Symbolic Interaction

From Prowar Soldier to Antiwar Activist: Change and Continuity in the Narratives of Political Conversion among Iraq War Veterans

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This study examines conversion narratives of Iraq War military veterans who have become antiwar political activists. I examine how antiwar veterans construct and emplot prewar, wartime, and postwar narrative periods to shape and reclaim their moral identities as patriots fighting for a just cause, and how through a communal antiwar story they work to both challenge and reappropriate the rhetorical framework they associate with justifications for the invasion of Iraq. The study draws on in-depth interviews with forty members of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW). In sum, the research describes how veterans engage with dominant narratives, shape new moral identities, and transition from soldiers to political activists.
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INTRODUCTION

> My experience over there-something that it taught me was the pragmatic reality of what happens when we go to war. The absolute necessity to be clear in our decisions and to be moral in our decisions. And what I learned was that the people who controlled the installation [Abu Ghraib prison] where I worked were in Washington, D.C . . . .they didn't experience it the way that I did, and I felt that it gave me a deeper understanding of the costs of war.

Above, "Brad,"[1] a former military police officer at Abu Ghraib prison, describes how his experiences in Iraq led him to question the moral justifications given by political and military leaders for going to war.[2] Brad tells a story of deploying to Iraq with very high expectations of "bringing democracy to Iraq and freeing the Iraqi people from a brutal dictator," but describes experiences on the ground that failed to meet his high expectations of military service. His military police unit was

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assigned to Abu Ghraib prison, and he recalls witnessing and participating in events of abusive violence against Iraqi prisoners there. In addition, he remembers feeling completely abandoned by his chain of command because they neglected to address the poor living conditions of prisoners, leading to numerous revolts against him and his comrades. When Brad returned from Iraq he joined the antiwar social movement organization Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), where he found a new way to make sense of his wartime experiences and learned how to use these experiences both to express his antiwar views and reclaim his moral identity as a patriot who fights for virtuous causes.

In this article, I examine the personal narratives of conversion of military veterans who have transitioned from prowar soldiers to antiwar political activists. Through in-depth interviews, I examine the personal narratives of forty members of IVAW who participated in the 2003 initial invasion of Iraq. I ask: How do the personal narratives of Iraq antiwar veterans engage with the dominant narratives used by political and military elites to justify the invasion of Iraq? How do these veterans shape new moral identities? And, more broadly, in the sociology of conversion, how can their accounts further expand our scholarly understanding of what personal transformation and moral conversion means?

My findings suggest that Iraq War antiwar veterans go through a similar narratively-constituted process that enables them to make sense of their experience and reclaim a moral identity. In this process, veterans interpret key events during war as "turning points" (Zerubavel 2003) or mental road signs marking the redirection of their political trajectory from prowar soldier to antiwar political activist. Veterans' narratives of conversion also work as "subversive stories" (Ewick and Silbey 1995, 2003) that are constructed in explicit opposition to powerful political and military narratives used to justify the Iraq War as bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people. But at the same time that antiwar veterans engage critically with elements of this dominant discourse, they also reappropriate other elements in order to emphasize not only their ideological conversion from prowar to antiwar, but also the continuation of their identity as moral patriots.

In what follows, I first review the ways in which narratives of conversion from one ideology or belief to another typically follow particular patterns of transformation (Cerulo 1998; Davis 2000, 2005; Snow and Machalek 1984; Zerubavel 2003): a previous ideology is disrupted by a moral decline, which is followed by a significant event that triggers a new understanding and interpretation of prior experiences and worldviews that align to new dominant discourses that are institutionally and culturally sanctioned (DeGloma 2007, 2010a; Johnston 2013). The section that follows analyzes each phase of the conversion story from predispositions, to significant events, to reconciliation, while tracing the ebb and flow between narratives of change *and* narratives of continuity in reclaiming moral identities. The article concludes by considering the broader implication of these findings for the study of conversion narratives.

CONVERSION NARRATIVES

The dominant theme of the literature on conversion is that of "radical personal change" (Snow and Machalek 1984: 169), and the idea that "conversion is a fundamental personal and public turn, a deep change from one state of being, knowing, and acting to another" (Waisanen 2011: 230). For the most part, earlier studies of ideological conversion followed the emergence of new religious movements and mass therapies during the 1960s and 1970s (Glock, Bellah, and Alfred 1976; Rambo 1982; Richardson 1983; Wuthnow 1976; Zablocki 1971), and sought to identify the causes of conversion, as well as the empirical process of converting (Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Rambo 1993). Psychological and theological explanations focus on how individuals experience a sudden shift from one point of view to another, or come to rediscover previously held principles (Gillespie 1979). But disagreement remains over exactly how much change is enough to constitute conversion (Gordon 1974; Travisano 1970) or when the conversion process begins and ends. Moreover, it remains unclear what exactly is being converted — is it values, behavior, identity, loyalty, or something else (Snow and Machalek 1984)?

Moving away from theological and psychological explanations of conversion, sociologists have focused on identifying narrative patterns in conversion stories (Jindra 2011; Smilde 2005; Snow and Machalek 1984). Hence, sociologists suggest that it is not just the convert who undergoes a radical change, but also her/his "universe of discourse" (Mead 1934: 248). Using an interactionist approach, they have fruitfully analyzed rhetorical patterns, looking for changes in speech and reasoning that mark the occasion of conversion (Frank 1993; Griffin 1990; Snow and Machalek 1984). In other words, whereas earlier studies of conversion analyzed its causes, more recent studies seize upon converts' own narrative accounts of conversion as objects of analysis.

This way of analyzing convert accounts shifts away from framing or relying upon them as "objective" data holding clues regarding underlying causes (Bruce and Wallis 1983), and looks instead at the ways in which such accounts are socially constructed, temporally variable, and largely retrospective (Beckford 1978; Snow and Machalek 1984; Taylor 1976, 1978; Zerubavel 1998, 2003). Sociologists examine how these accounts typically align the convert's own personal biography with group goals, ideologies, and rituals (DeGloma 2014, 2015; Snow and Rochford 1983). Thus, although each person has their own unique story, those stories typically vary around a collective central theme. Moreover, converts' accounts are reconstructed and elaborated over time (Zerubavel 1998). For example, in religious conversions, spiritual growth develops over time and is accompanied by changes in the organization and ideology of the group to which the person has converted (Beckford 1978).

Most recently, narratives of conversion are argued to follow either an "awakening" narrative (DeGloma 2010a, 2014) or a "narrative of continuity" (Johnston 2013), in which the convert recounts a master narrative that is culturally sanctioned by a broader group and justifies her/his conscious shift from one state of being or personal

view to another. In the case of "awakening" narratives, storytellers typically describe a process of realizing a certain "truth" in the face of prior beliefs that were "false" (DeGloma 2010a). Awakeners share a story formula in which they recount an unfolding sequence of events, often featuring a significant event or experience that changed their worldviews. Moreover, awakeners emplot their awakening stories within "social environments" working to affirm, privilege, and define personal events and experiences institutionalized by "autobiographical communities" that confirm collective social norms for a specific moral or political purpose (DeGloma 2014).

In contrast to awakening narratives, which follow a pattern of radical change, "narratives of continuity" follow a pattern of "rediscovery," in which the narrator reconnects with or acknowledges something that always was (Johnston 2013). Thus, this narrative form differs from awaking narratives "in its emphasis on self-continuity rather than self-transformation" (Johnston 2013: 569). Both ideal-type narrative formulas build upon the literature of narrative analysis and identity (Mead 1934; Ochs and Capps 2001; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Somers 1994) in order to uncover a set of narrative rules (Davis 2005) that structure people's conversion experiences in a particular way.

I argue that awakening narratives and narratives of continuity are not as oppositional or disparate as we may imagine. As the following sections will illustrate, the members of IVAW emplot both awakening narratives *and* narratives of continuity in order to reclaim their moral identities as American patriots who fight for a just cause. Similarly, I emphasize that, in addition to working as mechanisms of meaning-making and identity formation, the narratives of antiwar veterans work to both challenge *and* reappropriate dominant political and military discourses used to justify the invasion of Iraq. Powerholders with privileged access to mass media draw on a cache of "cultural themes" (Gamson 1992; Rohlinger 2002; Ryan 1991) that carry authority and resonate with the general public forming "taken-for-granted ways of thinking, talking, and acting" (Woehrle, Coy, and Maney 2008: 29) about the justification for war. Certain elements of those dominant narratives are contested, as veterans compare the abstract concepts of "freedom," "democracy," and "terror" with their own remembered experiences "on the ground." But in other instances, veterans draw on similarly lofty notions of "patriotism" and "morality" in order to narrate their own transformation as one of both conversion but also self-reclamation. The key is how veterans use narrative to manage these various tensions between change and continuity, challenge and reappropriation.

THE ACCOUNTS OF MILITARY VETERANS

Soldiers' accounts of warfare and the different ways in which war has shaped their thinking about politics and society is well documented (Frey-Wouters and Laufer 1986; Lifton [1973] 2005; Shay 1994). Following World War II (WWII), social scientists began studying the impact of war on soldiers, specifically, how participation in the military and warfare influenced soldiers' attitudes toward everything from race

relations to how they viewed their superiors (Stouffer et al. 1949). More recently, the sociological analysis of veteran accounts has sought to understand the cultural mechanisms veterans use to make meaning of their experiences and shape their identities (DeGloma 2010b; Heaney and Rojas 2006; Leitz 2011). Narratives of warfare work to weave together disparate combat experiences and situate veterans as the ultimate, credible "military insiders" (Leitz 2011: 235). Veterans' accounts of combat experiences, in particular, are seen as having privileged access to the "truth" of what actually happens in war, but at the same time, their accounts perform the work of constructing an activist identity that remains committed to the values and beliefs of American patriotism and service (Coy, Woehrle, and Maney 2008; Flores 2014; Leitz 2011, 2014).

In the case of IVAW, macropolitical and collective social debates serve as mnemonic tools for developing autobiographical accounts of how the experience of war transformed veterans from idealistic prowar soldiers to disillusioned antiwar political activists. For many of these veterans, it is precisely the irony of wartime events — for example, the notion of killing in order to achieve peace — that makes their memories stand out so strongly and gives those experiences their transformative meaning (Fussell 1975).

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study includes forty in-depth interviews with Iraq War veterans who participated in the initial invasion of Iraq, and who subsequently became members of IVAW. Research participants include veterans from predominantly working-class to upper-middle-class backgrounds. They are mostly white males between the ages of 19 and 25, with the exception of one retiree over the age of 55. Racial and ethnic groups such as African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are typically underrepresented in antiwar organizations (Hall 2003), and this is also the case with members of IVAW. Nonetheless, three African Americans, nine Latinos, one Native American, and five women are represented in my total sample.

Data collection is based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation at group meetings, rallies, and other key events from August 2008 to December 2009. Interview samples were clustered in major U.S. cities where IVAW chapters are most active, such as Washington, D.C., Boston, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Interviews were also conducted throughout Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, located near the researcher's home base at the time. Interviewing took place at state chapter meetings, national organizational gatherings in major U.S. cities, and at homes, restaurants, bars, and coffee shops throughout the country. Each interview was composed of open-ended questions that were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, providing the data used for the textual analysis. Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, the analysis included issue-focused coding (Weiss 1994) of narratives to analyze how veterans describe becoming an antiwar political activist. The sample consists of a purposive sample of respondents who are political activists.

Thus, the study is not a generalizable national probability sample administered to a large group of veterans who participated in the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, attitudes toward the Iraq War from veterans who do not participate in antiwar political activism are not reported in the findings.

In the following, I analyze how Iraq War veterans narrate their experiences before, during, and after their deployment to Iraq, weaving these periods into a broader story of their conversion from combat soldiers to antiwar political activists. I begin with veterans' descriptions of their views toward the military and war before volunteering for the armed forces. I then trace their narratives of deployment and of their postwar attitudes and behaviors to examine how they make sense of their own changing ideas and their shifting relationship with dominant discourses that define the invasion of Iraq as morally just. Last, I examine how veterans emplot their stories of war within the context of political activism in order to establish cognitive and moral authority over how the war should be remembered, and reclaim their identities as soldiers dedicated to the same ideals of service and patriotism that initially compelled them to volunteer for military service in the first place.

NARRATIVES OF EXPECTATIONS, PATRIOTISM, AND PROWAR IDEALISM

Prior to volunteering for the military, the veterans in this study argue that they held very high expectations of military service. Typically, these expectations developed early in life, with several veterans explaining that they joined the military to fulfill a very strong sense of duty or calling. For example, Paige joined the Illinois National Guard at the age of 17. She stated that when she was a child in Carbondale, Illinois, the river near her home flooded and National Guard troops came to sandbag the area and provide needed services to her community. Paige and her mother brought the troops cakes and snacks. She admired what the National Guard was doing, and it was then that she decided that she wanted to join the military. She held the military in high regard and looked forward to belonging to a cohesive group of well-trained professionals.

However, Paige shared that her actual experience in the National Guard was the complete opposite of what she had expected. Similar to many other National Guard troops interviewed for this study, Paige described going on training exercises with outdated and broken equipment, such as radios that didn't work, vehicles that often broke down, and combat gear that dated back to the Vietnam era. In addition, Paige described the many difficulties of being a woman in the military and feeling excluded from the gendered camaraderie of her fellow soldiers. I interviewed Paige at a coffee house on the west side of Chicago 5 years after she had completed a tour in Iraq. Sitting across from me, wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, Paige described her disillusionment with both her service and the military in general:

> We would set up our little training exercises and it was really … half the time, the shit didn't work. Also, I really thought I was doing a really cool thing, being a

> young woman joining the military. [But], I felt it didn't really make me feel proud. But then, I'm eighteen years old in this National Guard unit and these old men are like, "Oh, let's go drink. Let's go. I'm gonna go buy some beer blah blah blah." It really is hard for young women in those kinds of environments.

Thus, despite her high expectations associating service with patriotic duty and military professionalism, Paige argues that she found herself disillusioned with the lack of professionalism and the lack of resources available to soldiers. Although she made good friends in the National Guard, she also felt excluded due to her gender. Paige describes her shift in thinking, then, not as a sudden awakening, but rather as a process of conversion in which she experienced a slow erosion of her prior expectations as she underwent disappointment and a sense of subtle discrimination.[3]

Several other veterans also described enlisting for military service as their "patriotic duty" and as a direct response to the September 11, 2001, attacks against the United States. For example, Henry said that he joined the army because he felt a calling to defend his country after the World Trade Center was attacked. He signed up to be in the army's airborne infantry and soon thereafter attended basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Before joining the army, Henry's impression was that it was an honorable institution that protected Americans' freedom and was "a place where you could prove yourself to be a man." In February 2003, Henry deployed to Iraq with his infantry unit. When I asked him about the moment he learned of his deployment to Iraq, he described his response:

> It was exciting and scary all at the same time. I knew I was going to war, I signed up to go to war, it took us a little bit because we didn't go to Afghanistan, you know everybody was going to Afghanistan, and I felt that maybe I came in too late and missed the war, and then Iraq came up . . . . Then when I finally got orders I had to really get into a mode of "I'm gonna kill somebody."

He explained that this strong sense of motivation was common among the members of his entire unit. In addition, he argued that political and military leaders encouraged soldiers to think about the invasion of Iraq in the same context as the invasion of Afghanistan — as retaliation for the attacks of September 11, 2001. In this way, Henry and Paige, along with the other veterans in this study articulate a prewar narrative of high expectations toward military service and participation in the war. However, whereas veterans such Paige describe prewar beliefs that gradually began to shift her positive views toward military service, veterans such as Henry situate their prewar beliefs within a prowar context of total support for the war.

NARRATIVES OF DISILLUSIONMENT: THE ANGER AND FRUSTRATIONS OF WAR

Although many of the veterans in this study shared Henry's reported feelings of excitement and motivation for the war at its outset, they also shared similar accounts of what happened upon their arrival. Many described being attacked by

the insurgency and seeing the morale of their unit plummet. I interviewed Jason at an Irish pub in downtown Denver, Colorado. Like other interviewees, he recalled being told repeatedly by military commanders and the Bush administration that the troops were there to help free the Iraqi people and bring them democracy. But ironically, when they arrived and were attacked instead, Jason describes that the morale of his unit shifted toward bitterness, anger, and frustration, which was then unleashed upon Iraqi civilians. Jason stated:

> The morale of our entire company was pretty poor. My peers were very angry for having to be there. They didn't want to be there, they wanted to be at home, they didn't want anything to do with Iraq, they didn't like the heat; they didn't like the dust. They didn't like the living quarters, they did not like getting attacked all the time. But their frustration was a little different than mine. Their anger, they took their anger out on the Iraqis. They hated the Iraqis. They kind of bought into the propaganda of it, that the Bush administration was saying that we came to give them democracy. We came to free them. And they were really angry that we left our homes to come out to this God awful hell. And then, you attack us? We are here to help you, and you try to kill us? And so, there was a lot of anger, and they despised the Iraqis.

The rhetoric veterans heard from political and military leaders combined with constant attacks from insurgents in complex urban settings, along with the brutal heat of the Iraqi desert, created an extremely stressful, emotional, and confusing environment. As a result, Jason argues that his unit responded with intensely negative emotions like anger and frustration, which led to abusive violence toward Iraqi civilians. In addition, Jason states that his senior commanders permitted a certain level of hatred to build against the Iraqi people in order to prepare them for combat. At the same time, he also recalled that other soldiers in his unit were becoming critical of the dominant discourse used to justify the invasion, albeit in a more rudimentary way. He explained:

> Once we got there and saw what we were doing, they were like fuck this shit, this is all about the oil. You know, fuck the oil, I'd rather go home and ride a bicycle than have to deal with this shit. That was like a very common sentiment. And you could see that the soldiers themselves would write that with their sharpies. You know, where basically freedom of dissent is only limited to a bathroom stall, you'd see like "Fuck Bush" and you would see "Fuck Rumsfeld." You would see "Fuck this war" and you would see "Operation Iraqi Liberation," and emphasize O.I.L. — oil.

Jason said that the soldiers in his unit were also frustrated with the corruption they observed. He explained that his unit was constantly sent out to escort Halliburton convoys carrying empty containers across Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad. Soldiers were angered that they were putting their lives on the line to protect empty containers. Jason's narrative account of his wartime experiences continued with a series of negative events that unfolded on the ground, which he maintains gradually led to his questioning of the war.

Other veterans such as Eric provided similar narratives of deploying with high expectations and idealistic views about the war's purpose, but then having those views suddenly challenged. Eric's unit was assigned to southern Baghdad where they were tasked with conducting two patrols per day in the city. One patrol was in a humvee[4] and the other patrol was on foot. Because Eric was one of the lowest ranking members of his unit, he was placed on the Quick Reaction Force team at night. He was also the only private in his platoon who could remember how to properly load radio channels to send encrypted messages. Eric described the stress of being assigned all of these duties, and how the lack of sleep affected him:

> There's always some kind of gunshot, so we got called out every night … So, by the first two months I was there, I'd probably gotten one hour of sleep per night and … I was so stressed out that I started losing patches of hair on my head. I had, you know, the kind of buzz cut so my hair was kinda short, so you could tell where my patches of baldness are coming in 'cause of stress. And on top of that, I was handling radios … every time a radio broke, they'd wake me up to fix it or something because no one could figure out how to fix a radio.

After 2 months, Eric was assigned to a different platoon where he focused solely on doing patrols. But as the war continued, Eric maintains that his fellow soldiers came to care only about their own safety, and not about bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people. Their attitudes became increasingly aggressive on patrols as the difference between Iraqi civilians and insurgents became blurred. When I asked Eric to describe his interactions with Iraqis during patrols, he stated:

> You'd stop to talk to people, and you'd go into their houses, search their houses, and try to be civil. And if they gave you an attitude, you'd become more aggressive, and you know start throwing all their shit around in their house. It was not always the best interaction with the Iraqi people. We'd, uh … you know, treat them like shit, and every time we'd ask "okay, why did the IED explode outside your house?" And we'd ask them "is this a nice neighborhood?" And they'll say, "oh yeah, it's a perfect neighborhood, mister, nothing bad happens here." And we'd show 'em the IED hole outside, "then what is that?" And, "have you seen anybody?" And they just kinda jerk you around, and that just made a lot of the guys in the platoon angrier at the Iraqi people.

Eric went on to explain how soldiers lost interest in the security of Iraqis and in helping them to rebuild any part of their country. Eventually, their only concern on a patrol was to return to the base alive. Their interactions with Iraqis were minimal and they came to believe that the tougher they acted toward Iraqis, the less likely they were to be attacked.

Eric reflected that he was very naïve when he went to Iraq, truly believing that he was going there to help bring "freedom" to the Iraqi people. But he describes learning quickly from his on the ground experiences that the military "didn't care" about Iraqis. He participated in several house raids in the middle of the night, threw people on the floor, and destroyed their homes. He claimed that they treated the

Iraqis as less than animals and "dehumanized everybody there." Thus, his conversion narrative enacts a similar rhythm as that of other antiwar veterans in this study who described having their idealistic beliefs in the military shattered, which, in turn, turned them against the army and the war.

Similarly, Paige, who earlier described her experience of being a woman in the National Guard and a gradual shift in her idealistic beliefs toward the military, spoke about becoming disillusioned with the rhetoric that Americans were going to "liberate" the Iraqi people. Paige explained that even the language of her superiors shifted once troops were actually on the ground:

> When we got there everything was bombed to dust already, pretty much. But there's still people everywhere, just with nothing. We would drive through some roads that were just like, I mean, thousands of people just trying to sell whatever they could. Stuff like that, and it was really surreal . . . . And then we had this General. I remember him saying, "We gotta spin some artillery so we can get rid of these merchants" and shit. It's just fucked up shit, you know. These are just mostly kids trying to sell soda and stuff.

Paige said several events prior to her deployment made her begin to question her reasons for becoming a soldier and her expectations of liberating the Iraqi people, but she argued that it was her experiences in Iraq that finally shattered her ideals of the military and the Iraq War.

Her story thus charts a sequence of events leading up to the war, and then highlights the experience of the invasion itself as rupturing both the value that she had placed on being a soldier and her belief in the justifications that were given by political and military leaders for going to war in Iraq in the first place. Every new experience is framed as adding weight and momentum behind her transformation, pushing her to question her childhood idealization of military heroes. Paige argued that while political and military leaders told the American people one story of what was being done in Iraq, what actually happened was very different:

> We're on a convoy with people from my unit bringing supplies to a team. And I remember we saw these kids standing outside one of the compound's somewhere. It was between the checkpoints somewhere. These kids have flip flops and guns and they're running and one is like, standing by this guard thing and I'm like, "What the fuck is that?" These are Iraqi kids. They look so young. They couldn't have been eighteen years old. You know so … I'm like, "What the hell is that?" And this woman from this team, she says, "Oh yeah, they're training them to be the Iraqi police. And I'm like, "Can they at least have fucking boots?" What's that? I mean, you know, these kids were so young! There's no way they were eighteen years old. I'd say about thirteen to fifteen . . . . And that was really hard to see that. It's just that … every Iraqi person that I met or saw was just a normal person. It just seemed so abrasive and fucked up to me.

Paige framed her negative experiences in Iraq as watershed experiences that finally ruptured her previous support for the military and war. Importantly, whether Paige actually experienced these events as watershed moments or turning points

at the time is less crucial than how the events figure now in her narrative of transformation. What remains constant in her story is her implicit framing of herself as a moral person experiencing these "fucked up" events and her efforts to make sense of them in relation to dominant prowar narratives of bringing "freedom" and "democracy" to the Iraqi people.

"BECAUSE I TOOK MY SERVICE SERIOUSLY": NARRATIVES OF POSTWAR POLITICAL ACTIVISM

For military veterans, returning home from war is an incredibly complex experience. For members of IVAW, their stories of returning home are further complicated by a sense of anger and frustration with the lack of critical media discourse about the war. These veterans expected that when they returned to the United States, there would at least be some debate surrounding the war; but instead they recalled finding only apathy and disinterest in both their specific experiences and the war in general. For example, John described his frustration with the American public upon his return:

> I really felt the society was so apathetic and so stupid to allow this to happen; to allow this war to go on, when it was so wrong. It was so … right in the headlines it was so wrong. And yet nobody cared. And I think coming back home, dealing with the apathy was very hard. That's what made me most mad. Seeing these goddamn SUV's with these yellow ribbons saying "Support the Troops!" I would go out in parking lots and steal them and throw them away because I was that mad you know. It took about a couple of years after getting out of the military before I finally, you know, I was married and having my wife there to help tone me down a little bit and keep me a little bit more under control. So, that helped a lot. Like — yeah, I was just very angry. A lot of people didn't understand what I had gone through.

John reported that after he "toned down," he channeled his anger and frustration through antiwar political activism. He became increasingly involved in IVAW and traveled throughout the country speaking out against the war.

Similarly, Paige could no longer find a justification for the war when she returned from her deployment in 2004. Like many of the Iraq veterans whom I interviewed, Paige argued that she experienced a "honeymoon period" first, during which she was just happy to be home and did not think critically about the war. But though her tour in Iraq had ended, she claimed that the events that influenced her way of thinking about the war returned home with her. For example, she described to me arguments she had with her parents regarding their continued support for President George W. Bush:

> It was like, you're so happy just to be home and see grass and shit. And then reality settles in. I used to be in a lot of fights with my parents about politics and stuff. 'Cause … my mom voted for Bush the second time. I was like, "How did … how can you do that?" And she said, "He's gonna protect us from terrorists." I mean, "What the fuck?," where did I just spend a year? I would call them always and tell

> them what's happening, so how can they really say that they didn't know? It was so weird. And I used to scream at the TV … I was angry. Like, mood swings were insane. I'd be like, happy, crying, screaming every time, you know. It was really, really hard.

Paige claimed that antiwar political activism provided a way to express her anger and frustration. Her participation began after she enrolled at the University of Illinois, Chicago, where she met other Iraq War veterans who also opposed the war. Through meetings with veterans, speaking at peace rallies, and becoming involved in antiwar political actions, Paige learned to adopt a culturally sanctioned "autobiographical script" (DeGloma 2014:23) that helped to align her personal experiences and memories of the war with the collective memory and accounts of fellow IVAW members.

Veterans such as Carlos, who also participated in the initial invasion of Iraq, decided to file for conscientious objector (CO) status and describes a similarly patterned story. He states that he officially registered for CO status because he eventually came to see the war as both "illegal" and "immoral." As a result, Carlos served 9 months in a military prison because he refused to redeploy to Iraq after the initial invasion. When I interviewed Carlos in 2009, military charges were still pending and he faced the possibility of having his residency status removed and being deported to Nicaragua. Nonetheless, he continued to speak out against the war and was a prominent figure in IVAW and the antiwar movement. At the conclusion of our interview, I asked if there were any final thoughts that he wanted to share with me. After first saying no, he paused and told me about a soldier facing criminal charges for conscientious objection:

> A fellow that I want to remember just went to jail yesterday; his name is Victor Basco. And Victor and I spoke on the day of his court martial which was a day before yesterday. We gave an interview on the radio and they asked him what the message will be for our soldiers who are in the very same situation, and he said something that I said when I was in his position which is that, "You cannot go wrong if you follow your conscience." You know, there is nothing more empowering than to do what you feel is right in your heart regardless of the consequences. If soldiers who are in the same predicament follow their conscience then they can't go wrong with that.

Carlos, along with other veterans and active duty soldiers against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, share a collective moral argument in which antiwar resistance is the highest form of patriotism, and that it is the duty of soldiers and citizens to oppose what they define as unlawful and morally unjust wars. Importantly, their personal life stories and soldier identities are used to assert moral authority and validate group goals of remaining committed to the values, ideals, and principles that compelled them to become soldiers in the first place. Thus, several IVAW members argued that they were doing precisely what the military trained them to do: fighting for a moral and just cause. They see no disjuncture between service through the military and service through activism. As one veteran who filed for CO status put it:

> I didn't see what I was doing in protesting as being outside of who I was, as somebody identified as a soldier. It was almost like this [political activism] is the honorable thing to do, and going to Iraq is the dishonorable thing to do. Because I took my service seriously, I was pretty aware of the fact that soldiers can and should disobey illegal orders … A real patriot is gonna ask questions; they're gonna challenge authority. And so I didn't see them as being mutually exclusive, in fact, I was doing what I was supposed to be doing.

Thus, regardless of whether the narrative pattern of antiwar veterans follows a sudden "awakening" of "truth" (DeGloma 2014) or a more gradual "narrative of continuity" (Johnston 2013), their emplotment of pre-, during, and postwar narrative periods works to reclaim their moral identities as American patriots and frame their political activism as challenging specific actions of the U.S. military without abandoning the ideals upon which they view it as founded.

CONCLUSION

I argue that the stories of the antiwar veterans I interviewed constitute conversion narratives that work as forms of both resistance and self-reclamation. Within these narratives, there is an ebb and flow between "awakenings" and "narratives of continuity" that blurs the lines between existing frameworks for understanding the experience of conversion. For these veterans, their stories feature instances and dynamics of both rupture and continuity during their personal transformation. In narratives of conversion that subvert power, converts typically tell stories that are marked by "mental periods" (Zerubavel 1998) that illustrate the breaking points that opened new ways of thinking and provided a cognitive space in which the convert learned to challenge hegemonic claims of the institution to which they belong (Ewick and Silbey 2003). This was certainly the case for many of the veterans with whom I spoke, as their stories single out particular moments and events as reshaping their thinking about the war and their attitude toward military and political elites. In addition, taken together, their stories weave together the seemingly disparate cognitive trajectories of reclaiming a sense of self with that of political conversion. Calling attention to self-reclamation in counterhegemonic political narratives recognizes the mechanisms that facilitate identity formation within the processes of conversion more generally.

I also found that antiwar veterans engage in complex ways with the dominant discourses used to justify the war in Iraq. Through their narratives, veterans locate themselves as both disillusioned by their actual experiences with the military and with war, but still committed to the ideals that led them to enlist in first place — indeed, in some cases, as even *more* committed to those ideals only now pursuing those ideals in new ways. Antiwar veterans thus position themselves as asserting moral authority over the political and military elites they saw as justifying the invasion of Iraq. Importantly, the veterans' narratives do not suggest that the ideals of bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people were themselves misguided; rather, their narratives highlight the spectacular failure to actually enact any of these ideals on the ground.

Far from simply rejecting dominant discourses highlighting freedom and democracy, veterans redeploy the very rhetoric that once justified their previous prowar views in order to reclaim their identities as soldiers fulfilling their moral obligations.

In this way, political activism serves as a mechanism through which veterans can make meaning out of their experiences and establish moral authority. Veteran narratives of change/continuity and "still a good soldier" draw on the arguably equally resonant political and cultural discourses (circulating both since Vietnam and in relation to Iraq itself) of conscientious objection and the patriotic merits of opposing the war. Hence, conversion is not simply a process of rejecting old views and adopting new ones; rather, there is a leap away from the military (at least in a traditional sense) toward a new group of meaning- and identity-facilitating actors — IVAW. The veterans in this study negotiate their transition by identifying with an antiwar social movement organization that provides socially-sanctioned narratives reframing opposition to the war as a patriotic act. Had this alternate narrative not existed, veterans may well have had different narratively-constituted experiences of conversion, resulting in different kinds of transformation. At the same time, while these veterans' political stance vis-à-vis war underwent a complete reversal, it is significant that their new identity as antiwar activists enabled them to retain deeply meaningful aspects of their prior identities. This attention to the constant need to conform to *some* sort of group identity and norms helps to explain how it is that we see *both* change and continuity in the narratives of veterans who transition from soldiers to political activists.

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NOTES

1. All the names of veterans used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. In an interview on NBC's Meet the Press, Vice President Dick Cheney announced: "I think things have gotten so bad inside Iraq, from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators," transcript for March 16, 2003, http://mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/cheneymeetthepress.htm (accessed July 10, 2014).
3. Not everyone in the sample conformed to the same narrative patterns. For example, William's narrative is an outlier in the data. William arrived at his antiwar views via a somewhat different route. At age 55, he is the oldest veteran interviewed in this study and never believed the political rhetoric being used to justify the invasion of Iraq in the first place. He stated that he felt politicians declaring war were thinking more about their own economic and political gains than about the soldiers they were actually sending to war. But crucially, as a senior member of his unit when he was deployed to Iraq, William described feeling responsible for the welfare of his troops, both as soldiers in Iraq, and as veterans when they returned home, and this gave him his sense of purpose while there.

4. "Humvee" or High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV), a four-wheel drive military automobile.

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