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Are we allowed to win this time: new warrior culture in action and government betrayal in the *American Rifleman* 1975–2023

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The emergence of New Warrior culture in the post-Vietnam era has largely been unexplored by sociology of culture. While recent research on the NRA has explored significant aspects of gun culture such as advertising, narratives, as well as ratings of gun empowerment etc., less work has investigated how the NRA facilitated changes not only in gun culture but in the "systems of social relations" between gun owners and the government but also in "systems of meaning" in how gun owners understand their guns. This paper argues that the NRA's use of Native American warrior narratives, combined with other New Warrior narratives, maps onto Swidler's unsettled time. Merging classic warrior narratives based in service to the nation alongside extensive use of Native American warriors, the NRA leveraged warrior narratives as a way of facilitating the transformation of warrior identity from one who defends the nation to one that is prepared to fight their government. In this way, the NRA was able to communicate antigovernment narratives without openly embracing the conspiratorial anti-government ideals espoused by some factions of the militia movement by changing warrior cultural narratives from defending the nation to fighting against its government.

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Introduction

In the 1985 movie *Rambo, First Blood, Part II*, the movie's protagonist John Rambo is approached by his former commander for a secret mission: return to Vietnam to rescue POWs who were abandoned by their government (Appy 2016). The tag line for the film is "They sent him on a mission and set him up to fail" (Cosmatos 1985). As the movie opens, Rambo asks his former commander "Sir, are we allowed to win this time?" (Cosmatos 1985). While there were many films in the New Warrior genre, the *Rambo* franchise encapsulates the New Warrior cultural narrative of government betrayal of the troops in Vietnam, thus capitalizing on the abandoned POW/MIA myth gaining traction in the post Vietnam war years. The rise of New Warrior culture (Gibson 1994) demonstrates a way of theorizing Swidler's (1986) "unsettled time" in aftermath of the Vietnam conflict. The cultural narrative of warriors betrayed by their government enabled new strategies of action that fundamentally reshaped not only "systems of social relations [but also] systems of meaning (Hays 1994, 65), particularly the relationship between white American men and their government.

Both Swidler's unsettled times and the emergence of New Warrior culture have largely been left unexplored by sociology of culture. This is not to say the gun culture or the NRA has been ignored – indeed there is a wide range of new scholarship about the NRA and its impact on gun culture. The symbolic meaning of guns has been recently explored to reveal a sense of gun empowerment (Mencken and Froese 2017). More recent work has investigated how the NRA has leveraged narratives to facilitate changes not only in gun culture but in the "systems of social relations" (Hays 1994:65) between gun owners and the government. Lacombe demonstrates how the NRA shaped gun ownership as an identity "tied to broader gun centric political ideology" (2021:4). Filindra argues that a martial obligations of citizenship narrative previously tied to the willingness and ability to take up effective arms on behalf of the nation has transformed into a gun ownership centric understanding of citizenship. That is, being a gun owner is a necessary and sufficient condition to be viewed as a good citizen (2023:14). Schwartz identifies three meta narratives that the NRA frequently invokes as it shaped an American identity to which the gun is central (2022). These works and others have clarified the NRA's role in changing American culture and its relationship with guns.

In unsettled times, as I argue the post-Vietnam/post-Civil Rights movement years in America were, culture provides "components that are used to construct strategies of action" (Swidler 1986:273). This paper argues that the NRA's use of New Warrior narratives creates a vehicle to understand cultural change. I apply Hays definition of culture to investigate how warrior narratives are used to understand relationships between a people and their government. Following Hays, I define culture as being comprised of "systems of social relations and systems of meaning" (Hays 1994:66). By adopting the narrative of government betrayal alongside classic warrior narratives of sacrificing on behalf of the nation, the NRA legitimated strategies of action that links being a real American with being a gun owner with few other obligations or duties of citizenship (Churchill 2011; Filindra 2023). Following the incidents at Ruby Ridge and Waco in the early 1990s and the subsequent rise of the militia movement, the NRA embraced New Warrior culture, transforming the cultural meaning of warriors from someone who fights to defend the nation from foreign enemies to who has been betrayed by their own government. In this narrative, all other options have failed, leaving violence as the only recourse. That said, there is an important caveat necessary before proceeding: linking these narratives to actual violence is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I focus on establishing the argument for the existence of a narrative shift and leave the linkage between narratives and action to future researchers.

The New Warrior culture popularized narratives of government betrayal and suspicion, which then justified the rise of the "independent warrior [who] must step into fill the dangerous void created by the American failure in Vietnam" (Gibson 1994:7). In this way, these narratives moved historic realities for Native Americans, Black Americans and other minority groups that had been subjected to government overreach into mainstream (white) American narratives that justified suspicion of the government. This is not to say that distrust of the government is new – indeed distrust of the government harkens back to the very founding of the nation. And yet, the New Warrior culture, moving from film to political mainstream with the rise of the rise of the militia movement in the aftermath of Ruby Ridge, Waco and Oklahoma City represents something new: not just distrust but active betrayal of a government that was supposed to be of the people (Aho 1990; Churchill 2011; Cooter 2024; Crothers 2019; Zeskind 2009). In this way, the NRA leveraged existing ideologies of government betrayal to enable the construction new systems of meaning that legitimize the idea of taking up arms against the government.

From settled to unsettled times: The Great War to Vietnam. All cultures contain narratives that help shape meaning which then creates strategies of acceptable and unacceptable action. Narratives resonate through cultural objects when they "help actors solve puzzles they face" (McDonald et al. 2017:2). The American Revolution and the subsequent rise of nationalism represents an unsettled time that radically shifted the meaning of people from subjects to citizens. The rise of the modern nation state transformed subjects into citizens required to do violence on behalf of the state (Knox and Murray 2001). The social relations between a people and their government were "defined [through] participation in armed conflict as part of the normative definition of citizenship" (Segal 1989:2). This understanding of citizenship links directly to what Filindra describes as the martial republican tradition, one tied explicitly to the idea of disciplined, rational, expert marksman [which made firearms] instrumental to political virtue" (2023:14).

The modern nation state is also dependent on narratives to link individuals to the imagined community of the nation (Anderson 2016). The core American narrative has changed many times over the course of its existence, but James Madison, one of the Founding Fathers, argued that the American nation represents a "thing believed to be impossible…that a people can self-govern" (Martineau 1837:2). However, the American commitment to an ideal has not resulted in a coherent culture. Rather, it has always struggled with creating a sense of belonging not bound by blood or, in the American case, ties to the land. In this way and in particular during times of identity uncertainty, drawing on Native American identity has a long history of helping white Americans negotiate their "real Americanness" (Deloria 2022). New Warrior culture as well as the Vietnam conflict both deploy the use of the Native American narratives and imagery as a way of negotiating and understanding the war and its aftermath.

In settled times, culture "constrains action by providing a limited sense of resources" that enable or constrain subsequent action. Soldiers and their sacrifice, whether compelled to service or volunteers, have been a central piece to understanding American culture, particularly American civil religious narratives. As the nation emerged out of the Civil War era, the 100%

American narrative emphasized belonging to the nation writ large rather than loyalty to states (Churchill 2011). In the mobilization for World War II and the immediate aftermath, the United States entered pax Americana – at least for some Americans. The classic warrior narrative communicated the goodness not only of the American soldier but the nation, thus constraining action to mobilize toward the war effort against foreign enemies (Appy 2016; Huebner 2011; Slotkin 2000). The good soldier sacrificed himself on behalf of the nation, a sacrifice willingly given to purify and restore the nation. Through the 20th century, cultural depictions of the Great War and WWII, American soldiers "talked of home and family, together with their hopes that somehow their sacrifices would lead to a better world" (Gibson 1994:45), emphasizing the focus of their sacrifice in healing the world. Narratives of soldiers sacrifice "protect[ed] the American values of freedom and democracy and to liberate others from tyranny" (Gibson 1994:31) symbolically ensuring that society would be restored from their sacrifice. Critically, the violence of military action was directed abroad and reserved for foreign enemies, further restraining strategies of action with regard to relations with the government and delegitimizing calls for violence at home (Churchill 2011). War movies of the mid 20th century which depicted the might and goodness of the American military profoundly influenced the disenchantment of Vietnam generation (Gibson 1994, 22).

Vietnam represents a profoundly unsettled time in American culture. The violence of the war dropped into millions of living rooms on the evening news "smothered romantic views of warfare in post-1945 America" (Huebner 2011:10). The "core tenant of American exceptionalism – that the United States only uses force…for good and freedom – was profoundly shattered" (Appy 2016:63). It was simply "unthinkable that the United States might fight a war that was anything but righteous, winnable and fully supported" (Appy 2016:191). Vietnam awakened the nation's ability to acknowledge their "nations capacity for evil" (Appy 2016:217). The staggering amount of death and violence both experienced in Vietnam and delivered into the nation's living rooms every night on the evening news created a major ethical problem for the nation: The killing could not be linked to political success.

The loss shattered the mythology surrounding American soldiers and the futility of their sacrifice created a "contradiction between a people's core belief system and their experiences" (Gibson 1994:28). Following the loss in Vietnam, accompanied by accusations of extreme violence and war crimes, a narrative that soldiers sacrifice became profaned, wasted in a futile effort overseas emerged (Gibson 1994; Huebner 2011; Lembcke 2000). If soldiers were not dying to protect the nation, what then did the violence and death in Vietnam accomplish? Understanding Vietnam required new ways of understanding America's role in the world and in many ways, provided new life to the anti-state vein in American revolutionary narrative (Horwitz and Anderson 2009). This staggering loss resulted in soldiers occupying "contentious identities" which required a transformation of cultural meaning to answer fundamentally collective questions "Who are you" "Who are we?" and "Who are they?" (Tilly 2002:6) that fundamentally redrew the of systems of social relations retold in narratives. The resulting New Warrior culture legitimated new strategies of action – defining the government as a corrupt "they" rather than one made up of "we the people". In this way these narratives reframed the system of relations between (mostly white) Americans and their government as one of betrayal. This betrayal narrative gains legitimacy because of the centrality of the profaning of the military's sacrifice by their own government (Dawson and Weinberg 2020).

Emerging from unsettled times: the NRA's adoption of new warrior culture. The NRA was not immune to the cultural changes emerging from the post-Vietnam era but they were more constrained in the strategies of action they adopted until the 1990s. In the mid-20th century, the NRA operated as a quasi-official arm of the government, assisting with shooting clubs and training around the country as well as having an exclusive license to sell surplus military equipment (Filindra 2023). Military service has long been tied to citizenship but the "relationship between military service and citizenship was most dramatic with regard to the racial integration of the armed forces" (Segal 1989:10). Throughout the mid-20th century, the NRA closely aligned with this with their use of martial republicanism, which drew the requirements for being a disciplined citizen from disciplined, well-trained familiarity with weapons. This settled culture constrained ideas about who was allowed access to weapons.

The late 1970s, however, saw the NRA board of directors overthrown by members who wanted the NRA to take a more hardline stance against what they perceived as Second Amendment encroachment stemming from gun control legislation in the 1960s. Despite this gun control legislation emerging as a response to armed Black protests, the NRA grew increasingly concerned that the government would adopt a more hard line stance toward all gunowners (Knox 1979, 2009). Further, the end of the draft and full integration of the military fundamentally changed the utility of the NRA's use of martial republicanism (Filindra 2023). Following Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s, the end of Vietnam combined with the end of the draft, the association of citizenship with military service in defense of the American nation began a radical transformation in the way that social relations between citizens and their government would be understood (Segal 1989). The subsequent rise of ascriptive republicanism, an understanding of citizenship adopted through gun ownership (Filindra 2023), would accompany the NRA's incorporation of New Warrior narratives that coincides with the emergence of the militia movement in the 1990s.

The twin examples of government violence against its white citizens at Ruby Ridge and a few short months later at Waco enabled an ideologically driven change to systems of social relations. Vietnam veterans had returned home to a nation which some perceive had abandoned them, and Randy Weaver, a decorated Vietnam veteran who also adhered to Christian identity beliefs, became the embodiment of the New Warrior when his wife and son were both killed by federal agents who'd been attempting to arrest him on over a missed court appearance for pending weapons charges. The government violence against white Americans at Waco and Ruby Ridge were broadcast into homes across the nation in ways that the Move bombing of Black Americans (Norward 2019) or the state sanctioned violence against Native Americans was not (Deloria 2022; Dunbar-Ortiz 2018). The government violence at Waco and Ruby Ridge, combined with federal gun control legislation of 1993 and 1994 became hallmarks of fears about an out-of-control government. These beliefs that the government was turning on white Americans, including white veterans, gave rise to the patriot movement. The NRA saw an opportunity to embrace the burgeoning militia movement, while attempting to maintain its mainstream standing.

The NRA executive director Wayne LaPierre sent a fundraising letter in (1995) that called out the violence of "jack booted government thugs". Despite the legitimate anger over government actions at Waco and Ruby Ride, the full throated analogy of government law enforcement officers with Nazi imagery triggered a significant backlash among government officials as high up as

former President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker (Associated Press 1995) – many of whom were World War II veterans. This backlash demonstrates the way that settled culture works to constrain acceptable strategies of action but also the ways in which culture is often settled and unsettled at the same time for different groups (Swidler 1986). Despite the large number of constitutional militias, the overt antigovernment conspiratorial nature of some patriot groups was not widely adopted (Aho 1995; Churchill 2011; Cooter 2024). The NRA quickly back peddled but did not abandon the new system of social relations which defined the people as under attack by the government. Instead, they pivoted to highlight legitimate issues of government misconduct while smuggling New Warrior narratives into the pages of the *American Rifleman* through the use of warrior narratives.

Data. The data for this research is the corpus of the *American Rifleman* magazine from 1975–2023, the official magazine of the National Rifle Association that's been consistently published in its current form since the early 1920s (O'Neill 2007). An examination of the *American Rifleman* presents an opportunity to study the current emergence of religious nationalism in America, primarily because it is targeted toward broad NRA membership, rather than at core Second Amendment supporters like other NRA magazines, such as *America's First Freedom* (Melzer 2012). As the longest-running NRA publication, the *American Rifleman* is more representative of how the organization has communicated to the broadest base of its readers and provides an ability to measure change over time. The *American Rifleman* includes transcripts of major speeches given at the annual conventions each year, as well as presidential addresses, which focuses on key issues, each month. The *American Rifleman* has been in continuous circulation since 1923 under its current name (O'Neill 2007) and its circulation represents one of the top 50 magazine distributions in the country (Waldman 2015), even in today's increasingly digital environment. The NRA states that more than 2 million subscribers currently receive the *American Rifleman* every month (Keefe 2018).

Further, the *American Rifleman* also includes advertisements from all of the major gun manufacturers as well as smaller businesses who seek to reach NRA audience members. Significant work has been done understanding the impact of advertising on gun culture (Mak 2021; Saylor et al. 2004; Yamane et al. 2018) and I build on this work by including ads in this analysis. Further, the NRA has long been viewed as a lobbying arm of the gun industry and therefore has significant influence not only over how advertisers shape their message but also has demonstrated a willingness to attack companies which don't fall in line with their messaging (Busse 2021).

My sample includes nearly every issue from 1975 until 2023. Digital editions from 2008 until the present were downloaded from a digital archive. Physical editions were accessed through library archives or purchased from collectors through online vendors such as eBay. Physical editions were scanned to create digital editions and then optimized for text analysis using publicly available optical character recognition software[1]. Where optical character recognition was unclear, the actual text was read and selected passages were transcribed. Total number of issues are 561 with 19 issues missing from the dataset with 9 from before 1995 and 10 after. Issues average between 100–120 pages in length, with election year issues being about 20% longer. I begin with 1975, the official end to the Vietnam conflict, to show how rhetoric changed prior to the 1980s when mass culture – film, literature, and scholarship - began to wrestle with the legacy of the Vietnam war (Gibson 1994; Huebner 2011).

Methods

New Warrior culture is not only about gun culture or the Second Amendment. It is also about government betrayal. Conversely, classic warrior narratives are aligned with fulfilling the obligations of citizenship through martial support for nation governed by the people. I use a grounded approach combined with mixed methods to first search for and identify explicit references to warriors. First, I use a mixture of automated and manual methods to search through the magazines for explicit references to "warriors". I use only explicit references to "warrior" in this paper because I am interested in the ways in which the term "warrior" and its associated narratives are used by both the NRA and its advertisers. While sacrifice narratives are not exclusive to warriors, they are centrally about soldiers sacrifice and critically, in line with other work on New Warrior culture, betrayed sacrifice of service members is central (Dawson and Weinberg 2020). Further, the term "warrior" is not synonymous with other martial terms such as "patriot" or "soldier". Patriot, for example, can refer to people who love their country or to those who believe their government has been infiltrated by the New World Order or other conspirators (James 2000; Larizza 1996). The term "warrior" is contested among veterans with some seeking to preserve a "warrior ethos" (McMaster 2021) and others arguing for greater emphasis on citizen soldiers versus warriors (Devereaux 2021). Therefore, I focused solely on explicit references to "warrior" and their associated narratives, to avoid an overly complex analysis that investigating additional terms such as patriot, soldier, or other terms that might be associated with warrior narratives would involve and invite future researchers to interrogate those terms and narratives.

I read each sentence or paragraph associated with each search result, sometimes adding more text than was retrieved by the automated search to provide further context. This approach led to 637 individual results, of which, 353 out of 637 were ads of which 90% of the warrior references appear since 1995 ($n = 565$), which coincides not with the rise of the militia movement in the early 1990s but with the backlash to the NRAs fundraising memo in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing a year earlier. I include ads in this dataset because ads are a critical aspect of both gun culture (Yamane et al. 2018) and New Warrior culture, which was fundamentally a marketing scheme. As well as a broader cultural narrative, New Warrior culture was also designed to sell paramilitary culture to those most likely to be removed from the actual violence of military service (Stahl 2009). Additionally, it is unclear the utility of separating the ads from the magazine itself, because there is significant debate about the role of the NRA as a marketing arm of the gun industry (Barnhart and Huff 2018; Busse 2021; Huff et al. 2017; Mak 2021; Yamane et al. 2018).

I then created codes (Fig. 1) based on categories of warriors mentioned or the causes they were aligned with. I categorized main types of warriors, described in Fig. 1. These codes are not mutually exclusive. For example, the advertisement for the "Legendary Apache Warrior Model: 1873 Rifle" would be coded as both Native American and weapon.

Once the large types of warriors were classified, I returned to the theoretical framing of government betrayal to develop the subsequent analysis. In what follows, I outline how different categories of warrior represent new warrior or classic warrior narratives. These narrative elements of New Warrior culture provide the NRA with the ability to reframe the gun owners' relationship with government through the lens of New Warrior culture. No longer is the violence of war fought to protect the nation from foreign enemies but instead, violence becomes a mechanism to meet out vengeance and justice against their fellow citizens. The New Warrior archetype links the historic heroism of soldiers sacrifice on behalf of the nation with the armed citizens

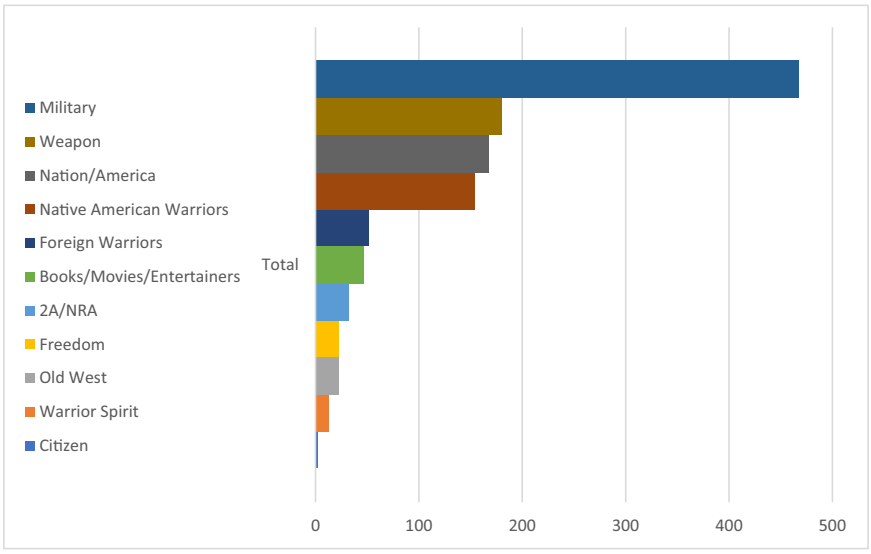

Fig. 1 Types of Warrior in the American Rifleman 1975–2023.

who protect their communities from an evil the government will not or cannot stop (Dawson 2019). Thus, using the military as a primary vehicle for government betrayal narratives enabled the NRA to capitalize on legitimate issues surrounding lack of resources for Vietnam veterans while simultaneously maintaining a support the troops pro military status quo. As a result, as well as for brevity's sake and for the clarity of the analysis, I focus this analysis only military related warriors.

Findings: settled and unsettled warriors. New Warrior narratives involve several key aspects that illuminate systems of social relations that emerge in the post-Vietnam era, because, as Gibson argues, "most New War stories have their origin in Vietnam" (Gibson 1994, 32). First, the New Warrior stands against authority figures. In this cultural narrative, the New Warrior was the Good Soldier until his government betrayed him. In this way, the New Warrior maps onto the NRA's Good Guy with a Gun metanarrative (Schwartz 2022). However, unlike the Good Guy with A Gun, where the Good Guy takes action in the face of government absence or inaction (Carlson 2015), the New Warrior's team or family or both was killed, leaving him alone, torn apart from the world he fought to return to. New Warrior heroes find their families destroyed because of their naïve expectation "that their family will be protected" (Yamane et al. 2018). Classic warriors fight for the nation, knowing their sacrifice will be honored and that their deaths contribute to something new and better (Dawson and Weinberg 2020). The Good Soldier had "done their part" but had been "stabbed in the back" by a government that has "failed to combat the enemies of American society"(Gibson 1994:32).

Military/veteran warriors. Despite the rise of New Warrior culture during the 1970s and 1980s in broader popular culture, the warrior as New Warrior narratives do not appear in the pages of the *American Rifleman* through explicit warrior references during this time. Instead, references to military warriors during the 1980s focus on classic warrior descriptions: warriors who fought on behalf of the nation. "Military/vets" warriors ($n = 202$) are references to soldiers, Marines or, most frequently, Special Forces, Navy SEALS or other elite troops as well as wounded warriors. I break out types of military warriors in Fig. 2. Oddly enough, however, despite the increase in the references to military and veteran warriors, the term warrior is rarely tied to regular Global War on Terror (GWOT) service members unless they are elite or Special Operations forces, which is an interesting tie to New Warrior culture that will be expanded on below.

I classify types of military warrior by their era of service such as Vietnam ($n = 34$), or Iraq/Afghanistan ($n = 13$) (Fig. 2). Interesting is the lack of portrayal of World War II veterans as warriors. There are less than 4 references to WWII warriors such as Patton and almost all are in the context of warrior weapons, specifically commemorative tribute rifles, discussed in depth below.

The use of warrior is first used to describe American soldiers and their weapons in 1987 in an article titled "American Warriors and their Arms" about a museum dedicated to weapons used and captured during various wars of the 20th century (Roberts 1987:76).

The military of the Greatest Generation was part and parcel of the broader American society – however, in the pages of the *American Rifleman*, the WWII generation is only rarely referred to as warriors. Instead, specific leaders like Patton are more frequently referenced and even then, sparsely.

> "The American Historical Foundation is helping to keep alive the bold warrior spirit of this American through the issuance of the George S. Patton commemorative revolver" (The American Historical Foundation 1986:5)

Patton's reputation as a fierce uncompromising leader who refused to accept failure (Aubrey and Darrell 2012) fits with later uses of warrior, especially post-Vietnam New Warriors who refuse to be constrained by the rules, laws, or government in pursuit of victory (Gibson 1994). Despite this, references to Patton are mostly in line with classic warrior narratives linking warriors to military service on behalf of the nation.

During the height of the Surge in Iraq (2006–2009), the use of warrior in the *American Rifleman* is are almost always in advertisements for weapons, clothing, or books about covert or special operations, echoing the narrative of the New War begun in American culture in the years following the defeat in Vietnam (Gibson 1994). Warriors are, with one exception, always coded as male in the pages of the *American Rifleman*. The only reference that co-occurs with women is a reference to Wounded Warrior Weekend. Wounded warriors are discussed in more detail below.

Comparisons between previous generations wars and contemporary wars are rare, but when they are used, there are very

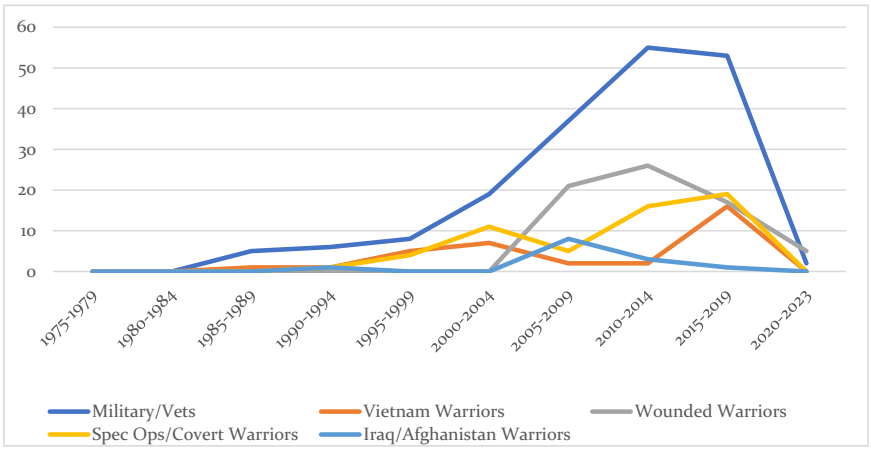

Fig. 2 Types of Military Warrior.

significant narratives shifts in meaning. One example referencing Greatest Generation soldiers as warriors in an interview with Navy Seal Marcus Luttrell. In this conversation, Luttrell is discussing whether Audie Murphy was the greatest American warrior or whether the Special Operations soldiers in Afghanistan deserve that title (Luttrell and Robinson 2008). This reference, however, draws stark delineation between the service of the WWII generation and the current generation of soldiers.

> "In describing how Matthew "Axe" Axelson fought seemingly past the limits of his own death, Luttrell wrote "I used to think Audie Murphy was the ultimate American warrior. I'm not so sure about that. Not now. Not anymore." (Luttrell and Robinson 2008: quoted in Adams 2008,18).

Fundamentally, however the juxtaposition of Audie Murphy with Luttrell's SEAL platoon serves another narrative purpose. Audie Murphy famously devoted himself to his image as a role model after his service. Murphy refused to be portrayed with alcohol and other things that he felt would diminish the image of the professional soldier and the modern Sergeant Audie Murphy club that bears his name "focuses on how to be legally, ethically and morally correct in anything that you do and your willingness to give back to the community" (Thorne 2009:np). Luttrell is holding his platoon members up on par with Murphy's highly respected image for engaging in a fierce firefight "seemingly past the limits of his own death" (Luttrell and Robinson 2008: quoted in Adams 2008,18).

While it is a difficult comparison to compare a conflict where America objectively won to the strategic failure in Afghanistan, the comparison Luttrell makes is worth discussion. According to Luttrell, what makes his platoon mates warriors is their willingness to fight against overwhelming odds. While his teammates fought at a level of intensity that may be on par with Audie Murphy's heroism, Luttrell's teammates heroism in the face of violence was unsuccessful in two ways: first, that it did not result in any greater good for the nation (particularly considering the strategic failure of the Afghanistan effort a generation later). Second, despite the level of violence, it still resulted in the near total destruction of the platoon. This is not to say that Luttrell is wrong for wanting to honor the memory of his deceased comrades – most of us would do the same. It's easy to understand why Luttrell would hold the valor and heroism of his teammates to the same level of admiration as a national symbol such as Audie Murphy.

Warrior weapons. The invocation of the myth of the lone warrior against a corrupt system has likely played a critical role in the NRA's adoption of New Warrior narratives in the advertisements (Barnhart et al. 2018; Barnhart and Huff 2018; Huff et al. 2017). New Warriors embrace guns and weapons as a signature piece of their identity, making warriors also fundamentally a marketing strategy and a political strategy (Lacombe 2021). These weapons serve as markers of the New Warrior's independence and demonstrate "the hero will never need reinforcements from the corrupt power structure" (Gibson 1994:82) and serve to legitimate the acquisition of weapons as necessary to self-defense. A key element of the NRA's New Warrior rhetoric can be found in the rise of self-defense culture (Yamane et al. 2018). Fundamentally, self-defense culture expresses a belief that the government cannot or will not protect you or your family therefore weapons remain necessary (Carlson 2015).

Weapons are also a key element of the revolutionary narrative, where revolutionary violence resulted in democracy (Churchill 2011; Filindra 2023; Schwartz 2022). One of the only mentions of warriors as citizens ($n = 2$) is the following quote, which epitomizes the revolutionary perspective. "The land owning citizen warrior…wearing a ceremonial sword at his local government assembly illustrates the perfect vision of our own founding fathers held for America" (McClaughry 1986:70). Closely tied to the revolutionary perspective is the insurrectionist perspective: the right of the people to bear arms is to defend against government tyranny (Becker et al. 2001; Horwitz and Anderson 2009). The distinction lies between the right of the people to overthrow an unelected monarchy vs the people engaging in violence against a perceived illegitimate government that is supposed to be drawn from the body of the peoples. In this narrative, no longer does the government derive its source of authority from the people. Instead, it is a corrupt power structure to be fought. This narrative thus rejects the Weberian idea of the state's monopoly of violence (Dusza 1989).

The most frequent use of warrior used most frequently in advertisements for weapons, holsters, or ammunition. The names of specific guns such as Weather Warrior by manufacturer Kimber or in the titles of books such as *Rogue Warrior* are the majority of uses of warrior tied to products. Just under one third of references to warriors were tied to advertisements for guns and gun related equipment ($n = 174/637$). Warrior is. "The New Warrior ™ and Desert Warrior'- pistols are no-compromise versions of the Kimber .45 issued to the elite Marine Detachment assigned to U.S. Special Operations Command" (Kimber 2005:148). Commemorative weapons advertisements linked weapons to memories of past wars or great military leaders such as General George Patton that clearly link classic warrior

narratives that tie service and sacrifice to defense of the nation as seen in this quote that references "world events [that]seems to tear at the fabric of our republic". The below quote represents a classic military warrior narrative, linking war, weapons, and military service to the defense of the nation. Commemoration of service in Vietnam also rose significantly during this period. References to Vietnam warriors are also most frequently tied to advertisements for commemorative weapons ($n = 21/28$). Some of the warrior references with regard to Vietnam link service in Vietnam to other times the nation has called, implying that this must be clearly articulated rather than assumed.

> "At a time when America is honoring its heroes as never before—and expressing heartfelt gratitude to all those who put their lives on the line for their country—it seems fitting that we pay tribute to those brave warriors who served in America's longest war: Vietnam" (America Remembers 2003:7).

The Special Operations Association Tribute pistol is one of the clearest linkages of warriors to Vietnam veterans. This not only links the service in Vietnam to the previous generations service in more traditional wars, but it clearly marks their service as having been "in support of freedom and liberty" (America Remembers 1999:4).

> "From 1964–1973, nearly nine million Americans served in Southeast Asia. Like their father and grandfathers before them. the young American warrior left behind the comforts of home for an uncertain late on a far-off treacherous battlefield, putting their live on the line in support of freedom and liberty, and serving with valor and distinction" (America Remembers 1999:4).

It is telling that the use of warrior skyrocketed in advertisements aimed at civilians on the home front just as the generation that grew up in the media milieu of the New Warrior culture of the 1970s and 80 s were being inducted into actual combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. During the Iraq war years (2003–2011), the term warrior is infrequently applied to American servicemembers in articles. Rather, warrior is used most frequently in advertisements for weapons, holsters, and ammunition magazines. "The New Warrior ™ and Desert Warrior'- pistols are no-compromise versions of the Kimber .45 issued to the elite Marine Detachment assigned to U.S. Special Operations Command" (Kimber 2005:148). When warrior is tied to Iraq and Afghanistan servicemembers, it's in often reference to them being wounded or transitioning back into civilian life after the military service but also critically maintains ties to weapons and thus full citizenship (Filindra 2023).

Wounded warriors. During the Iraq (2003–20011)/Afghanistan (2001–2021) conflict years, references to currently serving troops are rarely coded as warriors ($n = 13$). Most of the military references to warriors during the Iraq/Afghanistan years were not tied to the current conflict but past wars. When members of the military or veterans of the Global War on Terrors wars are referenced as warriors, it is almost always as either "wounded warriors" ($n = 64$) or as Special Operations warrior or other elite warriors such as Navy SEALs ($n = 51$). Wounded warrior" captures the transformation of warriors from military servicemembers to those wounded in action, specifically in the Iraq/Afghanistan conflicts.

Beginning in the Vietnam era, the predominant narrative surrounding returning soldiers has been of PTSD, homelessness and substance abuse (Huebner 2011) or, in the case of female soldiers, as victims of sexual assault (Turchik and Wilson 2010). The media portrayal of Vietnam veterans as broken and destroyed further highlighted similarities between Vietnam era warriors who were never welcomed home by their nation and the GWOT era soldiers welcomed home with empty thank you for your service lip service while they returned from yet another war begun with questionable evidence (Kleykamp and Hipes 2015). In the *American Rifleman*, wounded warriors are depicted as reintegrating with society not through civic participation but rather, through weapons. In this way, they maintain or reclaim their full citizenship through access to weapons via ascriptive republicanism (Filindra 2023).

In the pages of the *American Rifleman*, the discussion of warriors in terms of actual Iraq and Afghanistan veterans is almost entirely focused on their status as wounded warriors or in events meant to aid their transition home such as "warrior weekends."

> "A rifle business is different than just any job when it comes to smoothing the path from warrior to civilian: 'You lose a piece of yourself when you turn that weapon in. To be around guns again really helps the transition process'" (Wood 2015:96).

For a warrior to be turned into a homeless beggar "conveys the most impossible condition that can be imagine" (Smith 2018:34). The low status of the warrior turned "disgraced vagabond" is a reminder of the loss of power and prestige faced by the warrior deprived of their tools of war (Smith 2018). In this way, the narrative of returning veterans as homeless victims of the violence they suffered strips them of their power to engage in society (Huebner 2011). But in the pages of the *American Rifleman*, these returning veterans regain and retain their warrior status—in this case the means to engage in violence - through continued involvement with weapons—which reaffirms their identity as warriors and thus the full benefits of martial citizenship (Filindra 2023).

Native American new warriors. The most consistent use of warrior throughout the nearly 50-year span covered by this study of the *American Rifleman* is in reference to Native Americans such as Geronimo from the Apache tribe in the Southwest or referencing Plains tribes. The Native American warrior embodies the quintessential New Warrior narrative in the *American Rifleman*, positioning Native American warriors as men who simply wish to be left alone but when pushed, will use violence to defend their land and families from settlers under the protection of the American government.

The usage of Native Americans as warriors in the *American Rifleman* stands in stark contrast to the "mythology of the American west, [where] evil Indians relish the chaos of their wilderness and violently resist efforts of Anglo pioneers to push civilization westward" (Gibson 1994:18). The earliest uses of warriors as savages was more in line with broader cultural depictions "Soldiers had found that revolver bullets would not always stop a charging savage warrior, and there was a certain understandable reluctance to tackle vastly more powerful enemies with such an arm" (Myatt 1975:31). Throughout the 1980s, warriors were mostly depicted as foreign, primitive fighters. Other warriors in the pages of the *American Rifleman* are Samurai warriors and African tribesmen, almost all in the context of some historical battle, all depicted as having fought with honor and nobility. This is in stark contrast to films from the Vietnam era that depicted the savagery of Native Americans as a way of commenting on the brutality of Americans during Vietnam (Huebner 2011).

The elevation of Native Americans from savages to warriors symbolically restores the Vietnam veteran's heroic status (Huebner 2011) but also positions those who fought against the government as noble heroes justified in their defensive violence. In the early 1990s, the *American Rifleman* begins the establishment of the Native American warrior to a place of honor. Usually

depicted in advertisements for commemorative rifles or plates, the Native American warrior is not represented as a savage but instead a revered and honored protector from a violent and oppressive government.

> "The Sioux warrior, in perfect harmony the forces of nature, summons the Great Spirit to look with favor on the people - to provide for and protect them" (The American Indian Heritage Museum Foundation 1992:18).

The Native American warrior is portrayed as a protector, but also free from the constraints of modern society in an idealized past.

> "a long-lost era when proud warriors on horseback were masters of the endless plains and the landscape rumbled with thundering herds of buffalo. Reserve this magnificent Henry rifle today and own a tribute to the American Indian…and a piece of Western history" (America Remembers 2018:5).

Given the negative associations of Vietnam and the wars in the American West and the frequent parallels drawn between the savagery of American soldiers and the brutality of the Indian Wars (Huebner 2011:251), the laundering of New Warrior narratives into the *American Rifleman* through Native American narratives is both historically aligned with previous times when American identity was believed to be in flux but also effectively provides an effective vehicle to narratively transport antigovernment sentiment to an audience that might otherwise reject it.

Critically, one aspect of Native American warriors depiction is the fight they were engaged in: battling others for control of their ancestral territory from white settlers (Gibson 1994). These narratives serve a critical component of the New Warrior narrative: violence as a necessary means of defense *against the government who has betrayed you*.

> For generations, the Native American people lived in harmony with nature, connected to the land and bound by centuries of tradition. When settlers arrived, suddenly Native American tribes were forced to fight for what they believed in and defend what they held dear. This depended on the swift actions of *courageous leaders and fierce warriors*. In every tribe, heroic men heeded the call to action…Now America Remembers is proud to introduce a stunning new Tribute honoring the legendary Native American leaders who lead their tribes against overwhelming odds to *preserve their heritage*: the Native American Warriors Tribute Rifle. The Native American Warriors Tribute Rifle is truly a historical masterpiece that captures the strength and spirit of every brace Native American tribe, *along with the heroic warriors who led them*. (*America Remembers* 2008, 5 emphasis added).

By appropriating Native American's legitimate history for their own narrative purposes, the NRA is able to capitalize on actual government betrayal without courting the backlash experienced with Wayne LaPierre's 1995 jackbooted government thugs fund raising letter. This focus on Native Americans as respected warriors nonetheless emphasizes New Warrior status – separated by time through history but also through physical space in modern day reservations. Furthermore, it transforms the reader from the perspective of the settler as invader to the righteous Native American as defender, thus aligning the reader of the *American Rifleman* with a more accurate view of history. In this way, the Native American warriors are positioned as ideal fighters against a tyrannical and violent government that betrayed its promises again and again, often with frequently genocidal consequences for Native Americans (Deloria 2022).

Discussion

This paper contributes to the understanding of how the NRA influenced the transformation of the cultural meaning of gun owners by arguing that the post-Vietnam era, for at least some Americans, represented an example of Swidler's "unsettled lives" and thus required new narratives. This paper's central question was how the NRA used cultural narratives of government betrayal to justify guns as necessary means of defense *against the government*. I argue that the NRA did this through linking the long legacy of the civic warrior myth and national reverence for soldiers (Gorski 2017; Huebner 2011), to the rise of the post-Vietnam New Warrior paramilitary culture (Gibson 1994) which inverted key elements of the warrior narrative. Riding a new wave of anti-government sentiment from the patriot militia movement of the 90 s, the NRA carefully crafted warrior narratives to appeal to those who still viewed warriors as those whose revolutionary violence resulted in greater democracy and Native American warriors who were justified in taking up arms against a government that actually did betray them, to New Warriors who used violence to fight against a government that had or would betray them.

The end of the war in Vietnam was not just the end of another conflict in America's history but a period of significant cultural upheaval—an example of Swidler's unsettled time. The post-Vietnam years marked the start of a national reckoning for a nation that had always been victorious in its previous wars and who's soldiers sacrifice restored the nation to greatness (Marvin and Ingle 1996; Peters 2019). Amid this cultural transition, the NRA began its efforts to protect the Second Amendment from government restriction, walking a fine line between the post-Vietnam New Warrior paramilitary culture and the *noblese oblige* of the Greatest Generation. To achieve this shift in cultural meaning, the NRA utilized post-Vietnam New War cultural discourse overlayed on classic warrior narratives to transform the relationship between citizens and their government. The NRA played a pivotal role in changing the cultural meaning not only of civic duty and obligation but also in ordinary citizens relationship with their government. For everyday citizens not associated with the military, the defense of the Second Amendment links their actions to the sacrifice of soldiers who died to protect that the rest of the freedoms contained in the Bill of Rights, giving men who no longer had the obligation to serve in the military a sense of civic pride and obligation (Dawson and Weinberg 2020).

The NRA used warrior narratives in three key ways in the *American Rifleman* magazine and all three have deep cultural ties to American identity. In the pages of the *American Rifleman*, the classic American warrior reluctantly takes up arms to defend the nation. The second way the NRA invokes warrior narratives is through leveraging warrior's disdain for government. In this way, they shift the meaning of warrior from someone who reluctantly engages in violence to protect and restore the nation to those New Warriors, men who fight against the government who betrayed them. The third key way the NRA uses warrior narratives is through the use of Native American warrior narratives. This too has deep cultural ties to American identity and has been used from the very founding of the nation at the Boston Tea Party to define something new about American identity. Drawing on Native American identity gives Americans, particularly white Americans, access to claims of "real Americanness" and ties to the land that only Native Americans can actually claim (Deloria 2022).

Limitations. Because New Warrior culture provides the cultural meaning of the government as corrupt and therefore irredeemable, it enables the legitimation of the insurrectionist perspective, that it is the duty of the people to overthrow a government if it becomes tyrannical (Becker et al. 2001). Understanding how the

NRA used "shared cultural identities" for "political advantage" (Strauss et al. 1997:24) offers insight into how cultural change occurs through changing moral meaning (Tiryakian 1967) transmitted by stories and narrative (Tilly 2002). The transformation of meaning around some of Americans most sacred civil religious symbols – soldiers and veterans represents a symbolic shift that justifies violence against the government rather than restrains that violence in defense of the nation (Dawson 2019, Gorski 2017).

However, to draw distinct lines between the NRA and the gun industry's efforts in the pages of the *American Rifleman* to actual violence would be to move beyond the evidence offered. Some research has linked the rise in mass shootings to increases in gun sales, to the point where gun industry executives joked about back to school sales (Brown 2020; Busse 2021) but to link this action to the cultural evidence discussed would move into conjecture. That said, future researchers should more clearly investigate the rise of New Warrior cultural narratives and investigate the ways in which gun owners articulate these narratives in their talk of themselves as gun owners.

Further, the New Warrior narratives in the *American Rifleman* transform the insurrectionist perspective that is explicitly forbidden in the Constitution into a cultural narrative of legitimate defense against betrayal (Horwitz and Anderson 2009). It would be tempting to link these cultural narratives to the violence seen during the protests of 2020 and beyond but again, that would go beyond the scope of the current paper. Previous researchers have already investigated the ways in which the idea of civilian defenders of freedom have been leveraged in cultural talk and practices (Carlson 2015; Yamane et al. 2018) but more research is needed to clearly investigate specific aspects of new warrior/classic warrior culture in these groups and beyond. The NRA's use Native American warriors has a long history in American culture. To use a people who were actually betrayed by the government and nearly wiped outto legitimate the cultural meaning of the Second Amendment as necessary to defend against a tyrannical government is to lay claim to legitimate historic injustices.

Last, this analysis did not go into all the ways in which warriors appear on the page of the *American Rifleman*, primarily due to efforts to limit the analysis to the ways in which betrayal narratives are tied to New Warrior narratives around the military. Future work should investigate the ways in which warrior narratives are further deployed in other NRA and gun industry focused research.

Conclusion

This paper traces the process of cultural change through narratives and stories deployed by the NRA. Since the late 1990s, the NRA continually linked their political actions defending the Second Amendment to the sacrifice of soldiers who defended freedom and increasingly, preserved the use of violence as a means of protecting against a hostile federal government's actions. The New Warrior narratives embedded in pop culture of the 1970s and 80 s provided cultural scripts that helped change people's relations to their government that carried on into the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. By leveraging legitimate stories government betrayal of Native Americans but also of wounded warriors who failed to received adequate care and recognition for their sacrifice, these betrayal narratives legitimated more overt antigovernment stances *because they highlight actual government failures and betrayals*.

By embracing Native Americans in the pages of the *American Rifleman*, the NRA was able to advance New Warrior "government will betray you" narratives to their readers without feeding into the overt anti-government sentiment embraced by the anti-tax movement in the 1970s (Levitas 2004), the white power movement in the 1980s (Belew 2018) or the militia movement in the 1990s (Aho 1990; Churchill 2011; Crothers 2003; Stern 1996). In this way, the NRA is able to claim to be the true supporters of the troops by protecting them from a disloyal, inept government.

This paper maps the narrative transformation of warriors in the pages of the *American Rifleman* from classic warriors fighting on behalf of the nation to New Warriors, prepared to protect their family and home *against the government or because of government failure*. The NRA was able to use classic stories of defending the nation to launder in new narratives that position the government, not as the embodiment of "we the people", but as corrupt government that must be fought. This narrative makes Second Amendment warriors out of everyday citizens much like the rise of paramilitary culture following Vietnam made New Warriors out of everyday men (Belew 2018; Gibson 1994). The NRA, however, had to walk a tight rope in the 1990s—they could not overtly embrace the antigovernment militia movement without paying a political cost with World War II era veterans and voters.

In tracing this transformation from the years just after the end of the Vietnam war to the present, this paper shows how narrative change can be understood as a transformation of systems of relations and systems of meaning, reflecting and shaping systems of social relations to enable the development of different strategies of action. By using warrior cultural narratives, the NRA uses the same term but tells fundamentally different stories, providing support for Swidler's claim that unsettled culture involves competing cultural views (Swidler 1986, 282). Inside of these different narratives, the NRA was able to leverage cultural narratives during the post-Vietnam era to capitalize on a reemergent national myth of warriors willing to take a stand against a federal government that was perceived in the 1990s to have grossly overstepped their authority. In this way, they draw on a pre-Civil War narrative of patriots willing to fight a tyrannical government (Churchill 2011). The rise of the militia movement in the 1990s mainstreamed more overt anti-government sentiment in the aftermath of federal government missteps at Waco and Ruby Ridge (Crothers 2003; Levitas 2004; Zeskind 2009).

Embracing Native Americans as a vehicle for New Warrior narratives provided another solution to the unsettled times. Acknowledgement of the betrayal of Native Americans by the United States became more mainstream in the 1990s. Thus, the NRA was able to link well established frontier narratives to Native Americans fighting to protect their land and families from a violent federal government -drawing on more accurate historical analysis than the frontier myths alone provided. Further, in drawing on Native American narratives, the NRA taps a vein of "real Americanness" that frequently emerges during time periods when American identity becomes questioned or unsettled (Deloria 2022). By drawing on symbolic imagery of Native Americans, the NRA tapped into a long-standing tradition in American culture which enabled claims of "real Americanness" but also quietly advanced New Warrior narratives. By cloaking New Warrior antigovernment narratives in the historically accurate narratives of Native American self-defense, the NRA was able to speak to readers who would be familiar with New Warrior culture without alienating those who might be put off by it.

The NRA was able to embrace New Warrior culture in other, more subtle ways as well. The emphasis on Special Operations Forces was by no means limited to the NRA during the Global War on Terror years but it enabled the NRA to draw on ideas of elite warriors less bound by the rules or law and perceived to be less dependent on government or other support. This very much mirrors narratives present in magazines like *Soldier of Fortune* who were much more focused on mercenaries, the brutality of

war, and the necessity of violence, often outside the rule of law (Lamy 1992). In this way, the NRA reinforces the idea that to be dependent on the government is to be vulnerable or weak and therefore unworthy of citizenship (Filindra 2023).

The NRA's use of deep story narrative communicates their central values and what they hold to be true and right in the world (Hochschild 2016). These deep stories link everyday citizen's actions back to the founding of the nation is linked to traditions embedded in American society (Churchill 2011; Cooter 2024). However, they also leveraged the term warrior to launder subversive New Warrior government betrayal narratives into the mainstream. Understanding the NRA's use of civil religious narratives (Dawson 2019) alongside betrayal narratives helps broaden our understanding of a deeply American part of society and helps illuminate how this transformation of cultural meaning has occurred over time.

Last, and arguably most importantly, these narratives draw on real grievances that must be addressed in order to regain a broken trust. Veterans did struggle to access care following the Vietnam conflict and the War on Terror—some of the largest groups of protestors during the Vietnam War were not college students but Vietnam veterans themselves. However, the face of government betrayal was white, concealing the disproportionated amount of Black veterans who were actually turned away from care at the Department of Veterans Affairs and who were a disproportionate amount of casualties in Vietnam (Appy 2016; Jeffords 1989; Myers 1988; Reagan 1988). The Iraq conflict was largely constructed based on false information around weapons of mass destruction and the emergence of many charities focusing on wounded warriors rose out of a genuine need to meet wounded service members needs in the face of government inadequacies. The 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan was an operation that left many veterans questioning what the last twenty years accomplished as well as saw a mass mobilization of civilians and veterans to rescue those who had risked their lives to support the United States and who many perceived were being abandoned (Philipps 2021). Failure to engage with real grievances in meaningful ways creates opportunities for malign actors to feed on the discontent that may turn more Americans away from the ideals of democracy itself and toward anti-government violence.

Data availability

The documents used to generate the data during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to copyright protections of the NRA magazines. Digital files for the August 2009 and later are available at http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/nra/ar_200908/.

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Note

1 Due to software errors in scanning, the exact counts and word usage may be slightly off. Transcription errors may have results in references and usages being missed due to not being picked up by software searches. Nonetheless, we do not believe this will substantively change the findings.

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