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James Marten

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# Bearing Report: A Roundtable on Historians and American Veterans

ROUNDTABLE

JAMES MARTEN

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## ABSTRACT

Five historians—each an expert on a specific era and issue related to veterans—were asked to ponder the following questions: 1. What are the most important questions explored by historians in veterans studies? 2. What are the books that have been most useful to your particular area of interest in veterans studies? 3. How can the history of veterans help us understand larger cultural, social, and economic issues during the time periods in which the veterans you study lived? 4. What are the particular contributions that a historic sensibility can bring to the study of veterans of any war? 5. How is the study of “historical” veterans relevant to the experiences of veterans of modern wars and the civilians with whom they interact? 6. What topics in the history of American veterans still need to be explored? Their answers—lightly edited and in some cases shortened to avoid redundancy and maintain a semblance of symmetry—cover a wide range of issues.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**James Marten**

Marquette University, US

[james.marten@marquette.edu](mailto:james.marten@marquette.edu)

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Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. (Holmes, 1884, p. 11)

So said Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., former officer in the Union army and future associate justice of the United States Supreme Court, to the veterans of Keene, New Hampshire, and their families. Those famous words began the conclusion to his 1884 Memorial Day speech, and generations of historians have used them as titles for books and articles in order to evoke—sometimes ironically—the passions and pathos of Civil War memory.

Although Holmes's stated purpose was to offer reasons for Americans who had not fought and suffered through the war to celebrate Memorial Day, the words that have echoed down through the ages focus instead on the special meaning the day held for veterans. Much of the speech is taken up with descriptions of the New England boys and men who died heroic deaths on a dozen different battlefields, and he offers a brief but heartfelt tribute to the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters who bore the loss of husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers. Other passages recalled sounds and sites that only soldiers could remember. Indeed, the paragraph in which the famous quote appears declares that "the generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience." Holmes (1884) went on:

While we are permitted to scorn nothing but indifference, and do not pretend to undervalue the worldly rewards of ambition, we have seen with our own eyes, beyond and above the gold fields, the snowy heights of honor, and it is for us to bear the report to those who come after us. (p. 11)

Holmes's generation of veterans did their best to "bear the report" of the meanings and importance of "their" war, but over the last few decades historians have also sought to explore—"to bear the report"—of the lives of the veterans of America's wars. They have created a historiography deep and rich enough for a reckoning—or at least a conversation about important issues and approaches. With the winding down of the "forever" wars of the 21st century, and with the issues facing veterans and their families continuing to occupy policy makers, health care professionals, and journalists, it is an opportune time to assess how scholars have examined the experiences of veterans from earlier wars. Along the way, important links between the past and present will be suggested, not only in the lived experiences of veterans, but also in the ways in which communities and governments have responded to the needs of veterans.

A roundtable seemed to be the natural format for such an exercise. Although each participant responded to the

same questions, the approach was open-ended, allowing for reflection, multiple conclusions, and a wide-ranging set of references. Five historians—each an expert on a specific era and issue related to veterans—were asked to ponder the following questions:

1. What are the most important questions explored by historians in veterans studies?
2. What are the books that have been most useful to your particular area of interest in veterans studies?
3. How can the history of veterans help us understand larger cultural, social, and economic issues during the time periods in which the veterans you study lived?
4. What are the particular contributions that a historic sensibility can bring to the study of veterans of any war?
5. How is the study of "historical" veterans relevant to the experiences of veterans of modern wars and the civilians with whom they interact?
6. What topics in the history of American veterans still need to be explored?

Their answers—lightly edited and in some cases shortened to avoid redundancy and maintain a semblance of symmetry—cover a wide range of issues. Throughout, they connect the history of American veterans to the larger history of the United States, especially in terms of politics and policies; integrate notions of gender and race into the experiences of the men and women who have served in the military; and distinguish between the lived experiences of veterans and the perceptions of the communities from which they came and to which they returned. The dozens of books they mention, although far from comprehensive, provide a valuable starting place for anyone interested in a crash course on the history of veterans and "veteranhood"; it includes a number of classic studies but also recognizes seminal books published during the last 10 or 15 years.

The panelists invited to participate in the roundtable are, in alphabetical order:

**Paul A. Cimbala**, professor of history emeritus at Fordham University. He has authored six books and edited or co-edited nine more, including *Veterans North and South: The Transition from Soldier to Civilian after the American Civil War* (Praeger, 2015). One of his current projects is *Soldiering Behind the Lines: The United States Army Veteran Reserve Corps and the Preservation of the Union*.

**Michael D. Gambone**, professor of history at Kutztown University. He is the author of a number of books, including *The Greatest Generation Comes Home: The Veteran in American Society* (Texas A & M University Press, 2005) and

*Long Journeys Home: American Veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam* (Texas A & M University Press, 2017). His new book, *The New Praetorians: American Veterans, Society, and Service from Vietnam to the Forever War* will be published by the University of Massachusetts Press later this year.

**Barbara Gannon**, associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida. She is the author of *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), which won the Wiley-Silver Prize for Best First Book on the Civil War, and *Americans Remember Their Civil War* (Praeger, 2017).

**Stephen R. Ortiz**, associate professor of history and Executive Director of the University Scholars program at Binghamton University. He is author of *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era and Veterans' Policies* (New York University Press, 2009) and editor of *Veterans' Politics: New Perspectives on Veterans in the Modern United States* (University Press of Florida, 2012). His current project is *Comrades in Arms: Veterans Organizations and the Politics of National Security in the American Century*.

**Holly A. Pinheiro, Jr.**, assistant professor of history at Furman University and one of the editors at *Muster*, the blog of the *Journal of Civil War Era*. He is author of the forthcoming *The Families' Civil War: Northern African Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice*, which will appear in the *UnCivil Wars Series* from the University of Georgia Press.

Editor **James Marten** is professor of history at Marquette University and a former president of the Society of Civil War Historians. Among the more than twenty books he has written, edited, or co-edited are *America's Corporal: James Tanner in War and Peace* (University of Georgia Press, 2014) and *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011)

### What are the Most Important Questions Explored by Historians in Veterans Studies?

**Ortiz:** Historians in veterans studies occupy central ground in the scholarship on the emergence of the modern nation and of the modern state. They, therefore, pose incredibly important historical questions not just about veterans as social or political groups, but on these three issues:

- What is the long-term impact of war?
- How was the modern state formed?

- What was/is the nature of citizenship and belonging in the modern nation and how do marginalized groups use military service as a tool to claim it?

To elaborate, the study of veterans' social reintegration, their collective identities, their claims on the state, and their role in the post-war nation push us to extend the temporal scope of the impact of war to encompass the after-war or post-war periods. Exploring the lived experiences and the cultural productions of veterans allows scholars to access war's effects more concretely and adeptly than probably any other sub-field of study. Sometimes, this is approached through studies on historical memory of war and/or of war commemoration (Bodnar, 1992; Budreau, 2020; Piehler, 1995; Trout, 2020). But the perspectival shift to after-war also includes studies that explore post-war trauma and disability (PTSD and physical), individual politicization, and collective political mobilizations (Adler, 2017; Jennings, 2016; Kinder, 2015; Keene, 2001; Linker, 2011; Mettler, 2005; Ortiz, 2010, 2012).

Second, and related, while the connections between war and state formation are well established, the ways that veterans of war impacted state formation have not received the same amount of attention. The modern welfare state in the United States, in fact, only makes sense when the pre-existing and parallel *veterans* welfare state is understood first (Canaday, 2009; Frydl, 2009; Kelly, 1997; Skocpol, 1992). And studies show how veteran's organizations have served as the requisite political forces that have moved the US government toward that institutional development for over 150 years (Adler, 2017; Keene, 2001; McConnell, 1992; Ortiz, 2010).

Last, veterans studies have allowed historians of social groups marginalized on account of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality to examine how members of those groups have used military service—in the moment, and well after—as a lever to full citizenship and access to a place of national belonging. Starting first with members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in the late nineteenth through twentieth centuries, then in the latter half of the twentieth century with women and the LGBTQ+ community, people with secondary status in terms of citizenship or who were deemed outside of the nation, have been members of the military, have fought in the nation's wars, and then fought after the fact for recognition and the full set of entitlements and rights that service provided to the majority (Berube, 1990; Canaday, 2009; Meyer, 1997; Parker, 2010; Vuic, 2010; Williams, 2009; Zeiger, 2004).

**Cimbala:** Historian Ryan W. Keating (2017) notes in his study *Shades of Green: Irish Regiments, American Soldiers, and Local Communities in the Civil War* that historians have

generally grouped their concerns about Civil War veterans into two categories that could apply across time and place. “The first,” he writes, “is the role that veterans and their families played in shaping the postwar social and political environment and in memorializing their military service.” (p. 182) In other words, one of the big questions historians explore is how veterans fit into, worked within, and then shaped their communities, from families up through national governments. The second category consists of questions that direct our attention to “the experiences of Civil War veterans themselves” (p. 182). It is in this category that we find, for example, explorations of veterans’ mental health or how they dealt with their lasting physical injuries.

Perhaps the biggest question is not *whether* veterans of the Civil War reintegrated into communities but *how* they went about becoming members of their communities once again, for example, by participating in politics, the economy, and education, while helping their communities construct memories of the war. There is no purpose in arguing that war did not matter to these veterans or that it did not change them in ways their neighbors and families might not have understood. As historian Lesley Gordon (2014) notes in her study of a Connecticut Civil War regiment, “the experience remained the defining event in their lives” (p. 206). Gordon’s men of the 16<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Volunteer Infantry—a “broken regiment” whose reputation had been tainted by poor performance at Antietam and by imprisonment at Andersonville—did their best to construct a postwar image more appealing to their neighbors. Remember, these veterans were first civilians who were part of urban and rural communities before they became soldiers. Importantly, most of the veterans were volunteers bringing their communities, with their values and family relationships, with them to the war. The individual veteran’s experiences cannot be understood outside of his social and communal contexts. Even when it becomes clear that Civil War veterans believed the home folk had changed, families failed to understand them, communities were not giving them their due, or that politicians had betrayed them, they still recognized the reasons they had gone off to war and the values they held still existed within their communities. Being disgruntled or disappointed did not mean being forever alienated.

**Gannon:** Veterans studies address three fundamental questions. First, how did military service shape the portion of the population that served? Second, how did these men and women, in turn, influence society when they came home? Finally, what did this service mean in the context of other social identities, including citizenship/nationality, race, and gender? Much of our examination of marginalized American veterans assumes that their military service

should have improved their status compared to their nonveteran counterparts. In addition to fulfilling individual ambition, these veterans used their status to advance a broader struggle to oppose their cohort’s marginalization. Sadly, the broader society has often failed to recognize their efforts.

While we have examined veterans of specific wars, we have not examined different veteran cohorts’ relationships with one another. Veterans of different wars live side-by-side, claiming the identity of veteran. It is not always a shared identity; World War II veterans often have disdain for Vietnam veterans. Just about everyone disdained Spanish-American and Philippine-American War veterans. Regular Army soldiers who served for decades in peacetime, or the quasi-peacetime of the Native American Wars or the Cold War, remain invisible. Often, these men and women remain in the shadow of veterans of other wars.

**Pinheiro:** Some of the most important historical questions in veterans studies explore the lived experiences of veterans and their families. One question that immediately comes to mind is: “How did service-related disabilities—seen and unseen—impact the veterans’ lives?” Investigating disabilities and mental health are critical to understanding how military service reshaped veterans’ private and public lives. Secondly, who were the veterans before and long after the war? I want to learn more about their childhoods and about familial dynamics after their service. Exploring veterans’ pre- and post-service lives provides an ideal way for discovering who veterans were, and their familial dynamics are key to expanding discourse on the lasting realities of military service beyond idealistic rhetoric. What were the family structures for veterans?

**Gambone:** What impact do veterans make when they come home? Veterans represent an important and large historical constituency, one that is frequently overlooked by the discipline. This was particularly true with respect to World War II and the subsequent Cold War, which produced tens of millions of veterans. These individuals populated social movements, influenced culture, and provided generations of political leadership. You can find veterans in Congress, among the millions of boys coached by veterans in American Legion baseball, and in the Civil Rights struggle. Through individual initiative and collective action, veterans had an important influence on the trajectory of modern American history

Do veterans assimilate when they come home? A question posed by one of my dissertation committee members, Dr. Jeff Clarke, remains with me to this day. He asked if the military represents society as a whole or if it is a distinct subculture. The same question should apply

to veterans. When a veteran returns home and begins the process of reassimilation, is it ever complete? Is the personal and social change evoked by military service a matter of degree? How do these changes manifest themselves in society as a whole?

### **What are the Books That Have Been Most Useful to Your Particular Area of Interest in Veterans Studies?**

**Pinheiro:** As a historian of United States Colored Troops (USCT) and their kin, the books that I value use an intersectional approach to explore the lives of USCT veterans, their families, and communities. Donald Shaffer's (2004) *After the Glory: Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* is still an influential study that examines how freed people often came into conflict with the Bureau of Pensions, especially the Bureau's extensive scrutiny into the personal lives and relationships of USCT pension-seekers. Brandi C. Brimmer's (2020) *Claiming Union Widowhood: Race, Respectability, and Poverty in the Post-Emancipation South* resituates the conversation on African American widows of North Carolinian USCT veterans to denote their agency, persistence, and call for inclusion in national debates over public memory and cultural citizenship (a term referring to individuals' quest to have their national belonging recognized; Brimmer, 2020). Meanwhile, Barbara A. Gannon's (2011) *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* uncovers collective efforts of US Army veterans—African American and White—to reframe national politics in the context of veterans' need for medical aid and monetary assistance (in many cases due to disabilities), and their desire for the federal government to acknowledge the war's long-term impact on veterans and their kin (Gannon, 2012).

Still relevant is the scholarship of the late Megan J. McClintock (1996), whose work, like Brimmer's (2020), argued that Civil War pensions created a pathway for Civil War veterans' access to federally funded social welfare. She notes that the dependents of Civil War veterans applied for pensions both to try to establish economic solvency and to make a record of their families' experiences during and after the war (McClintock, 1996).

**Cimbala:** The essential starting point for grappling with the veterans' experiences is James Marten's 2011 comprehensive study of Civil War veterans, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America*. In a relatively short volume, Marten's narrative ranges from the end of the war through the physical problems of veterans, the politics of pensions, and the idea of manhood, to Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.'s rhetorical device of claiming veterans to be men set apart. The end of the war, as Marten reminds readers, was more than

flag waving and the surrender of Confederates. It was the beginning, not an end, of a difficult time for the nation (Marten, 2011).

Brian Matthew Jordan's (2014) *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* is another essential read, especially for anyone interested in the Northern home front. As does Marten (2011), Jordan provides the kind of detail that makes reading history exciting, but he also makes a reader wonder how any Northern veteran could thrive during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. There was a bleakness in the lives of Jordan's veterans as they faced the challenges of readjusting to civilian life. According to Jordan, wartime experiences made men unsuited for civilian life; at best they could find refuge in the organizations they themselves established, such as the Grand Army of the Republic, to continue the sense of belonging they had experienced around their old campfires (Jordan, 2014).

**Gannon:** Many works have shaped my research on veterans, but I will start with a classic—Eric T. Dean's (1999) *Shook Over Hell: Post Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War*. Though it is not without flaws, Dean's study represents pioneering work on PTSD and Civil War veterans. Like many historical reassessments, this study was as much about the immediate past, Vietnam, as it was about Civil War soldiers. The author's purpose included refuting the notion that Vietnam veterans' susceptibility to mental injuries reflected a fundamental flaw in their characters. Finding PTSD in the iconic American veterans of a "good war" removes the stigma from veterans of the ultimate "bad war." Some historians may be uncomfortable with this advocacy, but Dean's (1999) effort to redeem one generation of veterans by studying another tells you a great deal about Americans' attitudes toward Vietnam veterans.

Twenty-first-century scholars accept the notion that Civil War veterans suffered psychological injuries due to their service, partly because Dean inspired other historians. While this study prompted me to consider this issue, I have been most influenced by developments in neuroscience related to the biochemical nature of traumatic memories. Based on the need to address damaged soldiers of more recent wars, scholars have determined that the human brain's response to trauma explains this pathology (Sherin & Nemeroff, 2011).

The remarkable work of Jonathan Shay reinforced the notion that PTSD may be found in veterans of wars in other places and other times. Shay treated Vietnam veterans who had PTSD. As part of this process, he listened to their military experiences and found that their stories reminded him of ancient Greek literature. In *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Shay (1995)

reveals commonalities between the men of Troy and those of Tet. One of the most moving similarities between men living and dying millennia apart may be found in the trauma-inducing death of a beloved comrade. The men of 1968 often cited the loss of a dear friend as the trigger for their mental anguish. He compares their experiences to that of Achilles and his response to Patroclus's passing. It is a remarkable book that transforms the discussion of veterans from a single war to the broader experience of wars across time and space.

Shay (2003) also examined veterans' difficult homecomings in *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, which asks the reader to accompany him through the pages of this epic and to see it as a parable about any veteran's return home. Shay demonstrates that understanding the classic in this way might promote better treatment for psychological injuries and prevent these invisible wounds from happening in the first place.

It is no coincidence that landmark studies like these deal with Vietnam veterans; questioning the war prompted Americans to assess the price veterans paid for their service and sacrifice.

**Gambone:** Paul Fussell's (1989) *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, joins John Keegan in expanding our understanding of the military as a distinct culture that is insulated from the civilian world in many ways. Perhaps more importantly, Fussell (1989) takes the reader through the process itself, marking the points along the way where draftees and volunteers began shedding layers of their past lives in favor of a life in uniform. The chapter titled "Chickenshit, An Anatomy" is a perfect illustration of the jarring (and timeless) initial discovery of military culture (Fussell, 1989).

One of the most significant contributions of Thomas Childers's (2009) *Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation's Troubled Homecoming from World War II* is his demystification of Tom Brokaw's (1998) mythic reconstruction of the Second World War. The book effectively juxtapositions the postwar experiences of three veterans with the larger historical context at work in late forties America. A particularly poignant moment occurs in the chapter "As If Nothing Had Ever Happened," when Michael Gold, fresh from more than a year in a German POW camp and with discharge papers in hand, arrived in Atlantic City to throngs of celebrating vacationers on the Steel Pier (Childers, 2009, p. 105).

In *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger (2016) took the themes explored by Childers (2009) and applied them to the post-September-11 era in a way that is even more unforgiving than Childers. Junger

observes that war creates a "community of sufferers" comprising both civilians touched by violence and the military practitioners who inflict it (p. 55). People, as adaptive human animals, are accordingly altered by the experience, in many cases for both better and worse. War imparts a sense of individual honor and collective obligation. It also leaves residual mental and physical scarring from a level of violence that has no precedent outside of war. For Junger, the gap between a veteran and a civilian is in understanding the nature of this experience and its impact.

**Ortiz:** I will choose one very new book and three older ones. If I define my area of interest as the modern US (1877–present) and try to cover the sweep of that time and the questions I posed above, then, I would choose the following idiosyncratic titles: David Blight (2001), *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*; Chad Williams (2009), *Torchbearers for Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*; and Kathleen J. Frydl (2009), *The GI Bill*. Blight is foundational on the long-term cultural and political effects of war; Williams on military service and veteranhood as central to the Black community's ongoing freedom struggle; and Frydl on veterans, social policy, and state-formation.

I would add a new(er) book on the role of Vietnam veterans in the resurgence of White supremacy, which is getting justified attention now and will likely, and unfortunately, become even more important over the next few years: Kathleen Belew (2018), *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*.

### **How Can the History of Veterans Help Us Understand Larger Cultural, Social, And Economic Issues During the Time Periods in Which the Veterans You Study Lived?**

**Ortiz:** How can't it?! So much comes into clearer focus by studying veterans and modern US history. In the century-and-a-half for which war and military engagements were a normal occurrence, veterans, their relationship with the state, and their impact on the state and society are critical pieces of so many issues. An incomplete list includes:

- Black citizenship, military service, and civil rights;
- Women's citizenship, military service, and equal rights;
- LGBTQ+ citizenship, military service, and civil rights;
- the role of veterans and their organizations in American political culture and American civic/ethnic nationalism;
- Union veterans, the Grand Army of the Republic, and Gilded Age politics;
- Confederate veterans and the Lost Cause mythology;
- the GI Bill and its unparalleled economic and social impact on postwar society;

- the centrality of veterans to the awareness of, and medical approaches to, physical disability and post-traumatic stress disorder;
- veterans and national security policies (including civil defense programs); and
- veterans' welfare and the welfare state: Civil War Pensions, Veterans Bureau, GI Bill, and the Veterans Administration.

**Gannon:** Veterans represent an unparalleled opportunity to recreate the lives of marginalized men and women who often leave few records behind. Regardless of their social and economic standing, bureaucrats meticulously recorded their service, enlistment, medical challenges, promotions, and punishments. Post-service, the paperwork demanded by national pension systems provide more information on marginalized veterans' lives than their nonveteran counterparts. The richness of African American Civil War veteran studies rests on these men's interaction with the government. Entire generations of Black men and women's lives passed with little notice; however, if they or a family member served, they often left their stories in musty folders where they demand recognition for their sacrifice.

Like Vietnam, the Civil War allows scholars of veteranhood a unique opportunity to isolate crucial aspects of the veterans' experience. In this case, scholars have emphasized the similarities and differences in the "American" veterans of this war. For example, both armies fought the same war, albeit on different sides, and shared the experience of nineteenth-century combat and campaigning. The Blue and Gray suffered in many of the same ways; wounds still bled, minds were broken, and diseases still killed decades after Appomattox.

**Cimbala:** As I have argued, veterans moved into and through their communities and American society. It is nearly impossible to look at specific veterans' issues and not see the larger historical context. Even if veterans consider themselves unique, their lives overlap and inform their communities. Understanding veterans is a key to understanding their communities because, as leaders, veterans from Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and up through John McCain either shaped community attitudes or responded to community concerns. In the Civil War era, studying veteran activity illuminates Reconstruction, post-war patriotism, the Lost Cause, western migration, and race relations. Peter Carmichael (2005) clearly reminds us of this in his book *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion*, which examines how young veterans shaped postwar life. Shaffer (2004), too, covers this idea in his work on Black veterans. As Steven Hahn (2003) notes in his Pulitzer Prize-

winning study of Black political life after slavery in the rural South, "The presence of [B]lack troops and of [B]lack veterans mustered out of service helped to advance the local organization of rural freed communities," thus playing a crucial role in Black Reconstruction (p. 133). Northern Black veterans were also at the center of community action, illustrating the movements that were important to them and their neighbors (See, for example, Mezurek, 2016, pp. 220–226).

Also, African American veterans' claims to manhood through their military service suggests what their communities thought about a particularly nineteenth-century kind of masculinity. The role of Black veterans in the premier Union veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, helps us understand what was lacking in American society during the late-nineteenth century. This era, as Shaffer (2004) points out, "was the golden age of fraternal organizations in the United States, but rigid racial separation was also the rule of the day" (p. 143–168). African Americans who wished to participate in fraternal organizations had to do so in their own segregated societies—except, at least officially, in the Grand Army.

In her study of the Grand Army of the Republic, Barbara Gannon (2012) notes that by including African American veterans among its membership, the organization was more inclined to advocate a counterpoint to the erstwhile Confederacy's Lost Cause, a battle that continues to this day thanks to the commitment of so many White Southerners to their mythic version of the Civil War. As Gannon (2012) writes, Union "veterans argued that slavery caused the war and that their victory saved the Union and freed the slaves" (p. 148).

**Pinheiro:** Examining the lives of veterans and their kin throughout the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is, in my opinion, the key to better comprehending various local, state, and national issues that fundamentally changed American society. For instance, many USCT veterans used their service to force White society to recognize their sacrifices with post-service benefits, including suffrage rights and civil rights protection for all African Americans. Veterans of the Sixtieth United States Colored Infantry (USCI), such as Alexander Clark, argued that their military service legitimized their postwar petitions for suffrage rights in Iowa. Henry S. Harmon (a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) remained in Florida after mustering out of the Third USCI. Harmon's ingenuity and skill set led to his impressive accomplishments, including becoming the first African American to pass the bar in Florida and serving in the United States House of Representatives. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of dependent pension applicants made it clear that the Bureau of Pensions had a responsibility

to document the long-term impact of military services on veterans' families (especially African Americans). Due to racially discriminatory practices by pension agents, many African American applicants had their applications denied. Still, each application (regardless of the outcome) was an example of the federal government refuting the Lost Cause myth (which often ignored USCT military service) across multiple generations. Together, these examples illustrate that investigating USCT veterans and their families helps us better understand both the limits and the expansion of civil rights in American society.

**Gambone:** A common feature of many veterans is the desire to act on the motivations for their service and break with the status quo. Many Americans, inspired by Roosevelt's 1941 "Four Freedoms" speech and its endorsement of affirmative goals for the war effort—Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion, Freedom from Fear, Freedom from Want—used these principles to inform their actions once they came home. After 1945, African American veterans joined the NAACP in droves to pursue civil rights reform with an agency augmented by their military service (see, for instance, Brooks, 1997). When they discovered that traditional institutions like the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars—also paradoxically populated by other men and women with World War II service—would not advocate for them, Hispanic veterans created the American G.I. Forum in 1948 to do it for themselves. Nisei veterans facing the same racial discrimination after the war joined the ranks of the Japanese American Citizens League and the Anti-Discrimination Committee. They became directly involved with their communities and began running candidates for local, state, and federal offices. Daniel K. Inouye, a highly decorated member of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team during the Second World War, won a seat on the Hawaiian Territorial Congress in 1954 and moved to the US House of Representatives and Senate after Hawaii became a state. What unified this generation of minority veterans was a vested faith in the legal process, peaceful methods, and eventual achievement of universal rights enjoyed by all Americans (Gambone, 2005, pp. 114–146).

### **What Are the Particular Contributions that a Historic Sensibility Can Bring to The Study of Veterans of Any War?**

**Gannon:** Marc Bloch (1964) explained it best in *A Historian's Craft*: "there is, then, just one science of men in time," and that is history (p. 39). Today, we would add women. Marc Bloch died at the hands of the Gestapo in 1944, well before scholars used inclusive language. While he did not live to be a World War II veteran, his service in World War I shaped his scholarship; he would have embraced veterans studies.

Bloch (1964) and other historians understood that each veteran exists at the intersection of an individual life and the time he or she lives. The entire construct of veterans' identity implies a social identity that is a function of history and memory. Veterans served at one time, but no longer do so; their present understanding of themselves is defined by memories of their service. Ironically, although the books I value most make a case for the universal veteran, it is important to remember that veterans often defy any idea of generality because their lives remain delimited by their place in history.

Such is the case with the "Greatest Generation," whose heroic label is itself a construct of the late 1990s and not the 1940s. World War II veterans' lives represent an astonishing intersection of history. They were born into the aftermath of what would have been the worst war of modern times, World War I, if not for the devastation of World War II. Many came of age in the Depression, the greatest economic cataclysm of the twentieth century. They fought and lived through the Second Great War's brutality that ended with a bomb that seemed to make conventional war obsolete and with the revelation of the Holocaust's horror. Between the decades' long-nuclear arms race, cold wars, and hot wars, peace seemed ephemeral. At the cusp of the twenty-first century, these men and women were anointed by others as exemplars in history and memory—the "Greatest Generation." History, before, during, and after the war, defined and redefined their veteranhood (See especially Brokaw, 1998).

**Pinheiro:** Incorporating historical analysis into veterans studies deepens one's knowledge of the longstanding issues faced by veterans. More specifically, by moving beyond the isolated moment of military service, it becomes clear how previous events, particularly over an extended period of time, influenced the topic. African American veterans, throughout the Civil War era and generations after, knew that there was more to their lives than serving in the military. For instance, throughout American history African American veterans hoped that their military service would usher in full racial equality throughout American society. When African American World War Two veterans fought against racial discrimination in public transportation or in housing, for instance, they knew that both were issues that their predecessors fought against generations before. And the fact that USCT veterans, like most African Americans, continued to deal with racism in countless forms reinforces how contextualizing historical issues in veterans studies are essential.

**Cimbala:** Historians are not sociologists nor are they psychologists. They may use those disciplines to help

explore the past, but they accept that essential to their work is understanding change over time. Consequently, they can remind us that, despite scholarly insights gained from comparing various groups of veterans from different eras, those groups remain unique. Historians can bring this sensibility to studying Civil War veterans as well as other populations of veterans.

Thus, Shaffer's (2004) African Americans starkly remind us that even veterans of the same war actually experienced different kinds of war based on their race, ethnicity, place of enlistment, and time and theater of service. Kurt Hackemer (2019) makes this point in a recent, thoughtful article about Civil War veterans who migrated to Dakota Territory. He gently criticizes me for seeing the westward movement of veterans as part of the larger American drive for land and new homes that occurred before and after the war. He then persuasively argues that these men were a unique kind of Civil War veteran. They had been sojourners in various places before the war and had different kinds of wartime experiences, including longer, harder service. He explains, "both their antebellum and wartime experiences shaped their postwar actions in ways historians have failed to recognize. As a group," he argues, "they were distinctly different from the larger body of veterans than the current scholarship has overgeneralized, and they highlight the need for more regional studies" (Hackemer, 2019, pp. 87, 90, 104). In the end, those differences within a generation of veterans are as important as the difference across generations. Not all experiences transcend time and place.

**Gambone:** One of the original reasons that I began studying veterans was because of their perfunctory treatment as an historical topic, particularly after World War II. At the start of my teaching career, I was guilty of lumping 16 million men and women with war service into a single postwar experience as I worked through the post-1945 transition to peace. The dawning reality was that this contingent deserves the same historical filters—race, gender, culture, education, work, economic status—that we normally apply to any other aspect of American social history. There are two potential outcomes to this approach. In one sense, it contests the assumption that veterans are a monolithic block. Conversely, addressing the topic of veterans in greater depth and detail may also reveal patterns and trends that illustrate portions of a shared experience within the veteran community and between veterans and civilian society.

We may also apply historical context to better understand veterans. For example, two separate and seemingly unrelated events occurred after World War II that profoundly affected veterans of the Vietnam War. One was the publication of S. L. A. Marshall's landmark book *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future*

*War* in 1947. His critique of individual combat participation, specifically the conclusion that at best only 25% of soldiers fired their weapons in combat engagements, prompted the US military to begin major changes to its marksmanship training (Marshall, 1947, p. 53). One result was the Army's Trainfire System (1958), which refined doctrine by introducing features of operant conditioning such as the transition from bullseye to human silhouette targets. By the time US forces were engaged with Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army units, approximately 90% of soldiers fired their weapons in combat (Gambone, 2017, pp. 70–72).

Concurrent with these advances, military medicine in Vietnam significantly improved treatment of combat psychological casualties. Applying the lessons of frontline treatment from both Second World War and Korea, military doctors mounted a successful program to reduce the toll on deployed units caused by mental breakdown. Whereas these accounted for 10% of casualties each year during the Second World War, they averaged only 1.2% during Vietnam (Gambone, 2017, p. 78).

From the military perspective, reforms to marksmanship and combat medicine were successes and improved the overall effectiveness of American forces in Vietnam. Both contributed to the intensity of the individual combat experience that made it distinct from earlier wars. Neither considered the impact on the individual soldier or the long-term consequences to their well-being. Looking back, we have an obligation to find and incorporate details like this to have a better grasp of veterans' experiences and the relevance of underlying historical context.

### **How Is the Study Of "Historical" Veterans Relevant to The Experiences of Veterans of Modern Wars and The Civilians with Whom They Interact?**

**Pinheiro:** I firmly believe that the historical subjects and topics that I examine are very relevant to modern veterans and civilians, mainly because I envision that my work and that of many others calls for scholars and the general public to recognize and respect the long-term impact of military service on people. For me, this stance is personal. My mother served in the US Navy for twenty-five years. As a youth, I witnessed firsthand how my mother struggled, as a veteran, with issues of depression and unemployment that not only impacted her but, in many different ways, her entire family. I have tried to bring those perspectives to my research of USCT veterans in the hopes of demonstrating how the experiences of civilians, especially veterans' family members, also deserves attention. At the same time, I am always working to highlight the agency that African Americans demonstrated in their battles for public recognition of their sacrifices, especially when engaging the systemic racism within the Bureau of Pensions.

Over the years, some of my most receptive audience members were African American veterans and their relatives. Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Vietnam, for instance, have expressed gratitude for my focus on empowering historical subjects. But I also emphasize that we need to look at veterans as people who defined the service. Their service did not define the people. A few people have become emotional during the discussion portions of my talks; they deeply empathize with the historical subjects that I study because they are still struggling with similar issues, such as ongoing conflicts with the Department of Veterans Affairs and its predecessors over pension benefits. Their reactions are, to me, the best indicator about the relevancy of the lives of veterans and their kin who lived over 150 years ago.

**Cimbala:** Asking how past experiences enlighten more modern wars may be useful though problematic, but the question could just as easily be turned around to ask how scholarship dealing with modern wars might enlighten past wars and their veterans' experiences.

Eric Dean's (1997) seminal *Shook Over Hell*, for example, has been influencing the study of Civil War soldiers for almost a quarter of a century. [He] asks a question in his introduction that too many historians fail to answer because of how the image of the traumatized Vietnam veteran had at one time dominated our views about the consequences of military service:

Can one perhaps conclude—contrary to the post-Vietnam tendency to view war as a negative, toxic substance—that there was, in spite of, in addition to, or as a part of the mental suffering, something positive and invigorating in the experience for the Civil War generation—and perhaps for individual Veterans as well? (Dean, 1997, p. 6)

Many Civil War soldiers would answer such a question by claiming that war had made them better men, that the war had taught them all sorts of valuable lessons, from how to be men, how to judge men, how to exercise patience, and how to handle all sorts of life's difficulties. African Americans learned that justice required procedures even if they ended up on the wrong side of a court martial decision, and as noncommissioned officers, they learned how to supervise men. Many Civil War soldiers, especially in the Northern armies, left the war feeling satisfied that they had accomplished big things and Yankees felt contentment in knowing they had preserved their Constitution. That positive aspect of their service should count in the assessment of their status as veterans as much as anything else.

**Gambone:** The trope that history repeats itself applies to veterans. It is striking to see the parallels between the institutional failures of the Veterans Administration under Frank T. Hines in 1945 and the current series of embarrassments—from revelations about mismanagement at Walter Reed to enormous benefits processing backlogs, abuse of opioids, and mishandling of Military Sexual Trauma cases—by the contemporary Department of Veterans Affairs. The cycle of failures, scandal, and public policy reaction reflects a degree of institutional inertia that appears firmly embedded in the history of American veterans.

History and current events intersect in particular ways in the experiences of women veterans. While the all-volunteer military opened opportunities for women to serve, the military evolved to incorporate their contributions. In the years following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, the US military establishment expanded women's combat roles to reflect their capabilities. Unfortunately, neither the military nor the Department of Veterans Affairs have adopted policies or devote the resources necessary for the unique needs of women warriors. The failure to learn from almost a half-century of change has a human cost. Today, Military Sexual Trauma prompts more disability claims from female veterans than combat injuries and wartime PTSD suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan (Gaskell, 2018, p. 10).

And yet a study of past veterans may reveal reasons for some optimism about the generation coming home from our current wars. Faced with the challenge of improving the treatment of veterans in 1945, the country rallied to the cause. When Omar N. Bradley replaced Hines as head of the Veterans Administration, he introduced a degree of energy and organizational expertise that it was sorely lacking. His short-term leadership of the VA witnessed a modern revolution in funding, facilities construction, updated treatment regimens—particularly in the area of mental health—and a quantum leap in the quality of VA staff once Bradley demanded and won civil service reform. None of this would have been possible without an American public ready and willing to contribute to the long-term care of its veterans. As Bradley noted in December 1945,

While we can assist with benefits and offer guidance, it is the community that must do the grassroots work. For it is in his daily association with his neighbors that the veteran rubs shoulders with so many troublesome problems Washington cannot hope to solve.

This same willingness is apparent today in the hundreds of non-profits dedicated to healing America's modern warriors. They range from large organizations like the

troubled Wounded Warrior Project to those created and run by veterans themselves. Groups like the Student Veterans of America (2008-) and the Service Women's Action Network (2007-) are modern successors to the American Veterans Committee, established in 1944 to represent the specific needs of younger service members exiting the war (Seck, 2019).

**Ortiz:** I would address this question with three points. The regularity of American military conflicts means that there are frequent intergenerational hand-offs of leadership between veteran cohorts. And those hand-offs have not always been clean and conflict-free. The primary example is the World War II generation's ambivalence toward the Vietnam generation. But some Vietnam veterans did take responsibility for Iraq veterans return and integration to some degree. Moreover, the WWI leadership helped create the GI Bill for returning WWII veterans. Knowing what all veterans face; and what specific contexts of reintegration of specific cohorts faced makes these issues more understandable for the present. Similarly, knowing the political battles that previous generations had to wage for veterans' welfare blunts (or should blunt) the expectations of a benevolent and grateful society freely accepting responsibility for the care and well-being of veterans. Last, while some knowledge of the past will help us understand current veterans' issues, there will be a great divide marked by 1973's end of the draft and the creation of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF). Future historians will have to contend with this new American historical reality—one of the most significant features of contemporary civil-military relations and, indeed, of our understanding of citizenship.

**Gannon:** As the coordinator of the University of Central Florida Community Veterans History Project (VHP), I listen to many veterans' oral histories, where I often hear the echoes of my research. I keep returning to one essential truth: there is a fundamental commonality in veterans' experiences, and there are fundamental differences. The most compelling narratives relate to their commonalities; as Shay (2003) explained, it is suffering and trauma that ties veterans together across time, space, and social identities.

The VHP at our university sponsors commemoration ceremonies, academic symposiums, and fundraising events for veterans' organizations. We often invite speakers to campus to discuss veterans' issues. One very memorable year, we invited a veteran who had lost his leg in 21st century warfare and Brian C. Miller (2015) who chronicles the suffering of Confederate amputees in *Empty Sleeves: Amputation in the Civil War South*. As Miller described his book and its findings, the veteran was almost overcome with emotion. After the talk, the veteran explained that

he found a great deal of comfort knowing that he was not alone; he felt a kinship with these men. Despite their shared suffering, he learned from Miller's scholarship that poor prosthetics made these men's lives much more difficult. Our guest used a modern prosthetic device and could function and move as well as anyone not physically challenged. Miller (2015), a nonveteran, was moved by how his narrative of the 19th-century affected 21st-century veterans.

Like Miller (2015), most men or women living today have not served in the military, which may have severe consequences for modern veterans. Today's all-volunteer force is much smaller at the same time that the US population is much larger than during earlier conflicts. During our recent, seemingly forever wars, the government has consistently rejected the reinstitution of the draft. As a result, less than one percent of Americans serve in the military today. As a result, they have little understanding of the veterans' challenges.

### **What Topics in the History of American Veterans Still Need to Be Explored?**

**Ortiz:** With the possible exception of the Civil War cohort, veterans remain understudied despite how critical understanding them is to important historical questions. I believe three topics are most critical areas of future research:

The conservative welfare state: We need more studies that examine the development of what I call the conservative welfare state. The conservative welfare state emerged and has been strengthened over the 20th and 21st centuries, focused on expansive understandings of national security and state power, operated frequently as a partnership between the federal government and the private sector, and sharply curtailed entitlements to those (like veterans) who had served in it.

Veterans and foreign policy/national security: We need more studies on veterans' role in foreign policy and national security debates. Veteran's organizations are often in studies of the Cold War era without being examined as central political actors themselves. Yet their importance in national security debates was unmatched. They served as intermediaries between elected officials and members of the national security state, on the one hand, and between the vast population of veterans (40% of males over 14-years-old were veterans in the 1960 Census supplemental report) and non-veterans, on the other (United States Census Bureau, 1964). They contained arguably an unparalleled institutional infrastructure in modern politics: tens of thousands of posts; lobbying arms in Washington, DC, and in the states; incredible media circulation with their own magazines and film production

units; and intergenerational links with their support for Boys and Girls State programs, Junior Baseball Leagues, and many other youth programs. In political terms, the veteran's organizations were grassroots political actors with deep and pervasive community roots. The literature on modern veterans explores mostly their activism for veterans' welfare—not these aspects of national security politics and not their national impact.

Veteran's organizations and local communities: The twentieth-century history of veterans needs more understanding of some of the features mentioned above. We should examine them as foundations of twentieth-century American local communities. They led the patriotic parades, hosted baseball teams and tournaments, and created Boys and Girls State. Americans had wedding receptions—and their first alcoholic beverages (!)—in Veterans of Foreign Wars halls and American Legion posts. Veteran's organizations were part of the fabric of American community life for much of the twentieth century. We know virtually nothing about this (and nothing at all compared to our counterparts who study the Civil War); and now see some of the impact of the dissolution of these civic and communal foundations built during the 20th-century.

**Gannon:** First, veterans were not and are not monolithic. Of course, scholars understand race, gender, nationality, and class differences, but there are other distinctions. Most of these relate to veterans' particular military experiences. Partly, this is a function of how the various armed forces responded to the requirements of modern warfare. In modern wars, combatants represent a small percentage of the military. As a result, most modern veterans served in support roles of various kinds. Veterans performed these functions in the various US armed forces—Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and now Space Force—that developed disparate cultures based on their different roles and missions. A man who served as a technician in the newly established Space Force and a woman who served as an infantry officer in the Marine Corps have decidedly different military experiences.

Second, the type of war matters. Much of the scholarship on veterans focus on survivors of large generational wars such as the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam. Many of these veterans served briefly as citizen-soldiers and returned home. While wars that engendered a large cohort of veterans need to be studied, this focus also supports a particularly American construct of military service. The nation has always disparaged "Regulars." Americans who served in peacetime, often fighting in our periodic, so-called "small" wars, remain invisible. For instance, Spanish American and Philippine American War veterans, have often been consigned to historical ignominy. While lesser

wars produce fewer veterans, these men and women deserve our best effort; veterans studies needs to respond to this challenge.

**Pinheiro:** We need to examine more fully how military service impacted northern freeborn families of USCT veterans. The histories of former slaves continue to dominate the literature, which unfortunately minimizes hundreds of thousands of people whose stories matter and deserve analysis. The recent work of James G. Mendez (2019) recognizes the importance of these families, but his book, *A Great Sacrifice: Northern Black Soldiers, Their Families, and the Experience of Civil War*, primarily analyzes their wartime lives. I argue that scholars need to uncover what happened to these families when USCT regiments eventually demobilized. Doing so can reveal, whether or not the enlistment rhetoric of prominent war propagandists, including Frederick Douglass, Anna Dickinson, and Henry Highland Garnet, actually did lead to substantial and lasting improvements to the lives of all African Americans.

Recent scholarship has done an exceptional job of analyzing how numerous African American veterans struggled with various forms of mental illness and mistreatment when dealing with racist medical staff (along with preconceived notions about gender and class). I urge historians to integrate families into future projects. This will yield information on the different ways that the people connected to veterans processed various forms of racial, class, and gender discrimination as well. In my work, for instance, I have come across instances in which veterans came home with war wounds and trauma that manifested in shocking cases of domestic violence. Each example left me with a complicated understanding of veterans who forever changed American history. Thus, I can understand how some emancipators could also display various forms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that unfortunately materialized against themselves and their loved ones.

**Gambone:** Female veterans are a growing and essential part of the modern military, and their experiences deserve greater historical attention. Families, particularly children, are both an audience and participants in the life course of veterans. They live with feet planted in the wartime experience—through correspondence and individual veteran's reminiscences—as well as the process of re-assimilation once the veteran comes home (for an excellent source, see Gabriel, 2020). They are witnesses to, and sometimes victims of, wartime trauma and may provide valuable perspectives.

**Cimbala:** The fullness of topics covered by scholars such as Marten (2011), Jordan (2015), and Shaffer (2004)

suggest that we are at a point where historians should explore more deeply the questions already suggested by these historians. Whether through regimental histories or biographies or ethnic studies, there is room to explore the diversity of the Civil War veterans' experiences through methodologies that require deep research across the topics. I think of Brian Matthew Jordan's (2021) new regimental history dealing with a predominantly German regiment and see opportunity for coming to know ethnic veterans within the tightly defined boundaries of a unit history that moves into the postbellum world for more than one chapter. As Hackemer (2019) suggests, lifespan studies become critical for a deeper understanding of veterans. "Only by diving deeper into veterans' antebellum, wartime, and postwar lives," he argues about his westward-moving veterans, "can we adequately explain what motivated them to ultimately settle on the northern plains" (p. 104). People change over time, but certainly the antebellum experiences of soldiers influence their wartime service and their postwar adjustment. The questions we need to ask may not be novel, but we should be answering them within the context of lifespan histories of the veterans and not just their isolated efforts at postwar adjustment.

Community context can also influence our understanding of Civil War veterans. The subtitle of G. Ward Hubbs's (2003) *Guarding Greensboro: A Confederate Company in the Making of a Southern Community* is illustrative. The veterans' experiences of these particular Alabama men were rooted in their antebellum understanding of their role in their community. Of course, war changed them, but it did not separate them from that community. The war strengthened the loyalty that the members of the Guards had toward one another, but after the war that loyalty merged into loyalty to their community. Veterans joined the Ku Klux Klan to protect White Greensboro and worked to restore the community as they had understood it before and during the war. What Hubbs proposes is that wartime experience does not necessarily impose an impermeable break with antebellum connections. Hubbs's *Greensboro Guards* also suggests that one of the better ways to come to an understanding of the veterans' experiences within their communities is by studying them through collective biography, as a group that had originated within their communities, went to war as representatives of those communities, and returned home concerned with how their communities understood and honored them.

Such studies, along with Shaffer's (2004) work on African Americans, suggest that focusing on communities or regiments will allow for deeper research into the lives of their veterans. The topics Shaffer explores essentially follow those topics found in works on White veterans.

But Shaffer breaks new ground in examining a previously overlooked group of veterans by how he does his research. He advocates the use of collective biography through his example, by gathering "a random sample of just over 1,000 ordinary Black soldiers, and a second group of about 200 African-American veterans who engaged in notable activities in the postwar period," especially digging into the pension files in the National Archives in Washington, DC (p. 8). Other Civil War historians, such as Ryan Keating (2017), are now using this approach and have mined the National Archives' pension records to draw their portraits of soldiers and veterans. Hackemer (2019) argues that that is a start, but historians need to go beyond pension files and dig into census data. Indeed, Hackemer sets an example for future scholars by basing his conclusions on the lives of 6,000 veterans who moved to the Dakota territory.

In the end, the question becomes whether something called "veterans studies" can exist divorced from biography, community studies, and regimental histories that contextualized the veterans' experiences within the social and cultural worlds from which they came and to which they returned. Ideally, we need to combine lifespan studies, collective biography, and community studies to get to the heart of the veterans' experiences.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**James Marten**  
Marquette University, US

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