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*Review of A Communication Perspective on the
Military: Interactions, Messages, and Discourses*

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Book Review of: *A Communication
Perspective on the Military: Interactions,
Messages, and Discourses*,
edited by Erin Sahlstein,
Parcell & Lynne M. Webb

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As many of the contributors to this groundbreaking collection note, the United States has been shaped and sustained through war. Over a million U.S. service members have died as a result of combat from the Revolutionary War through current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Countless others have returned home from combat with life-altering wounds, both physical and psychological (Knobloch & Wilson, 2015). Thus, military issues and the fact of war are both an historical legacy and an enduring reality for people in the United States. The book, *A Communication Perspective on the Military*, ably focuses our attention on

the process of sensemaking about war. It is this emphasis on sense making that gives the collection its important communication perspective.

The book is divided into three sections, each focusing on one other institution with which the military and communication practices intersect: family, media, and rhetorical culture. In so doing, this collection provides readers with a survey of the full range of communication literature focused on the military. This survey reveals the ways communication researchers currently examine the challenges and opportunities posed by military life. The book accomplishes this by taking a broad perspective, and drawing from literature in family communication, media studies, and rhetorical studies. The collection is unique in this approach, and it showcases a variety of methods and theoretical frameworks focused on a consistent topic: communication and the military. As Sahlstein Parcell (2015, p. 2) notes in her introductory chapter, she and her coeditor, Lynne Webb, were interested in understanding the military from the perspective that only communication scholars can provide: “the notion that communication is the most fundamentally human of all endeavors, that people employ talk and engage discourses to shape social realities, to motivate human behavior, and to interpret and construct meaning in their daily lives.” Thus, the book is notable for its ability to synthesize work across the discipline of communication.

I found this organization intriguing and intuitively satisfying. My father served in World War II as a Navy ship captain. At least, I think he was a ship captain; I know he was in the U.S. Navy. I mention this because I came to this fascinating volume showcasing communication scholarship about the military with a very hazy sense of what talking about war in the family might sound like. In my own family, war, and my parents' participation in World War II were not discussed much. I can remember hearing only two stories about my father's time in the Navy, both of which were narrated by my mother. Later, in my teen years, the Vietnam War was a source of dinner table conflict in our family as I expressed my antiwar sentiment (shaped in large part by a negative reaction to the images of Vietnam shown on television) while my parents forcefully suggested that our

government's leaders knew best how to conduct foreign affairs, even when they included going to war. Interestingly, we all interpreted the public speeches by our political leaders in diverse ways, adding a further source of controversy to our family interactions. My own experiences both anticipated the organization of *A Communication Perspective on the Military*, and revealed the complicated dynamics of a communication perspective. The book illustrates this layered, dynamic quality of communication, and reveals how each level of communication is informed by other levels in some important way.

In presenting research at the nexus of the military and communication, the collection illuminates “how cultural tensions are negotiated” (Ivie, 2015, p. xii) around the topic of war. In the first section, Military Families, the editors present seven essays focused on how members of military families talk to one another (or avoid talking to each other) about the challenges and opportunities that deployment causes in their lives. The first chapter in this section, by Katheryn Maguire, provides a review and synthesis of the research by family communication scholars, emphasizing the stressors inherent in each of the stages of the deployment cycle: predeployment, deployment, and postdeployment. In addition, Maguire examines how research has found that military families cope with these stressors, and suggests avenues for profitable future research in the area. The subsequent chapters in this section offer extensions that branch off of Maguire's framework. Some chapters point to new avenues of research, such as Cramer, Tenzek, and Allen's chapter on how veterans might utilize military chaplains as a source of support and LeBlanc and Olson's chapter on how veterans negotiate their sense of identity within the family. Other chapters offer expansions of ideas discussed elsewhere in the literature, but given fresh expression in the context of the military family. For example, Mehta and Jorgenson's chapter uses sensemaking theory to apply the work–family discourse to Air Force wives' efforts to conceptualize their careers when they must move frequently for their husbands' jobs. The notion of gendering is critical here, and is echoed later in a chapter in the third section of the book that addresses the warrior myth permeating military discourse and

how that impacted public discourse about the U.S. policy of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” (Young & Kaurin).

The second section of the book, *Media and the Military*, presents seven chapters outlining the complicated relationship between military activities and the reporting on these activities. This section, like the previous one, begins with a chapter (Stahl) that overviews the area and provides a lens with which to read the subsequent six chapters. Stahl suggests that scholarship on the military and media falls into one of three categories: propaganda research, entertainment media, and new media. Two of the subsequent six chapters are focused in each of these three categories. In the two chapters devoted to entertainment media, Howard and Prividera (Chapter 12) and Coe (Chapter 13) take a critical approach. Howard and Prividera, for instance, point out that coming-home narratives on television tell only a partial story. This partial story is a narrative that highlights an ideology of national pride and leaves out the struggles of returning from war. The fact that some of these struggles have been detailed in the chapters in the previous section illuminates the idea that common threads trace through the subject of communication and the military, further establishing the usefulness of this volume.

The final section of the collection, *Rhetoric Surrounding the Military*, serves to clarify how the narrative of war is rhetorically constructed in our culture. The military is seen as a source and the substance of public discourse and the authors interrogate how meaning is made and contested in the public sphere. Again, the section begins with an introductory chapter (Mitchell) that serves as the spine for the remaining six chapters. The chapters contain an interesting range, from traditional rhetorical analysis (Quigley Holden) to contemporary rhetorical criticism and analysis (Bates). Bates' chapter about the renaming of a Canadian highway to honor their military dead provides the one analysis of military communication outside of the United States.

This collection is a welcome addition to scholarship at the intersection of communication and the military. The authors represented in the book use state of the art methods and theories from the Communication Theory of Identity to Foucault. The book's eclectic approach illustrates the utility of taking one topic and exploring its many facets with a variety of approaches and theoretical frameworks. The book is extremely well organized, and its structure highlights the overlapping complexities that make communication studies such a relevant and captivating field.

References

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