: “I would tell her to go for it. I would make sure she would talk to everybody—every branch of service….I would support her 100%....It’s not just because I did it….If any of my children felt strongly
enough to join the military, I would be very proud of that—raising their right hand to
defend the country by any means.”

Emphasizing that the armed forces offer an individual the skills for a productive
life as well as a virtuous standing in society was another reason where men and women
agreed. “It’s honorable. I would have no objections, “ said a male veteran. “You will be a
better person when you come out.” A military careerist and mother responded with no
hesitation, “I’ll drive her to the recruiter’s station. I think it’s an excellent, excellent way
to start your life, to get it on track.” Even the idea of combat did not dissuade some. A
woman veteran with children said, “Go for it! I would try to guide her to the right career
path. I would be 100% supportive, even if it was during wartime,” but quickly adding,
“not that I support war, but…”

Looking at the answers as a group such responses indicate a melding of the past
and present. On the one hand, we see women and men of different generations espousing
the virtues of military service, such as honor and self-respect. Yet, we also see traditional
gender barriers being challenged. Women are not seen as mere assistants, but active
players in what once was an all-male world. Moreover, this belief was not reserved to
younger adults. Support for females in the military came from all age groups, spanning
70 years. In fact, it was a male Vietnam veteran whose comment represented the epitome
of progressive thinking: “I completely believe in equality. Females can pull a trigger as
well as a man can.”

Whereas job training was identified as a significant consideration, others were
quick to point out the reality that once an individual signs the paperwork, he or she has
entered into a legally binding contract. A 33-year-old male said, “I’ll be the first person
to tell someone that the military is a great institution. I loved it. But, you better make sure that’s what you want. There’s no changing your mind.” Another veteran almost twice his age reiterated this point: “You have to know that when you raise your hand or sign the paper…that this isn’t an everyday job. You can’t quit.”

Women veterans also reiterated the “know-what-you’re-getting-into” idea, but some framed their advice amid the current context of war. “I think…[pause]…At the time, I thought there’s no wars going on…[pause] I would tell them to really think seriously about it….If they chose to, I would support them.” An ex-Marine said, “It depends on what branch and what they were looking to do and why they were doing it. The military is not for everyone….Now, I would have to question it because of everything that’s going on.” She emphasized that the would make sure the young woman fully understood that she could go to war, citing her own experience to illustrate how she and her colleagues were given no time to process such a life-changing event. “It was different in ’90 when we packed up…That’s something that we thought we’d never see….We got caught by surprise.” Her colleague added, “The war environment—it’s not a game anymore; not on Play Station….It’s about keeping someone’s stomach on their body…not letting them see your fear.”

Similar to their on decision-making process, many of the veterans focused on the vocational aspect of the armed forces. Although the branches are similar in that they all are capable of defending the nation, each has a unique personality that varies in terms of type of recruit it seeks, missions it undertakes, specializations, opportunities and organizational culture. Thus, some veterans were very specific in their recommendations. An Air Force veteran said, “I would tell her that you would be better off in the Air Force
where they’re going to appreciate your thinking ability rather than being shot at.” He clarified that his response was not gender-based, maintaining that he would give the same advice to his nephew, because of what the organization could offer. Another young male veteran also reported that job, not gender, would be his main concern. “Which branch? Do the research. Join for the right reasons.”

A woman Army veteran approximately 50 years old said, “I learned lessons too late….The recruiters are salespeople; they’ll do devious things and lie….I tell [kids] always bring the contract to your parents or a lawyer….Especially for women; you want to see where’s there’s a lot more women and it’ll be a lot more supportive for women. Where you place yourself [branch and training] can be really important.”

The most frequent condition was branch of service. Respondents who cited branch did so based on their beliefs about the treatment of women across services. For example, many veterans—both male and female—said that they would steer young women, particularly if it were his or her daughter, to the Air Force (USAF) because it is known as a more positive environment for women, compared to the other branches. Based on her experience, one woman considered the Air Force to be “the best equal opportunity employer in the world.” A male Air Force veteran concurred to a degree. He asserted that he would not want his daughters to join the military, but if they were that adamant, he would consider the Air Force. He said that he has visited Marine bases, Army posts and Navy bases and declared, “I know how they treat everybody. I know for a fact women do get mistreated badly….Treated the best in the Air Force; there’s no question about that.” Support for the USAF was not limited to former members. A young female Army veteran was very forthcoming in her evaluation of military branches. “I
would let her join the Air Force; I would never [let her join the] Army.” When asked why, she replied, “A lot of sexual harassment in the Army…women are treated as objects.” Again, we witness the perpetuation of a masculine culture clashed with a contemporary reality where women are supposed to be treated equally in very way. The takeaway here should not be an endorsement of one military branch over the other. Certainly, gender discrimination is found in all of the armed forces, including the USAF, a truism echoed by some members of my sample and the literature (Holm 1992, Hicks Steihm 1989). The greater significance, however, lies in the fact that despite the many victories women have recorded in their challenge for equality in the military, the imbalance of power between women and men remains a harsh reality that has not ebbed with the passage of time.

A little over one-quarter of the veterans interviewed were clearly against the idea. A male officer stated, “Actually, I’d be very hesitant for them to join. It’s very biased, I guess. It’s still a very male-dominated world to the extent where it’s very hostile to women.” For other men and women, gender did not seem to influence the answer, but gender norms did. For example, when I asked a young, male Navy veteran in his late-20s what his reaction to a young women interested in serving would be, he blurted, “Hell, no!” because of his male colleagues’ penchant for making sexual comments to women and behaving badly.

A former member of the Women’s Army Corps was concerned with security. “I think I would oppose the idea and try to talk her out of it,” she said. “It’s just not safe. There’s not enough safety going on. I don’t like the idea of multiple deployments. I then asked the participant to clarify what she meant by “safe” and she replied, “[It is] much
safer to have us [women] separated out. We’re seeing much more murder, violence against women veterans, soldiers...[I am] uncomfortable in advising any girl to join.”

Ironically, this same woman also ended the interview by stating, “I kind of reject this whole sexual trauma thing. [Instead, there is a] major communication and definition problem going on.” Although this participant’s remarks were anomalous, it does speak to the idea that traditional and contemporary messages often come into conflict an can muddy the waters so much that the issue gets lost.

**Today’s Veterans: Purposely Camouflaged?**

A final theme emerged among some veterans that transcended gender, but spoke to generational differences. Some interviewees maintained that today’s ex-military are unique from those who preceded them in that they blend into civilian society with little fanfare. One woman said, “A lot of them in the American Legion and VFW are very proud of their service....Newer vets—Desert Storm on—you don’t know that they fought....Older people are prouder of their service, where the younger people don’t really talk about it.” Another woman added, “A typical veteran is somebody you wouldn’t know is a veteran unless they told them.” A former military officer agreed. “[They] didn’t tell you [they] were a vet. I guess everyone doesn’t walk around with their fatigue jacket and patches on.” She explained that she does not publicize her twenty-plus years as a soldier. She added that there is nothing on her car except a small sticker that allows her access to an Army base at which she is currently a civilian employee. She said, “Most people wouldn’t know [I am a veteran] walking down the street....I guess for me, I like to have a little distance. So, for me, it is almost like two worlds.” These two worlds are
separated by approximately a 45-minute drive and a neighborhood with few military personnel. Her primary focus, she said, is on being a single mother rather than a veteran.

Another woman approximately the same age noted that today’s veterans are “pretty much average unless you wear your colors [or] a sticker on your car.” She added that the choice to highlight one’s military experience is an individual one, but there also is an unspoken familiarity among those who gave served. “You can be very quiet or very vocal....I can tell a veteran by how they walk. They walk with a lot of purpose or with a swagger. They walk very alert.” But, for the non-veteran, spotting the ex-service member may be a challenge. “You’d be surprised how many of us are undercover, especially women,” said one male, adding that a lot of people “have no desire” to say that they were a part of the military. He described an incident that may help clarify why some of today’s veterans may be less vocal. At the time of our interview, this veteran was attending college. With almost 15 years separating him from his fellow undergraduates, he recalled how on more than one occasion when students learned of his service, some asked, “Did you kill anybody?” Believing that today’s youth are desensitized to violence, he reasoned that they do not understand the insensitivity of such a comment. “Combat is glorified in the movies,” he said. “But, it is the very worse of human nature.” Yet, “the very worse of human nature,” or war, is often one of the most praised aspects of military service and can have a tremendous effect on how society sees veterans, as well as how veterans see themselves.

Despite the fact that the U.S. military operates during times of peace and war, some male and female members of my sample who did not see combat expressed a sense of inadequacy or remorse. For example, a young post-9/11 veteran said, “I didn’t serve in
combat; people don’t really have much to thank me for, in my opinion.” A young woman said, “I sometimes feel guilty for not going to Iraq.” A male veteran in his 30s identified in a similar manner. “I don’t think of myself as a veteran at times because I didn’t go to combat.” A woman who served for three years during peacetime reported that she generally does not disclose her veteran status, saying, “Oh yeah, if I’m standing at the Post Office [and someone mentions that he or she is a veteran] I can identify with them.” When pressed further and asked if she would tell the veteran that she was one too, she laughed, “If they asked I would say yes, but I don’t volunteer it. I don’t have a lot of war stories. So, when a vet talks about the Pacific...” Such responses suggested a perceived hierarchical arrangement between those who saw combat and those who did not, as well as those who served during wartime or peacetime. But, the question was whether or not the hierarchy existed.

Although combat veterans represented a much smaller proportion of the sample, men and women who self-identified as such said that serving in a war zone did not make them more of a veteran than those who did not primarily because of the volatility of the job. A Vietnam-era male veteran declared, “There is no such thing [as] ‘non-wartime’” because when one signs up he or she knows that there is the potential to be sent to a conflict area, citing the World Trade Center, September 11 and Hurricane Katrina as examples of situations that are just as risky as being deployed. A woman Gulf War veteran expressed a similar sentiment when she said that going to war makes military life “different,” especially when there is little to no warning, as was the case when she was deployed. When I asked her if “different” meant varying levels of importance between

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16 Of the 24 women in my sample five, or 21 percent, self-identified as combat veterans. Among men, seven, or 35 percent self-identified as combat veterans.
peacetime and wartime veterans, the latter being on a higher level, she quickly responded, “All [are] considered vets.”

If combat veterans do not see a distinction between wartime and peacetime service as it relates to veteran status, then why do non-combat veterans? One possible explanation may be because both government and society place a high premium on war, including its participants. The government’s interest in war is eminently clear: responsibility for the national defense rests with the state, and the national defense is dependent upon citizen participation. Therefore, government has a vested interest in filling the armed forces’ ranks, especially since suspension of military conscription. As far back as the Founding, government has made a practice of compensating those who fought for the nation, often offering more public benefits and services to veterans and their families during times of war, such as the G.I. Bill in 1944 or the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, which offers more benefits than peacetime versions of the legislation (e.g., Montgomery G.I. Bill). Additionally, VA offers benefits to what they consider “Special Groups,” one of which is classified as “World War Service by Particular Groups” and includes 34 separate subgroups dating as far back as the First World War.17

Society has followed government’s and also grants special privileges to, and bestows accolades upon war veterans. For example, some of the major Veterans’ Service Organizations, such as The American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, confines its membership to wartime veterans. In various states, combat veterans are given higher tax exemptions than non-combat veterans or non-veterans. Even popular culture follows suit and brings war and war heroes to the forefront through films and television, music, toys and even fashion. But, sometimes, even war and combat does not automatically confer

veteran status upon an individual, particularly women. The next section considers societal influences on the definition of veteran and how it affects women who served.

**Societal Messages**

For the greater part of the nation’s history, American women were relegated to auxiliary roles, when it came to militarization, a reality reinforced by societal norms. They did laundry for the revolutionary forces, nursed the wounded during the Civil War, put the Suffrage Moment on hold to volunteer for the Red Cross, rolled bandages, sold war bonds, distributed doughnuts to weary soldiers at the VSO and riveted airplanes all in the name of patriotism.

By World War II, though, the situation had changed. The widespread nature of the war meant that more manpower was required, so the military was forced to pull men away from their desks and onto the front lines. The personnel shortage opened the door for women in the armed forces. By war’s end, however, women in the military and civilian labor force were expected to return home so that men, especially veterans, could resume their rightful places in society. For many women who served during the Second World War, this was not a mandate, but rather a personal choice. However, not all women wanted domesticity after serving in the military. Some wanted to remain in uniform. By 1948 they could. On June 12, President Harry Truman signed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act (P.L. 625—80th Congress) into law and established a permanent spot for women in the military. The law was set, but was society?

History is clear about the fact that allowing women a spot in the military, particularly during peacetime, was not universally accepted. As Chapter 1 explains, just
because women had a legal right to serve in the armed forces did not mean that they were equal. Department of Defense rules and regulations concerning gender continued to keep women’s participation in the military at a minimum. However, the blame should not be placed solely on government; society was also complicit. Women solders and veterans did not have a large and powerful citizen interest group demanding gender equity. Nor, did they receive strong support from the public. Many young women of the post-War era were encouraged to get married and start families. Or if they were career-minded, there was always nursing, teaching or secretarial work available, at least until they got married (Harvey 1993). Similar to the African American experience, this political and societal arrangement gave freedom to a marginalized group, but structured it so that their power was limited.

Nevertheless, women continued to join the armed forces and prepared for war just as their male counterparts did. Still excluded from combat roles, most women in the military did not serve in war zones. But, women in the medical field, especially nurses, did. Unlike other women’s roles in the military, nurses were ever-present figures on and off the battlefields. Beginning as volunteers, nurses eventually secured full status as solders and became indispensible members of the military, especially during Vietnam when thousands of men were injured or killed in battle. The proximity to the front lines also meant that women were subject to the same types of trauma and the horrors of war as men. Jacqueline Navarra Rhoads, an Army nurse who served in Vietnam recalls:

My first real exposure to the war came five days after I landed. It was at Phu Bai. We received 25 body bags in on this giant Chinook helicopter. You know, the Chinook is this great big helicopter, this two-blade deal that can carry 100-150 people. And this Chinook came in with 25 body bags aboard. One of the nurses' responsibilities was to look inside these body bags to determine cause of death. Of course, they couldn't release the doctors for such trivial work. What you had to do
was open the bag, look inside and see what possibly could have killed this person, and then write down on the tag what you felt the cause of death was. It was so obvious most of the time. That's something I still have flashbacks about—unzipping those bags. It was my first exposure to maggots, something I had never seen before in my life. (1987, 12)

When Vietnam finally ended and women veterans returned home, their sacrifices were forgotten. By the 1980s, with time to heal, Vietnam nurses began to slowly share their stories and seek recognition for their military service. However, gaining a little societal recognition proved to be a big challenge. As a group whose combat scars were mainly invisible and undetectable to the general public, society still seemed reluctant to see women as veterans in the same way they did men. The decade-long controversy surrounding the Vietnam Women’s Memorial in Washington, D.C., serves as a prime example.

The Struggle for Public Recognition

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is situated on a two-acre site in the heart of the nation’s capitol. More commonly known as “the Wall,” the sleek, black marble structure was dedicated on November 13, 1982. Prompted by political pressure to represent the men who fought, a bronze sculpture, “The Three Servicemen,” was added in 1984 (VVMF n.d.). In explaining his design, sculptor Frederick Hart said, “The portrayal of the figures is consistent with history” (VVMF n.d.). However, for Diane Carlson Evans, Hart’s well-intentioned depiction was glaringly incomplete. As a member of the estimated 11,000 women who served in Vietnam (Loose 11/12/93), Carlson Evans was saddened, offended, and determined to break history’s pattern of neglecting women. That same year, she founded the Vietnam Nurses Memorial Project, later renamed the Vietnam Women’s Memorial Project (VWMP), and spearheaded a grassroots effort for equal representation in Washington’s landscape (Carlson Evans n.d.).
After three years of meetings, planning, fundraising, and traversing the country for support, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior at last approved VWMP’s proposal for a bronze statue entitled “Nurse” pending approval by the Commission of Fine Arts. On October 22, 1987, the same day the group was scheduled to testify, an article appeared in *The Washington Post* maligning the proposed memorial. Staff writer Benjamin Forgey’s missive, “Women and the Wall; Memorial Proposal: Honor Without Integrity,” blasted the project in no uncertain terms. Stating that the idea of a monument is “a bad one,” Forgey gave a series of reasons why the women who served in Vietnam did not need the same type of recognition.

This is not to say that the women who served in the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam were not brave, did not perform essential duties, do not deserve our respect. It is simply to point out that if our female veterans deserve more conspicuous honor than they already have received at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Constitution Gardens, where the names of the eight female dead are inscribed along with those of their male counterparts, then they should be given such honor elsewhere.

To add a statue of a nurse to that extraordinary memorial—the central feature of this misguided proposal—would create a serious symbolic imbalance in one of the nation’s preeminent commemorative places. The project raises questions of proportion, of political judgment, of precedent, of placement, of procedure. (E1)

Forgey then accused Interior Secretary Donald Hodel and federal lawmakers who supported the statue of having “their hearts in an idealistic stratosphere and their minds firmly on the female half of the electorate” (E1). He argued that nurses were a “special group” and if the Commission approved the project then it would open the proverbial floodgates for others. “If we begin to single out veterans by gender, why not select them by ethnic group? Why not an American Indian soldier, an Italian American? Or, if we begin to pay tribute to specialties such as medicine, why not others: why not engineers, or Seabees, or pilots, or supply sergeants” (E1)? Forgey’s closing line, however, was
perhaps the most memorable, not for its prose, but rather that it encapsulated a prevailing sentiment that has kept women veterans on the margins. “It should be clear,” he said, “that it's time to leave well enough alone. In this case, well enough is exceptional” (E1).

The article was an omen. In a 4-to-1 vote, the Commission of Fine Arts rejected VWMP’s proposal (Carlson Evans n.d.). Disappointed, but not defeated, the group redoubled its efforts and, in 1988, secured Congressional approval (Roberts 11/2/93). In 1989, the week after Thanksgiving, President George H.W. Bush signed legislation authorizing a site for the memorial on the National Mall (Carlson Evans n.d.). A short distance from the Wall, the VWMP would finally break ground in more ways than one.

On a sunny Veteran’s Day morning in 1993, the Vietnam Women’s Memorial was unveiled and dedicated before a crowd of 25,000 people from across the United States (Loose 11/12/93, A1). The bronze statue, designed by sculptor Glenna Goodacre, which stands six feet-eight inches high and weighs 2000 pounds, is comprised of four individuals: three nurses and a wounded male soldier in the arms of one of the women (Roberts 11/2/93). In November 2013, the sculpture will celebrate its 20th anniversary.

Without doubt, the sculpture is a fitting reminder of women’s contributions during a time when public opinion was sharply divided. For women to voluntarily leave the safe confines of the United States for the unpredictability of a combat zone where the traditional rules of engagement were being overturned by guerilla warfare was certainly a tremendous sacrifice that warranted immortalization. But, the memorial assumes even more poignancy when we look beyond the physical. The story of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial also offers clues as to what it means to be a woman veteran.
Symbolically, the sculpture speaks volumes. At the heart of the statue are three nurses. The nurse imagery is significant in that it personifies the feminine and maternal virtues historically associated with women. It is also noteworthy because approximately 90 percent of the women who served in Vietnam were medical personnel, many whom were nurses (Loose 11/12/93). The composition is also interesting in that it represents the primary avenue for women’s involvement in the military: nursing. Called upon to staff medical facilities overseas, over 20,000 American women (Holm 1992, 10) volunteered with the Army and Navy Nurse Corps during World War I. Although they did not receive full military status until the Second World War, nurses were decorated and honored by the military for acts of valor, and opened doors for future generations of women.

Having to wage a ten-year battle for recognition is also an important part of the larger story. It goes without saying that the eight women nurses who were killed in Vietnam deserved to be remembered with the fallen men veterans. But, for VWMF to encounter so much resistance for wanting more than a footnote in history sent a message to women veterans telling them they were unworthy of public praise. Moreover, the rejection that became the hallmark of the journey transcended time. In so doing, government and the public were not dismissing only Vietnam women veterans, but all women veterans. It is no wonder, then, that a number of women who served in the military did not identify as veterans; there was no tangible reminder. This is not to suggest that had there been a memorial prior to 1993 we would have seen more women identifying as veterans. In fact, states around the nation had erected monuments to women veterans prior to VWMP’s campaign. Rather, it is to point out that it was not until
the close of the 20th Century, well after women’s initial involvement in the armed forces, that they were finally honored on a national stage.

Aside from finally receiving the credit to which the Vietnam women veterans earned, the memorial also paved the way for subsequent tributes to servicewomen in the public sphere. Just shy of four years after the Vietnam Women’s Memorial was dedicated, The Women in Military Service for America Memorial was unveiled. Located at the Ceremonial Entrance of at Arlington National Cemetery, the memorial is a tribute to women, both living and deceased, that served the United States in any official capacity, in times of conflict and/or peace. If history is an indicator, then it would be reasonable to expect that future generations of women will look to these monuments when asked to recall images of the American veteran.

*Hot Lips Houlihan and Private Benjamin*

America’s fascination with the war and penchant for entertainment, films and television shows dramatizing the military had a built-in audience. Of course, heroic stories have been a staple in Western society since the classical era, so for Hollywood to turn to the armed forces for plot lines is keeping in line with a venerated tradition. In addition to its entertainment value, movies and television also have the ability to socialize and, from what some women in my sample suggested, may contribute to how society perceives and defines veterans. In fact, when I asked one female veteran, aged 30, to describe a veteran she laughed and replied, “I don’t know…. John Wayne.” When I asked why he came to mind she said, “I think when I was younger I saw a lot of John Wayne movies…it was so easy and clear in the movies.” She is correct. Many war movies, particularly those made before 1970, were “easy and clear” because that was the message.

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society wanted to hear. Films such as Sergeant York (1941), Sands of Iwo Jima (1949), Bridge on the River Kwai (1957), The Dirty Dozen (1967) and Tora! Tora! Tora! (1970), were framed in the classic “good versus evil” formula where United States and its soldiers as good who would always defeat evil in the end. Some lives may have been lost, but the underlying message was that there was honor in death. Near the end of the Vietnam era, war films became more complex. MASH (1970), Apocalypse Now (1979), Hair (1979), Platoon (1986) and Born on the 4th of July (1987) challenged the good versus evil set-up—America may not always have been on the side of right—and emphasized war’s toll on the individual. Collectively, the films provide reflections of then-current socio-political ideals and conversations. Perhaps more important, regardless of which good versus evil construction a viewer preferred, the movies were vehicles for political socialization and perception. Although difficult to measure quantitatively, it is plausible that some of the veterans in my sample were influenced directly or indirectly by how popular culture defined veteran.

The consistent popularity of military-themed films where, in most cases, the hero is an American soldier is also a testament to society’s admiration for veterans. There is just one glaring omission, however: women. All of the films cited above have male protagonists. Women were almost always included in these movies, but were usually cast in supporting roles, both literally and figuratively. If women were cast as a soldier, she was most likely a nurse. If she were in command, it was likely she was the antagonist, rather than the protagonist. If she were both an officer and a nurse, she was Major Margaret Houlihan, head nurse at the 4077th MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) during the Korean War.
Originally conceived in the popular 1970 film, *MASH*, the Major Margaret Houlihan most Americans recognize appeared on the television screen for eleven consecutive years, beginning in 1972\(^{19}\), but will probably remain there in perpetuity, thanks to reruns and DVDs. Played by Loretta Swit, the role of Major Houlihan was considered a supporting one. But as one of the few female characters in the ensemble, she was as familiar to viewers as the male lead actors. In one sense, having a woman officer gave the show a level of credibility not usually seen on television. As head nurse, Major Houlihan was portrayed as an extremely competent, but rigid taskmaster who thrived on the Army’s formality and prestige. Yet, despite her rank, the character was often the butt of jokes or seen as a desperate, unmarried woman in need of a man. It was common knowledge around base that she was in the throes of an adulterous affair with another officer, Major Frank Burns, M.D., the company buffoon whom few, if any, respected, and was dubbed “Hot Lips” based a scene in the movie where a microphone was placed under her cot and the couple’s lovemaking was broadcast over the public address system. “Kiss my hot lips,” she tells Frank.

Throughout the series’ eleven-year-run, the character of Margaret Houlihan evolved. She broke off her affair with Frank Burns; married Lt. Col. Donald Penobscot, immediately after meeting him while on leave in Tokyo; divorced Donald because of his infidelity; and finally came into her own, where she was free to show compassion and sincerity. With the luxury hindsight and being able to assess Margaret over the entire series’ run, the character’s development leaves a positive legacy and gives viewers the opportunity to think about what it means to be a combat nurse at during a time when women were fairly new members of the armed forces.

\(^{19}\) [http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0009466/](http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0009466/)
Major Margaret Houlihan’s “happy ending,” so-to-speak, masks the fact that for much of the series’ run, she was portrayed negatively, despite her competence, strength and rank. But, from what the women veterans in my sample, as well as those cited in the literature and news, suggest, perhaps it was because of her competence, strength and rank, in concert with gender, that the negative portrayal of a woman in uniform was acceptable. I do not want to suggest that MASH has little social value. Much like the films of the same time period, it was a form of entertainment that was as thought provoking as it was funny. But, when considering the portrayal of women soldiers/veterans through a very accessible mass medium like television, it is also fair game to ask what effects Margaret Houlihan may have had on the public’s perception of women veterans, particularly because of the show’s cross-gender appeal and long run.

If Major Margaret Houlihan symbolized the tough, unlikeable and unyielding woman in charge, Private Judy Benjamin was the polar opposite. In the 1980 film comedy, Private Benjamin,20 the plot revolves around the loveable, but spoiled, Judy Benjamin (played by Goldie Hawn), who is widowed on her wedding night when her husband had a heart attack. Depressed, Judy seeks solace on a radio call-in program. After hearing her story, another listener calls in with a message for Judy offering to help. When the two meet the next morning, she discovers the compassionate listener is also an Army recruiter. Judy is captivated by the recruiter’s sales pitch where he appeals to her spoiled rich girl persona and promises her a life of luxury condos and travel if she decides to join. Once Judy arrives on base, her dreams of a cushy life are ripped away when she comes nose-to-nose with her Drill Instructor, an imposing looking African American

20 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0081375/
man. As one would expect, much of the story is centered on the thin, blonde recruit’s inability to adapt to the military.

Disliked by her superior, Captain Doreen Lewis who, similar to Margaret Houlihan, is a strict, sour, by-the-book woman officer who lives and breathes Army. A career soldier, Captain Lewis would like nothing more than to see Private Benjamin leave, so she contacts Judy’s parents who are horrified to find out that their little girl has been marching in the rain and living in barracks. Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin arrive on base and plea with Judy to sign the waiver releasing her from the Army. Much to her parents’ and Captain Lewis’ dismay, Judy refuses to sign and renders a perfect hand salute, spins on her heels and rejoins her platoon as patriotic and triumphant music follows her out the door. That scene marks the feel good turning point of the film when Judy finally realizes that she does not need a husband or parents to coddle her; instead, she can stand on her own two feet. The rest of the movie follows an empowerment theme as Private Benjamin continues to succeed on her own merits.

While celebrating her graduation from basic training at an off-base bar with some of the women from her platoon, Judy meets a handsome and rich French gynecologist, Henri, who sweeps her off her feet. The couple enters into a long-distance relationship where he is in France and she is assigned to a NATO base elsewhere in Europe. Eventually, Henri proposes to Judy, but asks her to leave the Army. She reluctantly agrees and moves to France to plan their wedding. Once again Judy Benjamin is a bride, but this time, she end it. Discovering that Henri was unfaithful, Judy once again spins on her heels, but this time down the aisle. The patriotic and triumphant music is cured again and the audience watches an empowered Judy Benjamin, march out of the house in her
white wedding dress, throw off her veil and walks proudly down a tree-lined dirt path into her unknown future.

*Private Benjamin* was written to entertain and it did just that. Audiences across the U.S. saw the movie and loved it for what it was, a fun, light comedy. When it was released, film critic Robert Ebert, wrote:

The movie would have been better off sticking with Goldie Hawn as a female *Beetle Bailey* and forgetting about the changes that allow her to find self-respect, deal with the Frenchman, etc. Still, “Private Benjamin” is refreshing and fun. Goldie Hawn, who is a true comic actress, makes an original, appealing character out of Judy Benjamin, and so the movie feels alive, not just an exercise in gags and situations.21

*Private Benjamin* resonated so well with audiences that, like *MASH*, it also was adapted for television and ran for two years (1981-83)22.

Not everyone had the same positive reaction, though. According to Feinman (2000), some feminists criticized the film for suggesting that the military was a path to women’s empowerment and liberation. Jean Bethke Elshtain, author of *Women and War* (1989), had mixed feelings about the movie because it seemed “a far cry from accounts proffered by military women themselves” (11). But she also praised the film for its humanistic subthemes such as equality, responsibility, cooperation and friendship. Both scholars offer good arguments. However, what they fail to point out is that the elements that made the film marketable, such as Benjamin’s whining that she wants to go out to lunch instead of march in the rain in full gear with her platoon—a punishment for which she was responsible—or when she asks if uniforms come in any color besides green, are also stereotypical and add to the idea that women are unfit for military service. In fact, the movie’s tagline reads: “The army was no laughing matter until Judy Benjamin joined

it.” Although the film is genuinely funny from a comedic standpoint, it can also send the wrong message. For instance, when I asked a 60-year-old veteran if she wanted to address anything we had not discussed, she offered one last observation: “Not all young people are suited for the military. I think that movie ‘Private Benjamin’ comes to mind,” she said, laughing.

**Conclusion**

The point of the research was to determine who or what entity defines veteran as a way to understanding meaning. To that end, I investigated why some post-War women veterans did not identify as equal members of the veteran population. Whereas a majority of the women in my sample would acknowledge: “Yes, I am a military veteran,” this same group also expressed that being a woman veteran is not so black-and-white. Instead, because gender is part biological, part socio-cultural (Keiser et. al 2002), women enter the military with prescribed roles and expectations based on this arrangement. Though women have more than adequately demonstrated that gender does not preclude them from succeeding in typically male military occupations such as mechanic, parachute rigger, air traffic controller or officer, they are forced to do so in an environment where there is an imbalance of power because of gender.

Another explanation as to why some women may have a difficult time identifying as a veteran may be because the military, society, politics and institutions have bombarded them with mixed, and often conflicting, messages about their participation. For example, the armed forces have a long history of needing women to fill their ranks and have praised them for their competence and skill, but restricted full incorporation
largely based on gender constructs.\textsuperscript{23} Or, consider the controversies over the Vietnam Memorial (The Wall) and the Vietnam nurses statue in which society debated the merits of honoring women veterans in the public domain.

Together, these reasons provide some insight as to why some women did not identify as a military veteran on a more intrinsic level. However, despite the many challenges, being women in a masculine organization has not deterred participation, as the number of women joining keeps increasing, nor has it dampened their hopes for the next generation of women soldiers. The task will be, however, to see if gendered norms perpetuated by society and government have changed by the time the nation’s daughters and granddaughters serve.

The next chapter looks at the messages public institutions transmitted to women veterans over the years. Similar to the findings discussed in this chapter, women veterans have had to continue to navigate a masculine-oriented organization where words and actions do not always align. But, in sharp contrast to what was presented here, significant progress is being made to achieve gender equity and it has come from an unlikely source: the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As the next chapter will explain, women and VA have not always had a harmonious relationship, but thanks in large part to a proactive leadership, all signs point toward positive changes for women veterans that, if successful, could also help change public perception so that the key element in Title 38’s definition of veteran—“an individual”—becomes the norm in parlance and policy.

\textsuperscript{23} Although women are now eligible to serve in combat roles within all the military branches, at the time this research was conducted, the exclusion was still in place and applied to all of the women in my sample.
Chapter 5: Redefining Veteran

Chapter 4 demonstrated that despite wearing the uniform, some women still do not see themselves as military veterans. One explanation for the lack of identity, I argued, was the cumulative effect of gender and social constructs, which divided power according to sex, rather than ability, and established a power structure favoring men, particularly when militarization was concerned. But, is society the only entity responsible for cementing the male warrior into the collective consciousness? What role, if any, does the state play in defining veteran? To answer these questions, I shift the focus from veterans to the agency responsible for serving them, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and examine its treatment of women veterans since the Second World War. The chapter begins with a brief history of VA’s relationship with women veterans, followed by a presentation of interview data from women and men veterans regarding VA benefits and services, a review of recent initiatives for women and a discussion of theoretical concerns.

The Stutter-Step History of VA and Women Veterans

For the greater part of the post-War era, the relationship between VA and its women constituents could be best characterized as lopsided, with the balance of power rested heavily with men veterans, the primary recipients of VA benefits. Over time, though, this changed and women veterans were slowly integrated into VA’s extensive system of benefits and services. But rather than a steady, incremental climb, their path may be more accurately described as a series of stutter-steps marked by bursts of progress and stagnation. Here, I trace the relationship between VA and women veterans and find social constructs about gender and militarization frequently lurking in the shadows of
institutional development and policy implementation. A brief historical look at the relationship between women veterans and VA shows real progress toward gender equity, but a goal that still remains to be fully reached.

_Invisible Veterans_

Intentionally excluded from surveys, studies and questionnaires, data representing women veterans were absent from governmental records until the 1970s—and even then, statistics were spotty and nowhere near as comprehensive as the information gathered about male veterans (Holm 1992). According to June Willenz (2000 [1983]), VA’s rationale for the exclusion was based on the small percentage of women, approximately two percent, who served between World War II and the creation of the all-volunteer force in 1973 (156-57); a percentage which stayed fairly constant (Furey n.d., 8) as a result of caps and duty restrictions the Department of Defense imposed on women in the military. It was not until the 1980s, almost a decade after conscription for males ended, that women veterans were finally included in the research, albeit on an inconsistent basis (Willenz 2000 [1983]). To illustrate, in her 1983 study, Willenz discovered some information on women veterans’ usage of VA programs, but said the data only covered certain program areas (e.g., home loans, education).

Although women are now regularly part of VA’s research projects, their longtime absence from the data is troubling for reasons other than administrative. First, the lack of record keeping is tantamount to eliminating women from the institutional history. Next, and perhaps more important, is the idea that excluding women veterans, regardless of how few in number, sends a message that they are unimportant and, to a degree, unworthy of membership in the wider, highly regarded veteran constituency. Therefore,
what may have originally been viewed as administrative efficiency, could have unknowingly contributed to the perpetuation of a gendered institutional mindset, which made it difficult for women to see themselves as military veterans. The eventual inclusion of women veterans into the formal record did not mean gendered constructs were eliminated, however. Women who served were still subject to inequity both inside and outside VA. To illustrate the inconsistent treatment women veterans received when it came to benefits, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or “the G.I. Bill,” provides a strong example. Through an examination of the original G.I. Bill, it becomes evident that although the law classified women as veterans, and thereby eligible for the benefits, traditional beliefs about gender and military service relegated women to the sidelines for much of the post-War era.

_Women Veterans: Slowly Coming Into Focus_

Since World War II, women veterans were eligible for many of the same VA benefits as their male counterparts, but did not claim them at the same rate men veterans did. For example, many World War II women veterans were entitled to most of the benefits in the gender-neutral G.I. Bill, such as education, compensation or home loans. Whereas there is not a great deal of data documenting usage, it is known that women veterans claimed some benefits (Gambone 2005), although statistics are incomplete or imprecise. However, many opted to decline the benefits because they either did not need or want them. For example, several women in the military during that time entered with higher educational credentials than men, so they did not need to pursue a G.I. Bill-funded college degree (Altschuler and Blumin 2009, Mettler 2005). Or, if a woman married a
male veteran, he would bring home more veteran’s pay than she, so it did not make financial sense (Altschuler and Blumin 2009).

Another reason for women veterans’ absence on the benefit rolls was much less complicated: they were rarely encouraged to claim what was rightfully theirs (Altschuler and Blumin 2009, Gambone 2005, Mettler 2005, Willenz 2000 [1983]). Gambone (2005) explains, “There was precious little latitude granted to women veterans in this America. The female soldier had, by definition, challenged social convention by adopting a dramatically different role in U.S. social history…. [Therefore] American society held a special anxiety for women veterans” (101). Such anxiety ranged from fears that women veterans would not readjust to civilian life well to the loss of femininity. Although women veterans also had supporters who believed that the skills they acquired in the military would translate well once they returned to homemaking (Gambone 2005). In either case, the message was gendered and continued to marginalize women in uniform well into the next century.

Men, by comparison, were briefed about the G.I. Bill’s benefits upon separating from the military, as well as were assisted by veteran’s organizations—particularly the American Legion, who was instrumental in the bill’s passage—whose membership at the time was almost all male (Altschuler and Blumin 2009). In contrast, women were not told they were eligible, nor did they have a strong interest group, such as the American Legion, to encourage women veterans and help them claim what was rightfully theirs (Willenz 2000 [1983]). The G.I. Bill was, as Mettler (2005) points out, “created with the men in mind” (144) and implemented according to the same social standards that saw men as the main providers for American households. Therefore, men veterans were
encouraged to learn trades, go to college, start a business or buy a home, all on the government’s dime. Women, although eligible for the same largesse, were not. So, even though women veterans were vital to the war effort both at home and abroad, the legislation’s core foundation was predicated on cultural assumptions about gender roles where women were expected to return to domesticity and men were expected to reinte-grate into the labor force. Thus, although the 1944 G.I. Bill was instrumental in fostering civic participation and ushering in an era of economic prosperity, it is also an apt example of how the state can reinforce existing social constructs and expectations and keep the status quo intact.

As the post-War era gave way to the counterculture of the 1960s, the feminist wave of the ‘70s and eventually the prosperity of the Reagan years, women soldiers had proved that they were equally as capable as men when it came to politics, labor and the military. Yet, despite their progress, women soldiers were still not on par with men. The armed forces prevented women from full incorporation by continuing to exclude them from certain military assignments, and once women separated from service, many who claimed VA benefits were dissatisfied at the lack of programs and services for women, particularly within healthcare. If women were legally veterans, then there should have been no disparity based on gender. But because policy and reality did not align at the same pace, women veterans fell through the institutional cracks in that they did not receive the same level of service—if any at all—as male veterans. Unable to obtain gender-specific benefits, for example, many women turned to the private sector or other areas of the welfare state whose population was primarily female.
The unavailability of women’s health services was not the only explanation as to why many women veterans did not use their VA benefits. “The stereotypical image of the VA as just a men’s institution” deterred many women from seeking benefits, said Jane Weber, Women Veterans Program Manager for a Northeast VA Medical Center. For the better part of its history, VA operated within a gendered political, organizational and cultural framework built upon a social construct that assigned militarization to men.

Progress for women veterans received a big push during the Gulf War Era (Holm 1992), which began in 1990 and, according to VA (2013) is still in effect until an end date “to be set by law or Presidential Proclamation” (VA, Federal Benefits Handbook, iv). The 1990s also saw more women in uniform than ever before. For example, between 1990 and 2000 the percentage of enlisted women in the armed forces showed consistent upward movement with the Army, Navy and Air Force each gaining about five percent, while the Marine Corps saw a one percent increase in enlisted women personnel (Brown 2012, 190). The Gulf War marked the first time since World War II where women soldiers played a major role in warfare. In both theatres, women were still barred from official combat duty, but the conditions in the Mideast changed women’s role in a way unseen before. Unlike women who served in the Second World War who were far removed from combat zones (except nurses), women serving in the Gulf War were placed in the thick of the action. Their proximity to male combat soldiers, coupled with a new type of warfare in which the enemy was indistinguishable from citizens and roadside bombings became more frequent, forced women into combat roles both during the Gulf War and in subsequent Mideast wars. Although women were technically not combat veterans, they still suffered the same physical and mental injuries, including death, as
While the ban on women in combat was still in place, women veterans finally began to receive their due. In 1994, under the leadership of Democratic President Bill Clinton, The Center for Women Veterans (CWV) was established to serve this group and continues to do so. In addition CWV’s inception helped established more public and political legitimacy for women in uniform.

1994: The Center for Women Veterans

In 1994, with women’s presence in the military commonplace, Congress recognized the need for more systematic coordination between them and VA and established The Center for Women Veterans (CWV) within the Department of Veterans Affairs in November (P.L.103-446). The Center is charged with making women veterans aware of their VA benefits and corresponding services, and providing them with the resources to obtain such benefits. But, a closer look at CWV shows an agency that wants to go one step further. An excerpt from their mission best captures this goal: to serve as “an advocate for a cultural transformation (both within VA and in the general public) in recognizing the service and contributions of women Veterans and women in the military, and in raising awareness of the responsibility to treat women Veterans with dignity and respect” (http://www.va.gov/WOMENVET/about.asp).

CWV has remained true to its mission. According to Dr. Irene Trowell-Harris, the Center’s Director during the time this research was conducted, as well as a military veteran herself, VA and CWV have “been doing extensive outreach” for women since 1994 because of the existing gender gap within the constituency. Echoing current findings (Washington, et al. 2006) she said, “A lot of women veterans still don’t identify as veterans.” Citing that only about one-third of women know they are veterans, leaving
the remaining two-thirds either questioning or unaware, CWV launched a multi-pronged strategy to reverse the trend. In the past 20 years, but particularly since Secretary Eric Shinseki’s administration in 2009, they have established national task forces, coordinated with state-level veterans’ departments, held meetings with officials and veterans, appeared at local community events, issued media releases, created public service announcements, printed material specifically for the elderly, maintained an information-rich web presence and exploited social media such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter. “VA works with all organizations and stakeholders to inform women they are veterans,” Trowell-Harris said. Even amid social and political progress, there is still the “perception that if they [women] didn’t serve in combat they’re not veterans, and that’s not true.”

Although necessary, raising awareness among women veterans may be a challenge because for so long women have been directed to the non-veteran welfare state if they needed public assistance. According to social norms, women were not veterans men were, so the idea of claiming VA benefits most likely did not occur. We can only speculate as to the number of women who were eligible for veterans’ benefits but forfeited them because they did not see themselves as a veteran. Therefore, part of VA’s challenge, said Trowell-Harris, is ensuring that women know that benefits are available, even if “they may not need VA yet….If the veterans don’t need anything, they don’t apply.” Currently all branches of the armed forces conduct Transitional Assistance Briefings (or Programs) for personnel who are preparing to separate from service. During the briefings, which can last anywhere from one to five days and conducted in-person or online, soldiers are informed of VA’s programs and services and encouraged to submit their information to VA or, as more commonly known, “get in the system.” Because
claiming VA benefits require effort by the beneficiary, the earlier a veteran applies, the better, “even if they don’t need anything at the time,” said Trowell-Harris.

Another way VA is raising awareness and trying to change perceptions among veterans and non-veterans is by publicizing women’s contributions. Trowell-Harris reported, “We’re trying to publish more accomplishments of the veterans [and] recognize them for their service….A lot of people in the public don’t think that women served in the military the same as men. Keep in mind that they [women] put their life on the line.”

Change has also been a product of the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, a twelve-member group established in 1983 under P.L. 98-160 (Veterans’ Health Care Amendments of 1983). Members are appointed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and serve two- or three-year terms. Currently, there are eleven women veterans and one male veteran on the Committee who, together, represent the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and the Reserves, and whose service spans from the Vietnam War to Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom.24 The Committee is charged with identifying VA’s strengths and weaknesses regarding service provision to women. Every two years the Committee submits a report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs with specific recommendations on how to better accommodate this constituency.

In 2011, Secretary Shinseki announced the establishment of the VA Task Force on Women Veterans. The Task Force was responsible for developing a comprehensive plan of action that addresses issues women veterans face. Some of the key areas Shinseki wanted to see addressed were “OB/Gyn, childcare, military sexual trauma, homelessness, aging and end-of-life issues” (Wilborn Sept/Oct 2011, 31).

24 http://www.va.gov/WOMENVET/ACWVreports.asp.
For both groups, much of the recommendations have been centered on improving delivery of women’s health services, and rightly so, since that is the one glaring area in which measurable inconsistencies were detected. However, the Committee and Task Force are two visible reminders that government believes women veterans matter. Similarly, the use of public dollars to fund women’s programs suggest that the public also believes women veterans are important. If women veterans are to embrace a veteran identity, it is critical that they feel comfortable and worthy of the designation. Thus, VA’s efforts over the past two decades are critical in changing perceptions.

VA and CVW have been instrumental in equalizing the imbalance between men and women veterans. However, Trowell-Harris admits that there is still considerable work to be done. The Advisory Committee continues to see gender gaps, particularly in healthcare, and would like to see more women veterans enroll and utilize VA services. “For the women, it’s been a lot of catch-up, [but] things are changing….It’s not just your grandfather’s VA. It’s your grandmother, your mother’s and your auntie’s VA,” Trowell-Harris proudly declared.

However, there was one area in which sex did matter, but was left out of the picture: biology. No one could argue the biological differences between men and women. Therefore, it is the one aspect of VA where scholars, practitioners and beneficiaries see measureable inequities. The next section uses healthcare as an example to show how women and men veterans have fared throughout the years. Given the history, it should come as no surprise that women have also had to play “catch-up” in this area as well. Aside from its utility as a measurement tool, I chose to discuss healthcare because of its tie to veteran identity. Simply put, how can women veterans feel as if they
are members of a group but are not given the same benefits and, by extension, recognition and respect?

**Measuring Progress Through Healthcare**

One of the most widely recognized public symbols of America’s commitment to its military veterans is the local VA hospital. Operating under the auspices of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) touts itself as the country’s “largest integrated health care system” (2001 National Survey of Veterans), maintaining a presence in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and the Philippines. In general, VA health care use is predicated upon the following factors: lack of medical insurance, low income, having a service-connected disability, poor health and ethnic minority status. Breaking down the VA health care user profile even further, researchers found that compared to male veterans, women veterans are more likely to typify such characteristics, thus rendering them more in need of VA services (Washington, et al. 2006). Yet, female veterans have historically been, and still are, less likely to utilize VA health care services than males (GAO 2009, 1992, 1996; Washington, et al. 2006). Note, for example, a 2004 telephone survey of eligible women veterans residing in southern California and southern Nevada, where 87 percent of those surveyed did not use the VA health services to which they were/are entitled (Washington et al. 2006, S16). Respondents reported having private-sector insurance, finding VA facilities inconvenient, lack of knowledge of eligibility and of available services, and the belief that they would receive better care at non-VA institutions as reasons for not using VA health care (Washington, et al. 2006). Supplementing the scholarly research, federal agencies also reported that women did not
use VA health care to the same degree as men, citing many of the same reasons—fewer numbers of women than men, did not need VA health care, convenience and a general unawareness of eligibility (2001 National Survey of Veterans, 6-17). But there were also gender-specific barriers facing women veterans.

On multiple occasions, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigated VA facilities around the nation and reported that gynecological and obstetrical care was often unavailable to female patients. Further, in many older VA sites, women were not afforded a level of privacy on par with men, in areas as specific as domiciliary care for treatment programs, to as basic as separate lavatories (GAO 1992, 1982). Although changes have been made across VA’s health care network in order to inform women veterans about their eligibility of benefits as well as accommodate their health care requirements (e.g., hospitals that once cared primarily for men now offer comprehensive gynecological exams, screenings and tests specifically for women [2004 VHA Handbook 1330.1]). Despite progress, however, in 2009 GAO testified that there was still much more work to be done. In a year-long evaluation of nineteen VA sites throughout the country, investigators discovered that although basic gender-specific services could be found on- or off-site, thereby meeting the needs of its patient base, the delivery of services varied from site to site. The one consistent finding: none of the sites GAO visited fully complied with policy mandating privacy in clinical environments. To illustrate, in some facilities, tables for gynecological exams faced the door; exam rooms lacked privacy curtains; there were no restrooms adjacent to gynecological exam areas; sanitary napkins or tampons in public restrooms were not provided; and none of the sites “ensured adequate visual and auditory privacy at check-in in all clinical
settings…accessed by women veterans” (GAO 2009, 17). As a female Army veteran in her early-50s observed, “It doesn’t seem fair that women veterans need to work harder [for] what’s owed to them. But, I guess that’s because we’re women.” She paused for a moment and then with an ironic chuckle added, “The military may have made us that much tougher.”

Since 2009 GAO investigation, VA has been successful in its efforts to improve health care for women veterans. Speaking to members of The American Legion at their 2011 national convention, VA’s Under Secretary for Health, Robert Petzel, stated, “There’s no question about the fact that VHA [Veterans Health Administration] started behind the power curve when it came to providing for private, safe, convenient health care for women. I think we’ve made tremendous strides in the last five years, and this is an area that (VA Secretary Eric) Shinseki has made an emphasis” (Brooks 8/27/11). He reported that over the prior five years, VA had invested over $200 million to finishing projects such as gender-specific restrooms and comprehensive women’s clinics (at the time, they had them in three-quarters of VA facilities) (Brooks 8/27/11). In smaller facilities where there was insufficient capacity for a separate women’s clinic, primary care providers are required to complete what VA terms a “mini-residency” of 40 hours in women’s health. Clinicians now receive training in gender-specific areas such as “maternity care, birth control, abnormal bleeding, and female mental health care, including PTSD” (Philpott 2012, 16). In addition, Women Veterans Coordinators are installed in every medical center to serve as advocates for women and help them navigate VA (Brooks 8/27/11, Helfling 12/14/09).
VA’s most recent measure has been the establishment of a hotline dedicated to women veterans, their families and caregivers. By calling 1-855-VA-WOMEN, callers are connected with VA employees who will provide information about benefits available to women, health or otherwise (Petersen 5/20/13). The hotline was created to help serve the rapidly increasing number of women using VA services, a number that is anticipated to keep moving upward. To illustrate, 160,000 women used VA health care in the year 2000. By 2012, this figure more than doubled to 354,000 women (Petersen 5/20/13).

Although the hotline joins the many others VA established for its constituency, the rationale behind the measure has deeper significance. Dr. Irene Trowell-Harris, Director of VA’s Center for Women Veterans remarked, “Many women don’t self-identify as Veterans and therefore don’t think they qualify for VA benefits. We need to correct existing misinformation and misperceptions so we can provide more women Veterans with the benefits they’ve earned” (Petersen 5/20/13).

To see if VA had any influence on a veteran’s identity, the second half of the interview (see Appendix) asked veterans to comment about VA benefits and services. A veteran did not have to currently use, or have used, VA benefits to be able to participate. Rather, I was more interested in what each person had to say with regard to awareness and perception of VA and its programs. From this angle, I would be able to gauge how much interaction an individual had with VA, assess the one-on-one relationship between the two and then apply the findings to the appropriate subgroups (women and men veterans) and larger group (veterans in general). This approach would also allow me to see to what degree an institution influences the individual, if at all. The following section
presents findings from my interviews with veterans where they share their perceptions of VA from a client perspective.

**Veterans Weigh In**

This section presents findings from my sample of veterans (24 women, 20 men), which asked about their awareness of VA benefits, perception of VA and its services and, when applicable, direct experience with the institution. When I had initially approached the research, I wanted to see if VA had any influence on a veteran’s identity. That is, did veterans who used VA benefits (healthcare and non-healthcare) seem to have more ownership of their veteran identity than those that did not? Further, because women veterans were the much smaller population and therefore did not have as many services, in particular, women’s healthcare, could that explain their reluctance to identify as military veterans? In other words, did the institution, VA, have an effect on its female constituents? Based on interviews with women and men veterans, I learned that VA had little to no effect on a veteran’s identity, regardless of gender. However, midway through the research, the institution did exert itself and intensified its efforts to incorporate women veterans. As this chapter will discuss, VA launched an organization-wide culture change intended to socialize VA healthcare providers, staff, veterans and eventually the public, that women are veterans, too.

The first VA-related inquiry presented to veterans was in the form of a one-page questionnaire in which the participant was asked to check the box (or reply “yes,” when interviewed via telephone) next to the benefit of which she or he was aware; I emphasized that one did not need to have used the benefit, but, at a minimum, have heard
of it. The reason for this criterion was that many veterans are ineligible for certain benefits at the time of the interview, but may have heard about them through various channels such as seminars, print literature, word-of-mouth or even mainstream media, thus forging a connection, however small, to the institution. I was also hoping to get a sense of whether certain programs had positive or negative associations. More specifically, if a program had a positive connotation, then we would expect more veterans would take advantage of it (if eligible) and/or have a higher sense of satisfaction with VA regarding that program, and vice-versa. If I could assess individual and then collective attitudes toward a policy perhaps I could help explain one’s use or non-use of the program and, for those ineligible, if VA’s reputation was colored by such viewpoints.

The questionnaire’s content was comprised of a random sample of benefits taken from the 2009 Veterans Benefit Handbook published by VA. I kept the wording uniform with what was in the handbook and chose to include benefits with which I believed one would be very familiar (e.g., monthly compensation, health care) as well as ones that I suspected the majority would be unaware (e.g., special grants under the home loan program). The reason I chose some of the less familiar benefits was to balance the content and have a more accurate measure of what the average post-War veteran does or does not know about the agency dedicated to him or her. Additionally, by focusing on a variety of services in different policy areas, I wanted to remove the focus from VA’s largest program, health care, so that the conversation did not get one-sided at the outset. Certainly, some veterans discussed health-related programs in more depth than others—particularly those who had negative experiences with VA health care—but by mentioning
different program areas also served as a gentle reminder that VA is comprised of much more than the local hospital.

Prior to interviewing, I expected to see two outcomes: 1) an awareness level of about 50 percent of the benefits listed and, 2) a lower degree of awareness among women, compared to men. My rationale for the first point was based largely on the idea that many veterans return to civilian life and work in an industry in which she or he is eligible for private-sector benefits, thus making VA benefits unnecessary and, perhaps, forgotten. A related factor I also considered was eligibility. Whereas VA offers numerous benefits, not every veteran can claim them all. For example, the majority of veterans are ineligible for dental care unless the individual has met specified criteria. In this scenario, the veteran must go to the private sector for treatment and pay via private sector methods—out-of-pocket or through an employee benefit plan—thus rendering dental benefits an “out of sight, out of mind” issue.

The reasoning behind the second prediction was based, in-part, on 2000 Congressional testimony (see Methodological Notes) and the public health literature (Washington, et al. 2006), both of which reported lower levels of use and awareness of VA health benefits among women. If these facts were true for health care, would they also be true for non-health care benefits? Consequently, I wanted to challenge that proposition and see whether or not women would be less aware than men of VA benefits. The final reason for believing that women knew less about VA benefits was simply that women have not had the same history as men. That is, until World War II, women were not considered veterans, thus ineligible for benefits. In this respect, if the institution does
not consider a certain group as part of its constituency, then it makes sense that once inclusion was achieved, there would be a lag in both awareness and, by extension, use.

Despite my conjecture, what I found was a very high level of awareness of the benefits listed on the questionnaire for both sexes. As Table 5 on the next page demonstrates, approximately the same proportion of men and women reported varying degrees of familiarity with the list of benefits presented to them, suggesting that gender did not seem to affect one’s awareness level of VA benefits.

**Table 5. Awareness of VA Benefits Questionnaire**

*Directions: Please check which VA benefits and services of which you are aware, even if you are ineligible or have never used them.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VA Benefit</th>
<th>Women (n=23)</th>
<th>Men (n=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monthly compensation (10% or more disabled)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care ²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hospital, outpatient medical, dental, pharmacy and prosthetic</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Domiciliary, nursing home and community-based residential care</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Health and rehabilitation for homeless veterans</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Readjustment counseling</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alcohol and drug dependency treatment</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Medical evaluations for disorders associated with service in the Gulf War, exposure to Agent Orange, radiation and other environmental hazards</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home loans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guaranteed loan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Refinancing loans</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Special grants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Insurance</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (answer provided by veteran)⁷</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 One (1) female veteran and one (1) male veteran reported that they were unaware of any VA benefits, so questionnaires were blank. Therefore, I removed them from the sample for this question only.

2 For the health care section, in which there are multiple benefits listed in one subcategory, I coded the veteran as being aware if she or he reported a familiarity with one or more benefits. The majority of respondents stated that they were aware of many within a given subcategory.

3 Some of the “other” programs that were mentioned were cemetery and burial services, veterans’ preference for public employment and specific benefits, such as a home health aide (see Appendix C for full listing and breakdown by gender).

What explains the high level awareness among my sample? As Table 6 (below) shows, there are a number of informational sources available to those who have served and again find similar outcomes between men and women veterans, especially in the first three categories, suggesting that for the 44 veterans I spoke with, gender does not appear to affect an individual’s ability to learn about VA benefits.

**Table 6. Information Sources for Veterans’ Benefits**

*Question: I noticed you reported that you are aware of some of these benefits and services. How did you find out about them?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Source</th>
<th>Women (n=24)</th>
<th>Men (n=19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Military seminar</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working/volunteering at VA or other government agency</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans’ Service Organization (VSO)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent to a VA facility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaware</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused/did not answer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers also suggest inter-agency cooperation (military, other non-VA government agency), as well as cooperation with non-governmental entities (VSO’s) as having an influence on a veteran’s knowledge level. As Table 6 notes, a the majority of veterans reported learning about VA services because that they were required to attend a seminar and/or meetings before they officially separated from the service. According to the members of my sample, the content of what was covered varied slightly by branch,
but all personnel were briefed about VA benefits, including enrollment and eligibility. Some veterans explained that as they were about to leave, the last thing they wanted to do was sit in all-day seminars. One woman in her mid-40s explained that her unawareness of VA benefits stemmed from the simple human desire to return home. “Once I was out, I was done.” However, if one stayed the entire time, the payoff was worth it. Said one female: “I thought it was ridiculous and a waste of time, but it was the best thing in my life….If you didn’t read it [information] it’s your own fault….It was so informative.”

Others, particularly those who served during or after the 1980s, also echoed this “personal responsibility” theme. “If they’re a recent veteran,” said one male officer, “there’s no excuse for not knowing [about VA benefits].” He was of the opinion that those who served beginning in 1985 and later should have been informed via seminars, meetings with separation counselors and/or other branch-specific requirements. For those who served before the 1980s, a wealth of information is available online if one has access to a computer. “The Internet is wonderful,” said one woman, who, similar to many of her colleagues, keeps herself apprised of VA benefits through technology. In addition, there are numerous personal web pages, including chat boards and forums, where a veteran can seek assistance and information from peers and advocacy organizations. For those who do not have access to the Internet, each state VA has personnel trained to help veterans complete required paperwork and answer questions. Many state and federal VA personnel also conduct free informational seminars throughout the community in an effort to ensure that veterans know what is available to them as well as enter the VA benefit system, as enrollment is not automatic upon separation. Given their use of traditional and current information-spreading techniques, the military (DoD) and VA
have shown a deep commitment to its beneficiaries.

The commitment may have been there, however, the process was not always as smooth as it is today. As with many things, one generation learns by trial and error and only thereafter does change occur. A female veteran who served and separated from the armed forces during the early-1970s said, “Our generation has done a lot for the change in current policy.” She explained that when one left the military during the time in which she served, VA benefits were not explained thoroughly, if at all. In this instance, word-of-mouth proved to be a powerful tool.

Roughly the same proportion of women and men reported getting their information about VA benefits from another veteran or non-veteran family member, friend, or acquaintance, reinforcing the importance of such informal communication. In addition, word-of-mouth has shown to be beneficial for those who slip through the cracks. For example, a veteran in her 20s recalled that she was made aware of her benefits through channels outside VA. “Not from doctors. Not from outprocessing. I found out about my VA benefits from the DMV!” she exclaimed. Although she is now enrolled in VA’s health care system and is currently utilizing a number of benefits, this woman nonetheless expressed great frustration throughout when speaking about VA.

There were also times when word-of-mouth backfired. For example, when asked about VA and its services, a veteran in his 70s stated, “The VA hospital would be the last place I’d go.” When asked to explain why, he cited friends’ experiences with VA health facilities, indicating that the care was substandard, comparing their encounters with some of the negative events that occurred at Walter Reed Medical Center over the years. As a

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25 A common misperception among the general public and some veterans is that Walter Reed Army Medical Center is a VA facility. It is not. Nor is the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.
result, this veteran was very reluctant to seek assistance from VA, especially if it
involved health benefits. His perception of VA had already been determined based, in
part, on word-of-mouth information.

This point may seem trivial at first, but we must consider whether the negative
press attention given to Walter Reed, a facility which is not operated by VA, for example,
has colored some veterans’ perceptions. Although the large majority of male and female
veterans I interviewed were not as adamant in their distaste for VA, some expressed
hearing off-putting stories that made various impressions. One woman in her 40s told me:
“I, personally, have not had any problems with it [VA],” but “I’ve heard horror stories
from the medical side of it.”

Another method in which some veterans became aware of their VA benefits was
by helping another veteran, usually an older family member—a grandfather or father—
enroll in VA’s health care system. One woman explained that because she had benefits
through her employer, she did not consider VA benefits until she assisted her father with
the process. Now, both are enrolled in VA’s system. The same holds true for some men
in my sample. For instance, one veteran said that his stepfather served in the Army for 30
years and used his VA benefits. So when the participant left the Marines, he was well
aware of VA’s different programs.

The data also showed a group of veterans who sought out the information on their
own and/or supplemented what they had learned with their own research. A woman in

Instead, they operate under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Defense. Nonetheless, many incorrectly
associate these facilities as part of VA because of its main population, military personnel.
26 In this case I classified the data under “others.”
27 The only other non-health care VA benefit that was specifically mentioned by respondents who assisted
others was the VA home loan, in which some veterans were employed at one time by the real estate
industry.
her 40s said, “I was really pro-active….I made sure to go to all the classes…I was still part of the military with my husband being in…I was really involved in the spouse group…When my husband got out, we really had to look into [medical benefits]….I’m always on the VA web site looking for things to qualify for….Bought my first house with a VA home loan.” A Vietnam-era veteran agreed: “Well, I guess I’m pro-active. I tend to reach out and find out what these things are,” adding that he is very involved in amateur “ham” radio, of which many members are veterans, and takes advantage of VA information booths at local events such as county fairs. In short, what these examples tell us is that the information is out there, especially for those who are “pro-active,” thereby reinforcing comments that most contemporary veterans should be aware of his or her benefits. Of the women and men I interviewed, all but two (one male, one female) reported an awareness of VA benefits, demonstrating that over time VA and some of the veterans’ advocacy groups have done a good job in notifying its constituencies. One caveat remains, however. What we cannot discern from the data is whether or not the wealth of readily available information helps one “feel” like veteran. Thus, we are left back at square one: if one does not identify as a veteran, then how important is the information?

Finally, a small proportion of women and men reported that they found out about their VA benefits by working or volunteering at a VA or other government organization. In addition, there was also one source in which the proportion is also very small, but nonetheless alludes to an interesting subplot. Two men reported finding out about their VA benefits from Veterans’ Service Organizations (VSOs). VSOs are not-for-profit, VSO also stands for “Veterans Service Officer,” a paid position at VA facilities. However, in this research, when I use the acronym VSO I am referring to the service organizations, rather than people.
membership-based organizations that operate in the private sector and advocate for veterans and veterans’ issues. Some of the more prominent organizations include the American Legion, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), among others. The membership is comprised of veterans, with each group specifying its own criteria. As veterans’ organizations, naturally these groups were once restricted to men. If women wanted to participate they would join a secondary group, such the American Legion Auxiliary. However, now with women as full-fledged veterans, the membership composition has changed. The question now becomes, how many women are receiving assistance from groups that were once segregated?

As Table 6 shows, a couple of men were aided by a VSO, yet no women in my sample reported a similar experience. Of course, two members of the sample do not speak for the entire population, but it does reveal an aspect of the post-military experience that is often overlooked. In discussing why women veterans are still a somewhat forgotten population, a woman with over 20 years in the service observed, “We [women] blend into society. Men [have] the VFW, American Legion. What do women have? We have nothing.” Her point is well taken. Whereas women-specific service organizations exist, it is on a much smaller level. That being said, such advocacy groups do not possess the same political clout and by extension, visibility, as the more established, largely male-based VSOs.

Next, I asked veterans if they were surprised at the variety of VA benefits, even if the individual did not qualify. This is where we first start to see some minor gender differences. Table 3 shows that more women were surprised at the number of benefits
than men. This makes sense, considering that women are still a fairly new beneficiary group whose population is much smaller in comparison to men.\(^{29}\)

**Table 7. Surprised at the Number of Veterans’ Benefits?**

*Question: I noticed you reported that are you are unaware of these VA benefits. Are you surprised at the number of different benefits that some veterans may be entitled to?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women (n=24)</th>
<th>Men (n=19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused/did not answer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The original intent of this question—“Are you surprised at the number of different benefits that some veterans may be entitled to?”—was to confirm my assumption that most veterans would be surprised because the majority would be unaware. My research showed this to be somewhat applicable for females, as 16 replied in the affirmative. Again, this makes sense because women are the newer and smaller group of beneficiaries who are not as likely to have as many veteran peers once back in civilian life, compared to men. Even some of those who are or were employed by VA stated they were surprised at the number of different benefits. One woman described being “flabbergasted,” whereas another said that even after working at VA for seven years she was “still learning” everything that was available to former service members. Yet, for some men and women, benefits are as one man succinctly put it, “the least the government can do.”

The lack of benefits also arose as an interesting sub-theme, which brought access to the fore. A female veteran in her early-60s suffering from a series of debilitating ailments, does not see VA as being so benevolent because of the long and oftentimes confusing process an individual has to endure to claim benefits. “It would be nice if we

\(^{29}\) According to recent VA statistics, women veterans comprise approximately eight percent of the entire veteran population: 1.8 million compared to the estimated 22.6 million men veterans (VA 2/2/11).
could get ‘em,” she said laughing. “Yes, the benefits package is good if the VA would give it.” She added that she did not expect to be fighting for VA benefits at her age.

Similarly, a 42-year-old female, who spent eight years in uniform, commented, “I’m surprised by the lack of access. Yes, there are many, but they’re not easy to get….It’s not really publicized enough or encouraged enough.”

Whereas these questions were thematically similar, each had a slightly different angle. By framing the discussion this way, respondents could comment on specific programs of which they were aware and then examine the institution as a whole. As the data showed there were some straightforward, black-and-white responses, particularly if one had an extremely positive or negative experience at VA or with one of its programs, but by and large, the comments could be described as varying shades of gray. Moreover, the link between veterans and VA appeared insignificant, suggesting that veterans in my sample may perceive VA in the same way as they would public sector service providers.

But, the story does not end here. Instead, the plot takes an interesting turn in that despite the weak connection with its clients, VA is attempting to change and forge a connection with its constituents, particularly women veterans, who have been marginalized for the greater part of the agency’s existence. If successful, we will witness an organization countering conventional wisdom that says bureaucracies are loath to change. Even more notable is the fact that VA is harnessing its political power to spark social change. If everything goes according to VA’s plan, the idea that women are also full-fledged veterans and deserve the same treatment and respect will travel from the bureaucracy and into the public. In essence, VA, the institution originally designed to serve men soldiers and their wives and children, will have a large hand in changing a
paradigm about soldiers that has managed to cling to the institutional and societal consciousness for centuries. The next section looks at how VA is going about redefining veteran and shows that institutions designed to serve can also be influential and powerful political advocates.

**Partnership and Progress**

Although the situation for women veterans has changed considerably over the years, insofar as many have little trouble claiming VA benefits today due to gender discrimination, some women reported another form of bias; one that may be more prevalent because of its seemingly benign nature, but can be equally as dangerous because it reinforces a false and gendered reality. Note one woman’s frustration in a routine visit to her local VA facility: “When my husband and I go to the VA people look at him like he’s the veteran—that he’s [her emphasis] the veteran. I think there’s a definite gap out there. I think it’s going to be a long road for women.”

She is correct. The gender gap still exists and from what women veterans report, it is much more pronounced outside of the military. In an interview with the Associated Press, a 25-year-old combat veteran who served as a gunner in Iraq and engaged in hostile fire said that the treatment she received from the public upon homecoming had her question whether she was a veteran. When she told non-veterans she had just returned from fighting overseas, some of the responses were, “Oh, you didn’t do anything,” or “you were just on base.” Returning home with post-concussive headaches, ringing in her ears and other related health problems she reported being equally as frustrated with how VA staff recorded her service. Instead of noting her job as a gunner, staff downplayed her
service. “It would say, like, ‘The patient rode along on convoys,’ like I was just a passenger in the back seat” (Hefling 12/14/09).

VA leadership has recognized the inequity, as well as the insensitivity, and continues to improve care for women who served. But, one of the tougher challenges VA faces is getting women to feel comfortable as veterans. Genevieve Chase, an Army veteran who served in Afghanistan and founder of American Women Veterans\(^\text{30}\), said, “If you are a woman who served in the military, then you need to understand that you are a veteran, and that there are so many other women who know what it’s like to feel looked over or not acknowledged for their service” (Qtd. in Bailey 7/12/10).

Certainly the changes at VA facilities will help. For example, the separate waiting rooms for women seeking gender-based care, has been viewed as positive, as have the more knowledgeable personnel and women advocates. But, there needs to be more than physical changes for the improvements to stick. VA needs to change the organizational culture. Cultural changes may be small, such as replacing men’s brown, oversized dressing gowns with purple ones cut specifically for women patients, as the Albany, New York, VA recently did. Or, perhaps create a tranquility room in the Women’s Clinic, as the Northport, Long Island, VA had. According to one of the women I interviewed, a former Marine, she was not only happy with the quality of medical care she received at her VA facility, but also loved the atmosphere, describing it as very “girlie-girl.” Of course one women’s conception of what is “girlie-girl” many not necessarily be the same as another’s, but the more important point should not get lost in the details. Collectively, purple gowns, tranquility rooms and “girlie-girl” décor symbolize an incremental

\(^{30}\) American Women Veterans (AWV) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit advocacy group “dedicated to preserving and promoting the legacy of servicewomen, veterans and their families” (http://americanwomenveterans.org/home/mission/).
movement toward redefinition of the American veteran to include women, most notably by an organization originally created specifically for men. The following section takes a closer look at VA’s internal culture change on a larger scale. VA’s case demonstrates that strong leadership and clear goals are necessary for changing the message.

Change Begins at Home

With approximately 300,000 women veterans currently using VA health services alone (Women Veterans Health Strategic Group 2012), the presence of females in any VA facility today should be no surprise. But, it is. Despite being the biggest growing subpopulation in the active armed forces—and potential VA beneficiaries—women are still primarily viewed as male veterans’ dependents. This stereotype has not been lost on VA officials. The poster described above is part of a VA-wide culture change campaign designed to replace the prevailing, but outdated, conception of the male-only military veteran, with a modern and more accurate depiction that includes both genders. In so doing, it challenges the meaning of a designation that cuts across literal, colloquial, political and social planes. Consider the following ad, which ran in a local VA health facility.

The image of a sweet, elderly couple, appearing to be in their 70s or 80s dominates the frame. He, a well-dressed man in a light blue collared shirt and gray vest sat in a wheelchair, a contented smile across his face. Behind him, a woman about the same age in a purple sweater stood behind, gripping the chair’s handles; a modest ring adorned her left hand. She, too, was smiling. My first impression was that the two were married, probably with grandchildren, and that she was bringing her war-veteran husband to VA. Perhaps that was true. But, that was not the point of the ad. In fact, it was quite the
opposite. To the left of the couple, the question, “Which one is the veteran?” sat in the foreground. The answer: “Both. It’s our job to give every vet the best care anywhere.” With the words “both,” “our job” and “every vet” jumping out in fire engine red against traditional black text. The point is clear: Grandma is a veteran, too.

Under VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki’s leadership, the agency launched an organization-wide culture change campaign to ensure staff accommodate women veterans and understand and honor their service (“VA Announces…” 10/13/11). The new organizational philosophy is simple and direct: “It’s everyone's job to care for women Veterans.”^31 The campaign is currently in place throughout the institution, but with a particular emphasis among its health care providers, non-medical including staff. VA’s strategy relies heavily upon socializing new and existing employees. Dr. Patricia Hayes, Chief Consultant of VA’s Women Veteran’s Health Strategic Health Care Group, said, “Part of this initiative has been educating staff so they understand and appreciate that it is their job to make sure women Veterans receive the best care anywhere” (“VA Announces…” 10/13/11). To that end, new employees will be trained during orientation and given additional education if the position so requires (e.g., mini-residencies in women’s health). Existing staff will be reminded of VA’s philosophy through posters, videos, conferences and e-mail (“VA Announces…” 10/13/11).

Employee training is one aspect of the campaign. Other goals include dispelling myths about VA being a male-only facility, providing top-notch gender-specific care and changing the dominant image, which portrays veterans as men (2012 Women Veterans Strategic Health Care Group). The ultimate aim, however, is to give women veterans the respect they have rightly earned and were promised through serving their country. In that

[^31]: http://www.womenshealth.va.gov
sense, the campaign’s significance supersedes health care. By turning its attention to women, VA directly challenges the meaning of a designation that cuts across literal, colloquial, political and social planes. Such an undertaking assumes an even greater importance when we consider the fact that it is coming from an institution that perpetuated the male soldier archetype for the greater part of its existence. Should VA’s culture change campaign succeed, it has the potential to trigger a seismic shift in perception, which is currently dominated by the millennia-old construction of the male-only military veteran.

The culture change campaign is also notable because it shows the limitations of policy making. It is an important aspect of the design process that is overlooked. It, too, has its limitations—extremely difficult to change behavior—but can be a powerful companion to policy. Change minds, change behaviors; we have witnessed this with other social issues that began as mindset changes and culminated in meaningful legislation follows (e.g., civil rights, gay marriage), so we know change is possible.

**Lessons From the Bureaucracy**

What can we learn from examining VA’s relationship with women veterans? First, we see an institution that shows change is capable, despite the slow inner workings of bureaucracy and political factors that often prevent progress. Next, it is evident that leadership matters. As the evidence shows, a great deal of progress toward gender equity may be traced to Secretary Shinseki’s leadership. It would be tempting to chalk up his success to his status as a combat-injured veteran, but over the years, many veterans have held his position and been successful and unsuccessful. Therefore, other factors are at
work, one of which is social climate. Since the post-War era, the United States has experienced significant culture shifts in which formerly marginalized groups have gained varying degrees of power. We only need to look at the steady increase in women soldiers to see how ideas and practices have changed. Yet, there is still one more piece of the puzzle that must be identified and that is the type of marginalized group. Even though women veterans challenged the status quo since World War II, part of their power is derived from the fact that they are veterans in the legal sense. Despite the waxing and waning level of public support for soldiers, veterans have remained a very prestigious and powerful population. Therefore, women veterans are much more likely to progress than other groups of women, for example, welfare clients. Now, when social climate, group identity and leadership are factored in, we are able to better explain VA’s changes.

This, of course, leads to the question as to whether or not VA’s case generalizable it to other institutions with marginalized constituencies? In theory, perhaps, yes. History has shown that other institutions can and do change. For example, we can look to the U.S. Department of Labor to see how it has successfully helped women and minorities advance in the workforce. However, in practice, I would argue, no. Compared to other American bureaucracies, VA possesses more power than most. Carpenter (2001) explains:

Bureaucratic autonomy lies less in fiat than leverage. Autonomy prevails when agencies can establish political legitimacy—a reputation for expertise, efficiency, or moral protection and a uniquely diverse complex of ties to organized interests and the media—and induce politicians to defer to the wishes of the agency even when they prefer otherwise. Under these conditions, politicians grant agency officials free rein in program building. They stand by while agency officials do away with some of their cherished programs and services. They even welcome agencies in shaping legislation itself. (4)
A good deal of VA’s success may be attributed to the factors Carpenter mentions above. Now a cabinet-level office, VA enjoys strong political and public support. Strong interest groups such as The American Legion or Disabled American Veterans have worked with VA to initiate change and in the process have acted as an additional check on government, thereby helping raise VA’s reputation as an agency that cares about its constituents. Even negative media coverage, such as the rise in MST or stories which tell of veterans falling through the cracks and not receiving proper treatment, VA has managed to retain a high level of power, a commodity most other institutions simply cannot claim.

Finally, what does this case say about the bureaucracy’s ability to shape identity? Although a definitive answer is a bit premature, it is safe to say that given VA’s level of power, strong leadership and political and public support, odds are in their favor to succeed. Changing the image of the American veteran on a broader scale is an ambitious undertaking, particularly since VA was created to serve males. However, the U.S. has a history of being able to redress social wrongs through government interaction (e.g., Civil Rights, Affirmative Action), so there is every reason to believe that VA will meet its goals. The bigger question, though, will be whether women buy into the revised paradigm. The “veteran” role was around well before the institution, so it comes with social constructs built in, specifically centuries of gendered beliefs. Will VA’s efforts be enough to capture those women who do not consider themselves veterans? Although still speculative, my research points to yes. The next chapter considers all of the evidence and concludes that veteran is indeed a construct, but one co-defined by the state and society.
Chapter 6: Veterans: Co-Produced by the State and Society

This research centered on the question, who or what entity, defines veteran? Based on interviews with veterans, VA officials, current and historical events, media and government publications, I conclude that “veteran” is not necessarily a “who,” but rather a “what.” Veteran, I argue, is construct in which both the state and society are the architects. My research does not suggest that one entity has more power than the other, but rather that each asserts its strength at different times. For example, The American Legion’s (society) pressure to see the G.I. Bill passed (state). But, although one may exert more pressure than the other at times, the relation seems to be mutually reinforcing and symbiotic. Thus, for as much as Title 38 of the U.S. Code defines veteran, it is equally defined and understood by social constructs. Although social constructs function much like heuristics in that that help us make sense of our world, they can also be dangerous, particularly when they exclude or divide, as we have seen happen to women veterans. Unfortunately, the state-society bond seems to be just strong enough so that the individual veteran has very little direct control over the definition. Instead, the veteran is forced to choose whether to accept the current definition or reject it.

My research also suggested that incorporation of marginalized groups into a more powerful existing framework for the purposes of equity is only one half of the equation. The other necessary and often missing half is cultural equity. That is, laws can change with the stroke of a pen, but beliefs take longer. Therefore, if lawmakers want to increase the chances for policy success, then perhaps they may want to follow VA’s lead and consider preexisting constructs that impede meaningful change. Of course, whether or not
VA succeeds has yet to be seen. But, we can follow VA’s culture change as it is happening and see if it has any effect on women veterans’ identity.

Despite the inability to measure the success of VA’s campaign at this stage I found women moving a little closer toward seeing themselves as veterans, but they also indicated there is still much ground to cover. To illustrate, of the 24 women I interviewed, each confirmed having honorably served in the military. In other words, they acknowledged being a veteran in the Title 38 sense: “I served in the U.S. armed forces,” and showed an awareness of VA benefits. But in looking at their responses as a whole, I concluded that many have yet to assimilate the veteran identity beyond claiming the occasional benefit. Certainly, some women strongly identified as a veteran. However, I did not find a distinct pattern among this subset, which explained why they “owned” their veteran status more than those who did not. Also, I did not find a solid pattern among the men who seemed to identify more than other males, but noticed that a few of whom I would classify as strongly identifying, belonged to veterans’ service organizations (VSOs) such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign War, suggesting a possible link between identity and such civic groups. Two women in my sample reported being active members in the American Legion but, similar to the men, I did not see enough of a pattern among respondents. Whereas I suspect that VSO membership most likely contributes to a stronger veteran identity, regardless of one’s sex, I would hesitate to offer a definitive conclusion because it is unknown as to whether the veteran identified strongly before joining or because of joining.
Perhaps some of the reluctance may be traced back to the core of the challenge: equality. For so long women fought for equality in the military by asking to be treated exactly as the men were treated; no special favors, no special rules because of their sex. The literature (Holm 1992, Hicks Stiehm 1989), as well as some of my interviewees, confirmed this. Similar to members of other marginalized groups, for example women who joined the labor force, women simply wanted the opportunity to perform the same tasks as men and be eligible for the same rewards (e.g., rank, recognition) based on merit and ability, not sex. In theory, the military operates as a meritocracy where the majority of personnel advance because of meeting required criteria. Yet, that was not always possible for women. For example, in excluding women from combat duties (until very recently), women were barred from some higher ranks, as these ranks were dependent upon combat roles. Combat aside, when women were slowly integrated into various jobs within the armed forces, many received backlash from male colleagues. A few of the women I interviewed who earned positions or ranks normally given to men were met with resentment, sometimes being told by their subordinates that the only reason they advanced was because they were females. Some men reacted by refusing to obey orders or giving a half-hearted effort, justifying their behavior by accusing the military of reverse discrimination. For many women soldiers, it was a classic no-win situation in which the best solution was to fall back on her military training, stay strong and keep moving ahead, despite the obstacles.

It is this same military training, or socialization, that could help explain why some women veterans preferred to remain out of the spotlight. A common trait I found among all veterans I interviewed, regardless of gender, was a sense of humility. With obedience
and cohesion imperative for the armed forces to survive, soldiers are taught right away to never break the chain of command and to remember that group needs will always take precedence over individual desires. For many veterans I spoke with, they were just “doing their jobs” and did not find anything extraordinary in what they achieved in the military. So, to be recognized for doing what she took an oath to do may make her feel uncomfortable and unworthy of praise.

It is also possible that because of military socialization, women veterans did not actively seek VA services for fear that it may have appeared as if they were asking for preferential treatment, especially if the service was available in the private sector (e.g., health care). In today’s parlance, women were not going to play the gender card. Indeed, an answer that frequently appeared among my sample was one in which women were proud of how their military training helped them become resourceful and self-sufficient. In fact, it was one of the few instances in which women veterans gave themselves credit. Humility can be a double-edged sword, however. If women veterans do not speak up, then their needs cannot be adequately met. This problem may be compounded by the fact that women in general have been socialized to put others’ needs before their own. Therefore, VA becomes a critical piece of the puzzle. If VA is able to help women connect with their veteran identity beyond the parameters of Title 38, the agency will have effectively helped women veterans increase the political and social power that they have earned.

Collectively, the findings in this research add to the existing theoretical framework by offering a slightly different take on what is in the existing literature. As discussed in Chapter 2, veterans are undoubtedly considered to be a deserving group by
the state, a status reinforced by social policy (Schneider and Ingram 2005, 1997, 1993; Mettler 2005; Jensen 2005, 2003). The same social policy realm has relegated many women-dominant constituencies to an undeserving status (Soss 2002, Mink 1995, Gordon 1994). It is a clean, dichotomous arrangement that has been accepted and adopted by society through social constructs (“veteran” v. “welfare queen”). If veterans are “deserving” and most women are “undeserving,” where do women veterans fit in? As some of the members of my sample showed, they do not fit neatly in either category. Therefore, my research adds to the literature by pointing out that not all members of a single policy group, in this case, veterans, are equal—even though, by definition they should be. In organizational terms, there is intra-inequity within one of the most deserving and powerful policy constituencies, a reality that has yet to be explored in the literature.

By comparison, this research shows an agency, VA, cognizant of the inequity and well positioned to make meaningful change and is slightly ahead of society, which seems to understand that women can be military soldiers, but rarely see women as military veterans. In this case, it may be up to the bureaucracy to redistribute power so that it is equally allocated between women and men veterans and, in so doing, revise one of the oldest and deeply entrenched paradigm: the male warrior.

Although the distribution of power between men and women veterans is still unbalanced, as the scales are currently tipped in favor of men, gender inequity does not have to remain. Power is dynamic and capable of redistribution, particularly when supported by government and society; women’s presence in the armed forces serves as evidence. But, as the research has suggested, full gender equity has yet to be achieved.
One of the barriers keeping women at a disadvantage in the military has been the ban on combat duties. This same combat exclusion most likely had a hand in keeping the masculine soldier/veteran construct as the societal dominant image as well. But, what about now, when the combat ban has been lifted? Will the integration of women in combat roles finally allow the colloquial definition of veteran to include both genders? The next section briefly addresses the women in combat issue and posits that, although the move is necessary to achieve gender equity, the change mirrors the past in its choppy and uneven gait.

**Women in Combat: Another Stutter-Step or Full Stride Toward Equality?**

A final point worth addressing is what the future may hold for women veterans, now that the combat ban has been lifted. Retired U.S. Air Force Major General Jeanne Holm\(^2\), author of the definitive history of women soldiers, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (1992), speaks to this point in the conclusion of her book. She called for a military culture that rewards an individual’s ability to perform the job rather than on gender. Only when women receive full citizenship, or the right to engage in all military duties, including combat, will they have achieved equity and can end “revolution.” Sadly, in 2010, two years before the combat exclusion for women was lifted, Major General Holm passed away at the age of 88 (Martin 03/01/10). I cannot help but wonder what her perspective would have been, had she been alive to witness the event. As a woman, I wholeheartedly agree with Holm’s assertion that opening combat

\(^{2}\) A pioneer in her own right, Holm held the distinction of being the first two-star woman general in the armed forces. While in command she was credited with helping to open all but four Air Force specialties for women (Martin 3/1/10).
roles to women is a necessary condition for achieving equality within the military. However, based on this research, I would hesitate in calling the revolution unfinished. If we used the information from women and men veterans in my sample, coupled with social and political history, I would expect true equality, the ability to work in a non-gendered environment, to still be quite a way off.

As we have seen with other legislative measures to remedy inequity, including those applying to women in the armed forces, revising the law does not produce immediate change. At this time of this writing (November 2013) three women successfully graduated from the Marine Corps infantry training school, making them the first female cohort eligible for combat assignments. But, after spending 59 days and nights training in the field, completing 12-mile marches with 80 pounds of gear, and meeting the same fitness tests as men, the Marines are making no promises that the women will become members of the infantry. Upon graduating, the three women infantry were assigned to non-combat jobs. Although DoD and the Joint Chiefs of Staff mandated all military jobs opened to both sexes by 2016, the regulation contained one major loophole: combat jobs may be segregated by gender if the military can show strong justification (Associated Press 11/24/13, Carroll 11/22/13, Kesling 11/21/13, Whitlock 06/18/13). Once again, women’s progress in the military may be best described as a stutter-step rather than a full stride forward, in that in the meantime, the gendered conception of veteran remains intact.
Conclusion

Throughout the research the point has been made that military veterans possess much more political power and public esteem than almost any other policy constituency, but particularly when compared to populations of the welfare state. Understanding veterans’ place in the larger socio-political structure is a detail that often missing from the literature but one I maintain is critical in expanding our understanding of veterans and VA. To illustrate, take Social Security and Food Stamp recipients. Although each group is situated on different tiers of the welfare state, upper and lower, respectively, they are alike in that they, as policy constituencies, were created directly from the corresponding legislation. By comparison, veterans received publicly funded benefits as early as the Founding (Jensen 2003) and in so doing established their political and social prominence well before VA was established. The group’s longevity helped to cement its high standing among lawmakers and citizens, which may explain why veterans and veterans’ policy appear to be much less vulnerable to internal socio-political shifts (e.g., institutional changes, ideological preferences, election outcomes, public opinion, economy) and external influences (e.g., foreign affairs) than other policy constituencies. However, one critical question remains: given such favorable characteristics, why would some women veterans feel excluded from the larger group and not identify as veterans?

For many of the women in my sample, signs pointed to social constructs. That is, how society and government believe a group should behave matters. For example, when we look at women veterans and veterans’ policy, a gender-neutral picture emerges. By that measure we should not see gaps in benefits claiming between the sexes, nor hear reports of women not considering themselves veterans. But, as this research as shown,
theory and practice do not always align. Just because policy language is not gendered
does not mean that society or institutions are not. As we have seen beliefs and behavior
take much longer to change than the law. If VA, an institution with a great deal power
and legitimacy, needs to launch a culture change campaign to reach out to a segment of
its constituency who do not realize or believe they are part of the group, then something
in the policy process is not working. The problem, however, may not be with the process
itself, but what lay in the background, a reality that today’s VA seems to recognize.
Perhaps if there is one lesson to be emphasized it is that in some cases it takes more than
legislation alone to help groups attain the equality. Thus, a deeper understanding of how
policy constituencies are created and under what socio-political assumptions can prove
valuable to maintaining and furthering a democratic society.
Methodological Notes

Project Origins

This research was borne out of an excerpt from Congressional testimony delivered in June 2000 by the Legislative Director for the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), where she informed Congress that women military veterans use their VA health benefits at much lower rates than men who served (Ilem 2000). The disparity was not totally unexpected, the Director explained, considering how small the percentage of women veterans was compared to men. The likely culprit was probably the absence of female-specific health services at the majority of VA facilities across the nation, a known fact on Capitol Hill (GAO 1999, 1992, 1982), but nonetheless a significant one that still needed to be rectified. But, it was the other explanation for low VA claim rates that was much more intriguing and eventually became the impetus for this project. DAV’s Legislative Director said:

It is possible that women veterans utilize their benefit entitlements less than their male counterparts in part because of the strong cultural perception associated with the word veteran. Women veterans will often check “no” on a questionnaire when asked if they are veterans, but then indicate that they have served in the military. Many women believe they do not meet the basic definition of “veteran” [;] perceived [as veteran] to be a male who served in combat. A VA commissioned survey in 1985 found that 57% of women did not know they were eligible for VA services and programs.33 (Ilem 2000)

In essence, it was my own disbelief that prompted this study and led to the task of trying to understand what it meant to be an American woman military veteran in a post-World War II society. To make the project manageable, I framed it around the question who, or what entity, defines “veteran?”

The first source I turned to was Title 38 of the U.S. Code, which makes no reference to gender as a criterion for claiming veterans’ benefits. Instead, eligibility was based on “a person” having served in the “active military” and separating “under conditions other than dishonorable.” With such clear and concise language, it was difficult to believe there could be any misinterpretation. Yet, as the first chapter also showed, misinterpretation did exist. What else could explain why Rhoda was denied her tax exemption, or why Georgette’s disclosure of military service was met with surprised looks and second-guesses or, on a more personal level, why an Iraqi war veteran who was deployed to the Mideast did not feel she “earned the status of ‘veteran?’” I would eventually come to learn, however, that misinterpretation of Title 38 probably had the least influence in explaining the women’s experience. Instead, what became evident was that “veteran” encompassed much more than what the U.S. Code conveyed. Beneath the surface of the legal definition were layers of beliefs, customs and expectations, which combined to produce multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings of “veteran.” In the final analysis, “veteran” is indeed a legitimate government classification for a specific

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33 When Ilem testified, the 1985 survey for women veterans had not been updated, thus data from which she was citing was the most current and available at the time. According to VA officials, new data were gathered in 2010 and are still in the analysis phase.
policy constituency. But, it is also a construct co-created by government and society and capable of influencing attitudes and behavior.

**Looking Back**

Although I was pleased with the project’s design and findings, in retrospect, if given the opportunity to re-test, I would include questions related to VSOs because of their ability to continue to connect veterans during and after military service. Further, VSOs are not simply social groups. They are also very powerful political groups who have been responsible for a majority of veterans’ policy. Whereas I was aware women could belong to such organizations, it never occurred to me to ask. Upon reflection, I believe social constructs played a role.

Despite being married to a woman veteran who spends a great deal of time at VA facilities for her service-connected disabilities, in my mind, the image of a veteran was an older man. In fact, the first woman veteran I interviewed captured the sentiment perfectly: “I guess when I think of veterans, I think of people who served in World War II mainly—they wear hats. I think of old men who will wear a cap signifying they were veterans…and tell stories.” The comment is a strong reminder of how powerful constructs can be on the individual and collective levels. What this woman veteran expressed may not be too far off of other Americans’ perceptions, alluding to the fact that despite over half a century in uniform, women veterans had still not reached the same status, even among women themselves.
Appendix A: Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 below gives a demographic breakdown of the sample as a whole. Educational level, home state and tenure variables were omitted because I felt it would make the table confusing. However following Table 1, I included comprehensive tables of all the raw data relating demographic characteristics for reference.

The one characteristic in which I had hoped for more variation was race among male veterans. As Table 1 shows, there is some diversity in the sample, but I would have liked more. However, since I was not testing race, nor did race appear as a potential explanatory variable, I do not believe the integrity of the findings suffered.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women (n=24)</th>
<th>Men (n=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
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Sample Demographics: Coding and Raw Data
Tables 2 and 3 on following pages present the raw data by sex. Any notes related to the sample are listed below the table. My coding scheme for both tables are:

**KEY**

**Code** = I assigned each participant an alphanumeric code in order to protect identity

**Race** = Participants were asked to self-identify as being members of one or more of the following racial groups. I used the same race classification measures as the U.S. Census Bureau for consistency, as VA sometimes uses census data for its research.

- AA = African American
- A = Asian
- H/L = Hispanic/Latino
- NA = Native American Indian
- W = White/Caucasian

**State** = State in which the veteran resided at the time of the interview

**Edu** = Highest level of education completed at the time of the interview

- A = Associates (2-year) degree
- C = Graduate of a 4-year college or university
- HS = High school
- In coll = Participant was attending college at the time of the interview, but had not graduated. My rationale in distinguishing those in college from high school graduates was to be able to see if higher education made a difference in the individual’s perceptions, to which it did not.
- M = Master’s degree
- Ph.D. = Doctorate

**Branch** = Branch of military service

- A = Army
- AF = Air Force
- CG = Coast Guard
- M = Marine Corps
- N = Navy

**Rank** = Military rank at the time of separation of service

- E = Enlisted
- O = Officer

**Time in** = Years spent in the active (full-time) military

**Combat** = Did the veteran participate in combat directly, or in a combat-related capacity?

- 0 = No
- 1 = Yes
Table 2. Raw Data for Women Veterans in the Sample

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Note: FV-011 was omitted because her age was outside of the study’s parameters.
Table 3. Raw Data for Men Veterans in the Sample

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Notes: MV-001: Participant did not disclose age; age is estimated based on era of service. MV-011: Participant said he attended two years of college, but did not graduate.
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions: Veterans

All veterans in my sample were given this set of questions as a way to maintain consistency. Because participants in the sample were from different geographic regions, some interviews were conducted via telephone; local participants were interviewed either in person or by telephone.

Researcher: Please understand that there is no right or wrong answer to any of these questions. I’m looking specifically for your honest reactions.

Part I. Interview Questions: Identity

1. Let’s start with some free association—the first thing that comes to you. Please give me some adjectives or phrases that you would use to describe a “veteran.”
2. Building upon what you’ve just said, if you were to create a picture of an American veteran, what would it look like? Thinking about what you just said, where do you think you got your ideas about what constitutes a veteran?
3. In your own words, please describe a “typical veteran.”
   a. If the respondent does not reference him/herself, then I will ask: Where do you fit in, in all of this?
   b. Do you see yourself as a typical veteran? Why or why not?
4. What led you to join the military?
5. How would you describe your time in the military?
6. What if your [daughter, granddaughter, niece] wanted to join the military today—what would be your reaction? Why is that?

Part II. Questionnaire and Follow-up Interview Questions: VA Services

1. [Present questionnaire] Please check which VA benefits and services of which you are aware, even if you are ineligible (or have never used).
2. Awareness of VA benefits:
   a. I noticed you reported that you are aware of some of these benefits and services. How did you find out about them?
   OR
   b. I noticed you reported that you are unaware of these VA benefits. Are you surprised at the number of different benefits that some veterans may be entitled to?
3. Have you used VA services—you do not have to tell me which ones?
   a. If so, how would you describe VA services? Why is that?
   b. If not, why not?
4. Whether or not you have used veteran benefits, what is your overall perception of VA services? Why?

Part III. Closing

1. Is there anything else you would like to mention that I have not addressed?
2. If I need any clarification or additional information may I contact you?
3. Do you know another person(s) that I may contact for an interview?

Researcher: Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experiences with me.
Interview Questions: VA Personnel

This set of questions was used when interviewing VA personnel. Although VA makes a concerted effort to hire veterans, if the VA was a veteran, I interviewed them in their capacity as bureaucrats, a point I also addressed when soliciting interviews.

Section I: Women veterans

1. I understand that VA is currently doing a great deal to inform women veterans of the benefits and services to which they are entitled. Could you please tell me more about the agency’s outreach efforts?
2. Have these efforts been successful? Why or why not?
3. What would you say is the biggest challenge in getting women veterans to use their benefits?

Section II: Public perception of VA

4. If you had to describe the general public’s perception of VA to me, what would you say?
5. Do you see any public misperceptions about VA? If so, what are they?
6. Do think public perception of VA helps or hinders women veterans from seeking their rightful benefits?

Section III: Research and women veterans

7. So far, the data I have collected show that a number of women veterans do not see themselves as such. Are you surprised? Why or why not?
8. My research has suggested that VA, as an agency, has recognized the commitment women veterans have made and now consider them on par with men veterans. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
9. In your opinion, how do you think the general public sees women veterans?

Section IV: Closing Remarks

10. Is there anything else that I did not address that you would like to mention or discuss?
11. If I need any clarification or additional information, may I contact you?
12. Is there anybody else at VA whom I should contact?

Researcher: Thank you very much for your time. I would be happy to share my complete findings with you as soon as they are available.
Appendix C: Questionnaire

The following is the one-page questionnaire that was distributed or read to each veteran participant after the conclusion of Part I. The selection of benefits is verbatim from the 2009 *Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents*, published by the Department of Veterans Affairs because I wanted to stay consistent with VA language. Additional explanation was provided only when clarification was requested. See Table 4 (next page) for comprehensive results.

VA Services Questionnaire: Veterans

Please check the box next to those VA services of which you are *aware*:

- Monthly compensation (10% + disabled)
- Pension
- Health Care
  - Hospital, outpatient medical, dental, pharmacy and prosthetic services
  - Domiciliary, nursing home and community-based residential care
  - Health and rehabilitation for homeless veterans
  - Readjustment counseling
  - Alcohol and drug dependency treatment
  - Medical evaluation for disorders associated with military service in the Gulf War, or exposure to Agent Orange, radiation, and other environmental hazards
- Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment
- Home Loans
  - Guaranteed loans
  - Refinancing loans
  - Special grants
- Life Insurance
- Education and Training
- Other (Please list): ____________________________________________

Results

Table 4 on the next page aggregates the data from the questionnaire shown above. Incomplete answers were discarded, thus the sample size for this table is smaller (23 women, 18 men) than the actual number of veterans I interviewed (24 women, 20 men).
Table 4. Veterans’ Questionnaire Results

*Question: Please check which VA benefits and services of which you are aware, even if you are ineligible or have never used them.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VA Benefit</th>
<th>Women (n=23)</th>
<th>Men (n=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monthly compensation (10% or more disabled)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hospital, outpatient medical, dental, pharmacy and prosthetic</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Domiciliary, nursing home and community-based residential care</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Health and rehabilitation for homeless veterans</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Readjustment counseling</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alcohol and drug dependency treatment</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Medical evaluations for disorders associated with service in the Gulf War, exposure to Agent Orange, radiation and other environmental hazards</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home loans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guaranteed loan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Refinancing loans</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Special grants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Insurance</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (answer provided by veteran)*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Answers for “Other” were as follows:*

**Women veterans**
- Burial in military cemeteries (2 responses)
- Transportation to and from [healthcare] appointments
- Women’s programs now at VA clinics (e.g., counseling for MST)
- Veteran’s preference for government hiring

**Men veterans**
- Home health aide
- Eye exams and glasses
- Burial (2 responses)
Appendix D: Ethnographic Content Analysis

For a different perspective, I conducted an ethnographic content analysis for the first question veterans were asked in Part I. Incomplete data were discarded from the sample. Raw data are presented below in Table 5.

Table 5. Veterans Describing Veterans

Question 1: Let’s start with some free association—the first thing that comes to you. Please give me some adjectives or phrases that you would use to describe a “veteran.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal</th>
<th>Military Ideals</th>
<th>American Ideals</th>
<th>Positive Connotation</th>
<th>Negative Connotation</th>
<th>Multiple Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-time (1/0)</td>
<td>Camaraderie (0/2)</td>
<td>Allegiance (0/1)</td>
<td>Creative (1/0)</td>
<td>Broken (1/0)</td>
<td>Functional (1/0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-directed/ self-sufficient (1/1)</td>
<td>Commitment (0/1)</td>
<td>Brave (5/0)</td>
<td>Compassionate (1/0)</td>
<td>Denied (1/0)</td>
<td>Misunderstood (1/0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served his country (0/1)</td>
<td>Dependable (0/1)</td>
<td>Dedicated/ dedication (2/1)</td>
<td>Distinguished (1/0)</td>
<td>Disabled (2/0)</td>
<td>Opinionated (1/0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldier (0/1)</td>
<td>Discipline (2/0)</td>
<td>Duty (2/2)</td>
<td>Generous (1/0)</td>
<td>Forgotten (1/0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone who’s been in the military (5/3)</td>
<td>Have our own language (0/1)</td>
<td>Freedom (0/1)</td>
<td>Professional (0/1)</td>
<td>Homeless (1/0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone who’s been in the military, in combat (0/1)</td>
<td>Resilient (1/0)</td>
<td>Hero (0/1)</td>
<td>Selfless (1/0)</td>
<td>Washed-up (1/0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas (people from) (0/1)</td>
<td>Respect (0/1)</td>
<td>Honor/ honorable (4/6)</td>
<td>Steadfast (0/1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel (1/0)</td>
<td>Risk-taking (1/0)</td>
<td>Independent (1/0)</td>
<td>Strong (2/1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonderful life (1/0)</td>
<td>Team player (1/0)</td>
<td>Loyal/loyalty (1/2)</td>
<td>Tenacious (1/0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remolding (1/0)</td>
<td>(A) patriot (0/1)</td>
<td>Truthful (1/0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of belonging to a group (0/1)</td>
<td>Patriotic/ patriotism (2/2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tough (1/0)</td>
<td>Pride/proud (4/1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust/ trustworthy (1/1)</td>
<td>Public servant (0/1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Warrior (0/1)</td>
<td>Sacrifice (1/1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>War (2/0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>War hero (0/1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample: 23 women, 16 men
(n/n) = Frequency: Number of women/number of men reporting adjectives/phrases
Bold italics = Adjectives/phrases that both women and men reported.
References


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Ilem, Joy. 2000. Testimony delivered to Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 8 June 2000.


_____. 2008.

