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WHY THEY FIGHT:
Combat Motivation in the Iraq War

Leonard Wong
Thomas A. Kolditz
Raymond A. Millen
Terrence M. Potter

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U.S. Army War College

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This study was greatly supported by members of the 800th Military Police Brigade -- specifically BG Paul Hill, COL Al Ecke, and LTC James O'Hare. Staff Judge Advocates COL Ralph Sabbatino and COL Karl Goetzke also provided critical guidance. Finally, COL Jim Embrey planned and coordinated the visits to units for this study.

*****

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ISBN 1-58487-133-4

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FOREWORD

With the recent lightning swift combat successes of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, there may be a tendency to view with awe the lethality of U.S. technology and training. Indeed, the U.S. military is unmatched in the raw combat power it is capable of unleashing in a conflict. This monograph, however, argues that the true strength of America's military might lies not in its hardware or high-tech equipment, but in its soldiers.

Dr. Leonard Wong and his colleagues traveled to Iraq to see what motivated soldiers to continue in battle, to face extreme danger, and to risk their lives in accomplishing the mission. As a means of comparison, they began by interviewing Iraqi Regular Army prisoners of war to examine their combat motivation and unit dynamics. The researchers then interviewed U.S. combat troops fresh from the fields of battle to examine their views.

What they found was that today's U.S. soldiers, much like soldiers of the past, fight for each other. Unit cohesion is alive and well in today's Army. Yet, Dr. Wong and his fellow researchers also found that soldiers cited ideological reasons such as liberation, freedom, and democracy as important factors in combat motivation. Today's soldiers trust each other, they trust their leaders, they trust the Army, and they also understand the moral dimensions of war.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the all-volunteer Army. This monograph is a celebration of the success of that radical idea and the transformation of the U.S. Army from a demoralized draft army, to a struggling all-volunteer force, to a truly *professional* Army. The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this study of the American soldier to the national defense community as policymakers continue to chart the course of the Army's transformation.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF THE AUTHORS

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COLONEL TERRENCE M. POTTER is an Associate and Academy Professor at the U.S. Military Academy, Department of Foreign Languages. Colonel Potter has served in the Army for over 29 years, and has taught languages and linguistics for the past 7 years. His research interests include applied sociolinguistics, onomastics, language and culture, and the teaching and learning of Arabic. Colonel Potter holds a B.A. from The Citadel, an M.A. from Middlebury College, and a Ph.D. from Georgetown University.

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SUMMARY

Since World War II, studies have argued and conventional wisdom has claimed that soldiers fight for each other. Cohesion, or the bonds between soldiers, traditionally has been posited as the primary motivation for soldiers in combat. Recent studies, however, have questioned the effects of cohesion on unit performance. This monograph reviews the combat motivation literature and then analyzes findings from interviews conducted during the recent Iraq War.

By examining the perspectives of Iraqi Regular Army prisoners of war, U.S. troops, and embedded media, the monograph argues that unit cohesion is indeed a primary combat motivation. The report also notes that, contrary to previous studies of U.S. soldiers, notions of freedom, democracy, and liberty were also voiced by soldiers as key factors in combat motivation.

The monograph concludes that soldiers continue to fight for each other, but today's soldiers are also sophisticated enough to grasp the moral concepts of war. The report suggests that this is a result of the transformation of the Army from a fledgling all-volunteer experiment to a truly professional force.

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WHY THEY FIGHT:
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> Four brave men who do not know each other will not dare to attack a lion. Four less brave, but knowing each other well, sure of their reliability and consequently of mutual aid, will attack resolutely.[1]
>
> Ardant du Picq, 1870

Introduction.

This monograph seeks to answer the question: Why do soldiers fight? It begins with a historical overview of the combat motivation literature and examines studies from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. It then shifts to the recent Iraq War and analyzes the results of interviews with Iraqi Regular Army prisoners of war, U.S. combat troops, and embedded media. The varied perspectives combine to show the critical importance of unit cohesion in combat motivation but also highlight how today's soldiers are different from U.S. soldiers of the past.

Why Do Soldiers Fight?

The motivations of America's conscripted soldiers was a growing concern during the early stages of World War II, as the Army ranks swelled with freshly drafted soldiers. As Kansas newspaper editor William Allen White noted, soldiers of a draft army "haven't the slightest enthusiasm for this war or this cause. They aren't grouchy, they are not mutinous, they just don't give a tinker's dam."[2] After noting the ineffectiveness of prepared lectures read to bored troops, Chief of Staff of the Army General George C. Marshall brought in movie producer Frank Capra and told him to make a movie that would "explain to our boys in the Army *why* we are fighting, and the *principles* for which we are fighting."[3] Critics claimed that there were more important things to do, but Marshall insisted on men motivated and knowledgeable about the democratic cause. The seven-part *Why We Fight* film series resulted and was widely used during World War II.[4] The riveting film series emphasized that the

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war was not "just a war *against* Axis villainy, but *for* liberty, equality, and security."[5]

After World War II, a series of studies emerged that examined the motivation of soldiers during combat--to determine why a "tired, cold, muddy rifleman goes forward with the bitter dryness of fear in his mouth into the mortar bursts and machine-gun fire of a determined enemy."[6] Was it for ideological reasons as suggested by the *Why We Fight* series?

In his widely acclaimed work, *The American Soldier*, Samuel Stouffer documented the attitudes of World War II combat infantrymen. When soldiers were asked what kept them going during the war, the most common response was getting the war over so that they could go home. The second most common response and the primary combat motivation, however, referred to the strong group ties that developed during combat.[7] When asked about sources of support during combat, responses concerning loyalty to one's buddies and the notion "that you couldn't let the other men down" were second only to the number of combat soldiers who said they were helped by prayer.[8] Despite the *Why We Fight* films, Stouffer's study argued that ideology, patriotism, or fighting for the cause were not major factors in combat motivation for World War II soldiers. Cohesion, or the emotional bonds between soldiers, appeared to be the primary factor in combat motivation.

Historian S. L. A. Marshall reinforced the importance of the bonds between soldiers in his examination of World War II infantrymen in *Men Against Fire*. He noted, "I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade. . . . He is sustained by his fellows primarily and by his weapons secondarily."[9] As for fighting for a cause, Marshall wrote, "Men do not fight for a cause but because they do not want to let their comrades down."[10]

In another landmark study on combat motivation, Shils and Janowitz interviewed *Wehrmacht* prisoners in an attempt to determine why some continued to fight so determinedly despite the overwhelmingly obvious evidence that Germany would lose the war. Testing the belief that good soldiers were those who clearly

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understood the political and moral implications of what was at stake, they concluded that the behavior and attitudes of infantrymen who fought to the end derived, instead, from the interpersonal relationships within the primary group (although they did note an allegiance to Hitler as a secondary motivation.) From their research, they concluded that:

> When the individual's immediate group, and its supporting formations, met his basic organic needs, offered him affection and esteem from both officers and comrades, supplied him with a sense of power and adequately regulated his relations with authority, the element of self-concern in battle, which would lead to disruption of the effective functioning of his primary group, was minimized.[11]

The emphasis on unit cohesion as the primary source of combat motivation continued into the Korean War. Sociologist Roger Little observed a rifle company in combat for several months and found that the bonded relationships between men in combat--what he called "buddy relations"--were critical to basic survival.[12] To Little, buddy relations could refer to a specific soldier or the entire unit.

During the Vietnam War, noted military sociologist Charles Moskos interviewed soldiers and concluded that combat primary group ties serve an important role in unit effectiveness. Interestingly, Moskos argued that the close bonds with other soldiers may be a result of self-interested concern for personal safety rather than an altruistic concern for fellow soldiers.[13] Regardless, Moskos reinforced the critical role of cohesion in combat performance.

Despite the wide acceptance of the importance of interpersonal relationships between soldiers in combat,[14] things began to change in the later stages of the Vietnam War. In their controversial book, *Crisis in Command,* Gabriel and Savage claimed that the individual replacement system in Vietnam and the lack of professionalism in the officer corps led to the dissolution of primary group cohesion in the Army. While their conclusions about the causes of the decline of cohesion can be questioned, they did bring attention to a potentially deleterious effect of cohesion--fragging. They pointed out that cohesion between soldiers without the proper norms can work against organizational goals as in the case of nearly 800 cases

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of fragging in Vietnam.[15]

More recently, cohesion in the military has been addressed by several critical studies that go beyond highlighting the potentially detrimental effects of cohesion and instead challenge the correlation of unit cohesion with performance. Interestingly, the subject of many of these studies is not cohesion, but the current Department of Defense (DoD) policy on homosexual conduct. The current policy assumes that, "The presence in the armed forces of persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and *unit cohesion* that are the essence of military capability [emphasis added]."[16] Arguing that unit cohesion is not critical to military capability supports efforts to change the DoD policy. To this end, researchers such as Elizabeth Kier examined the cohesion literature and concluded that "fifty years of research in several disciplines has failed to uncover persuasive evidence . . . that there is a causal relationship leading from primary group cohesion to military effectiveness."[17]

In a 1993 RAND report, Robert MacCoun argued that actually two types of cohesion exist. According to MacCoun, *social* cohesion refers to the quality of the bonds of friendship and emotional closeness among unit members--the type of cohesion referred to by the post-World War II studies. *Task* cohesion, on the other hand, refers to the commitment among unit members to accomplish a task that requires the collective efforts of the unit. MacCoun argued that task cohesion is correlated with unit performance, not social cohesion. Social cohesion, according to MacCoun, has little relationship to performance, and can even interfere with unit performance (e.g., rate busting, groupthink, or fragging).[18] MacCoun's arguments are echoed by Segal and Kestnbaum who stated that, "There is no clear causal link that can be demonstrated using rigorous methods between social cohesion and high levels of military performance."[19]

Despite an emerging debate about cohesion occurring in the academic realm, it is tempting to believe that it has little relevance in the Army policy arena. Three factors suggest otherwise. First, the homosexual conduct policy assumes that unit cohesion is essential to military capability. Determining the role of cohesion in combat

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motivation helps inform that policy debate.

Second, the Army is pushing ahead with the Unit Manning Initiative that rests on the premise that "full-spectrum forces must be highly cohesive teams whose shared experiences and intensive training enable them to perform better in combat."[20] As the 172nd Infantry Brigade transforms to a Stryker Brigade Combat Team and implements a unit manning personnel system, its soldiers will arrive and train together through a standard 36-month tour. If cohesion is truly unimportant to unit performance as recent critics suggest, then the Army is putting an abundance of resources into a radical change that may produce a modicum of results.

Finally, discussions at the DoD level have been exploring the difference between task and social cohesion and which has the biggest impact on the military. One view maintains that the Services already do a good job of getting people who "don't like one another" to work well together, so social cohesion may be unnecessary. Given that the academic debate concerning cohesion has moved into the policy arena, an exploration of cohesion--specifically *social* cohesion --and the broader topic of combat motivation, is warranted.

Methodology.

This monograph analyzes motivation and cohesion in combat. The backdrop for analysis was Operation IRAQI FREEDOM with major combat operations occurring roughly from March 20, 2003, to May 1, 2003. To examine the concepts of combat motivation and cohesion, views were solicited from three distinct samples that experienced combat during IRAQI FREEDOM.

The first sample consisted of Iraqi Regular Army soldiers. The combat motivation of Iraqi soldiers was analyzed through interviews with enemy prisoners of war (EPWs) held at Camp Bucca at Umm Qasr, Iraq.[21] Nearly all of the EPWs questioned were lower enlisted Iraqi soldiers; two officers, a lieutenant colonel and a lieutenant, were also interviewed. Only two soldiers, both sergeants, claimed membership in a Republican Guard or Special Republican Guard unit. In this sample, then, views probably represent rank-and-file soldiers, rather than elite units or senior leaders. The researchers

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conducted, recorded, translated, and transcribed over 30 interviews, using a structured interview format.[22]

To gain the U.S. perspective, researchers met with troops assigned to the maneuver units of the three U.S. divisions conducting the majority of combat operations--the 3rd Infantry Division, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), and the 1st Marine Division.[23] Researchers conducted interviews at unit locations in the vicinity of Baghdad and Al Hillah prior to the official cessation of major combat operations. They conducted, recorded, and transcribed over 40 interviews.[24] The same structured interview format was used with both Iraqi EPWs and U.S. troops--thus providing a good comparison and contrast of issues across both armies.

Embedded media represent the third sample used to analyze cohesion and motivation in combat. They furnished a unique perspective on cohesion and combat motivation for two reasons. First, they were able to comment on small unit dynamics without being a part of the small unit. Second, prior to the war, much discussion concerned the embedded media needing to avoid developing emotional relationships with unit soldiers in order to remain objective journalists. The personal reflections of the media's experience help to explore the role of cohesion in combat. Over a dozen members of the media embedded in U.S. Army ground units were interviewed in person or telephonically, or responded to an email questionnaire.

Motivated by Fear.

During World War II, Stouffer asked combat veterans the question, "Generally, in your combat experience, what was most important to you in making you want to keep going and do as well as you could?" The same question concerning combat motivation was asked of the Iraqi EPWs. Iraqi EPWs were expected to respond that they were motivated to fight for each other (as earlier research had shown with the *Wehrmacht* or North Vietnam's Viet Cong) or were simply defending their homeland.[25]

Instead, the near universal response was that the Iraqi Regular Army soldiers were motivated by coercion. Even with the powerful

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coalition forces to their front, they were fearful of the dreaded Baath Party to their rear. Their behavior was driven by fear of retribution and punishment by Baath Party or *Fedayeen Saddam* if they were found avoiding combat. Iraqi soldiers related stories of being jailed or beaten by Baath Party representatives if they were suspected of leaving their units. Several showed scars from previous desertion attempts. One soldier related how he still felt guilty that his mother was jailed in response to his AWOL[26] status several years before.

When Iraqi soldiers described the desertion of their comrades, they noted the universal practice of deserting with small arms, rather than burying their weapons in the sand as U.S. psychological leaflets had urged. Deserters remained armed to protect themselves against the *Fedayeen Saddam* death squads they expected to find in Iraqi rear areas. The decision to desert with arms is one not taken lightly because it increased the likelihood of being killed by U.S. or British forces, particularly reconnaissance units common to the most forward elements. Armed desertion, then, represented clear evidence of the fear experienced by those who wished neither to fight nor surrender.

Surprisingly, fear of retribution was usually not attached to officers serving in Iraqi units. Most of the enlisted soldiers described their officers as distant, but normally not as a threat. Iraqi officer training was described by a captured graduate of the Baghdad Military Academy as "on the Sandhurst model," suggesting a British influence and a subsequent separation between the ranks of officers and enlisted. Officers were often politically appointed and not regarded as tactically competent by their men. Such circumstances led to little mutual respect between officers and the enlisted soldiers, but the strained relationship was far from intimidating. Several prisoners reported that if their officers had tried to force them to fight, they would have simply killed them and surrendered anyway. No prisoner ever described an attempt by officers to compel resistance against coalition forces.

Surrender decisions, in the sample interviewed, were usually made at very low levels, often among small groups of soldiers, and were not attributed to the capitulation of a higher headquarters. Artillery shelling or air attack sometimes catalyzed surrender--

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though none of the soldiers interviewed had to withstand lengthy bombardment. Officers permitted surrender, sometimes by their own desertion, sometimes by benign neglect. One officer stated, when questioned about why he had not forced his men to fight, "As a man before *Allah*, that would have been the wrong thing to do." Although he understood that his mission was to defend along the edge of an oil field, he had no map, no plan, and no communication with his higher headquarters. The ability of the Iraqi small unit leadership to invoke loyalty and influence up and down the command chain was almost completely lacking and unquestionably contributed to the disintegration of Iraqi Regular Army units in the face of advancing coalition forces.

As far as cohesion serving as a factor in combat motivation, questioning revealed that if Iraqi Regular Army soldiers had emotional ties to other soldiers, they were almost always with soldiers from their tribe or region. Squads and platoons had little or no cohesion. Iraq's approximately 150 major tribes are comprised of more than 2,000 smaller clans with a wide range of religions and ethnic groups. Soldiers spoke of units fragmented by tribal or regional differences. In addition, units were at such reduced strength that manning issues may have exacerbated the effects of fragmentation. No Iraqi soldier reported a unit strength greater than 40 percent. One of the two officers in the sample, a platoon leader, found his unit composed of only nine men of more than 48 authorized.

Many soldiers reported the practice of constantly asking (and bribing) their officers for permission to go home to their families for ten days out of every month. As Shils and Janowitz in the World War II study of German prisoners found, surrender decisions are greatly facilitated when primary groups are disrupted. The surrendering Iraqi soldiers showed little or no concern about letting their comrades down since their allegiances to their fellow soldiers in the unit were already strained or never fully cultivated. One BMP[27] driver related how, despite the fact that one of his friends was both his vehicle commander and his immediate supervisor, his surrender decision was easily made at home where he was physically and emotionally separated from his unit.

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Interviews uncovered no evidence of higher order concepts such as commitment to national service or the Arabic obligation to withstand (*Sumoud*) among the Iraqi soldiers interviewed. The soldiers never invoked Iraqi nationalism or the need to repel Americans as an invading army in response to questions about why they were in the Army, or what would cause them to try their hardest in battle.[28]

The Iraqi Regular Army appeared to be a poorly trained, poorly led, disparate group of conscripts who were more concerned with self-preservation and family ties than defending their country. It provided a good case study of what happens to a unit when social cohesion and leadership are absent.

Motivated for Others.

When U.S. troops were interviewed shortly after their experience in combat (for most, it was 3 weeks of continuous enemy contact), one of the first questions the researchers posed addressed their reasons for entering the military in the first place. The responses were what most recruiters already know--to get money for college, to gain experience before looking for a job, to follow in the footsteps of a family member who had been in the military, or just to find some adventure before settling down. Although one or two mentioned that they were motivated to enlist because of September 11, 2001, most did not cite patriotism or ideology as their enlistment rationale.

As the interview progressed, soldiers were asked the same question posed to World War II combat soldiers by Stouffer and also to the Iraqi EPWs in this monograph--"Generally, in your combat experience, what was most important to you in making you want to keep going and do as well as you could?" For World War II soldiers, besides ending the task to go home, the most common response was solidarity with one's comrades. For Iraqi Regular Army soldiers, it was coercion. For U.S. soldiers in the Iraq War, similar responses were given about going home, but importantly the most frequent response given for combat motivation was "fighting for my buddies." Soldiers answered with comments such as, "In

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combat, just the fact that if I give up, I am not helping my buddies. That is number one." or "Me and my loader were talking about it, and in combat the only thing that we really worry about is you and your crew." The soldiers were talking about social cohesion--the emotional bonds between soldiers.

Social cohesion appears to serve two roles in combat motivation. First, because of the close ties to other soldiers, it places a burden of responsibility on each soldier to achieve group success and protect the unit from harm. Soldiers feel that although their individual contribution to the group may be small, it is still a critical part of unit success and therefore important. As one soldier put it, "I am the lowest ranking private on the Bradley [fighting vehicle] so I am trying to kind of prove something in a way that I could do things. I did not want to let anyone down."

This desire to contribute to the unit mission comes not from a commitment to the mission, but a social compact with the members of the primary group. One Bradley Commander (BC) spoke of the infantrymen in the back of his vehicle and the responsibility he felt for them:

> You have two guys in the back who are not seeing what is going on, and they are putting all their trust into the gunner and the BC. Whatever objects or obstacles, or tanks or vehicles are in front of you, you are taking them out, because they don't know what is going on. They are just like in a dark room. They can't do nothing. Having that trust. . . . I guess that is one thing that kept me going.

One soldier simply stated, "I know that as far as myself, sir, I take my squad mates' lives more important than my own." Another soldier related the intense burden he felt for his fellow soldiers, "That person means more to you than anybody. You will die if he dies. That is why I think that we protect each other in any situation. I know that if he dies and it was my fault, it would be worse than death to me."

The second role of cohesion is to provide the confidence and assurance that someone soldiers could trust was "watching their back." This is not simply trusting in the competence, training, or commitment to the mission of another soldier, but trusting in

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someone they regarded as closer than a friend who was motivated to look out for their welfare. In the words of one infantryman, "You have got to trust them more than your mother, your father, or girlfriend, or your wife, or anybody. It becomes almost like your guardian angel."

The presence of comrades imparts a reassuring belief that all will be well. As one soldier stated, "It is just like a big family. Nothing can come to you without going through them first. It is kind of comforting." One soldier noted, "If he holds my back, then I will hold his, and nothing is going to go wrong." Another added, "If you are going to war, you want to be able to trust the person who is beside you. If you are his friend, you know he is not going to let you down. . . . He is going to do his best to make sure that you don't die."

Once soldiers are convinced that their own personal safety will be assured by others, they feel empowered to do their job without worry. One soldier attempted to describe how the close relationship he had with another soldier provided the psychological cushion to drive his vehicle without concern:

> I knew Taylor would personally look out for me. . . . It was stupid little things like, 'Dude, you look like you need a hug.' He would come over and give me a big old bear hug. He knew that I looked out for him and vice versa. . . . Knowing that there is somebody watching when I didn't have the opportunity to watch myself when I am driving--Taylor watched everywhere. When I am driving down the road, I have to watch in front of me knowing where I am driving and knowing that I am not going to drive over anything. I don't know what is behind me. I don't know what is to my side. I trusted Taylor was going to keep an eye on everything. He always did. Obviously, he did. We are still here. Thank God.

It should be noted that soldiers understood that totally entrusting their personal safety to others could be viewed as irrational. One young soldier commented on his parents' reaction--"My whole family thinks that I am a nut. They think, 'How can you put your life in someone's hands like that? . . . You are still going to be shot.'" Despite the occasional skepticism of outsiders, soldiers greatly valued being free of the distracting concerns of personal safety.

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Of course, anyone who has been around soldiers for any period of time recognizes that there is always a level of bickering and quarreling occurring between soldiers--especially in austere conditions. Social cohesion in combat, however, manages to overcome petty disputes. A soldier put it this way:

> I think that when we are here and we are living and seeing each other every single day going on 6 months, there is a lot of [stuff] that you just get irritated with and don't want to be around one another. But in the same sense, I think that everybody learned that no matter how [ticked] off we were at one another and how bad we were fighting, when the artillery started raining down and [stuff] started hitting the fan--it was like the [stuff] never happened. Everybody just did what we had to do. It was just looking out for one another. We weren't fighting for anybody else but ourselves. We weren't fighting for some higher-up who is somebody; we were just fighting for each other.

The bonds of trust between soldiers take weeks and months to develop. Soldiers related how shared experiences prior to combat helped develop those bonds. One soldier related how the weeks of training prior to deployment helped build relationships between soldiers:

> Going out and constantly training together, NTC rotations. . . . We are together every day for the majority of the day, 5 days a week. You are going to start knowing what ticks people off, what makes them happy, what you need to do to work with them. Eventually a bond is going to form.

Once deployed, soldiers spent more time together training. As one soldier noted, "We have worked a lot together. We did a lot of field training together, so it is like we are brothers. Suffered through it all together."

But cohesion is not just developed in training. In the long, often mundane, periods of time spent neither in training or actual combat, the bonds between soldiers are often nurtured. One infantryman spoke of cultivating relationships while pulling security:

> I knew we were going to end up spending some time together, but I never knew that we would be sleeping nose to nose, waking each other up to stand guard over the hole. . . You are waking somebody up to help

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> keep you awake and they will get up and talk to you for however long it takes.

Interestingly, much of the cohesion in units is developed simply because there is nothing else to do except talk. As one soldier observed, "In a fighting hole with somebody for so many hours, you get to know them real good because there is nothing else to talk about. You become real good friends." Another pointed out:

> You are sitting in the dirt, scanning back and forth, [and] the only person you got to talk to for me is him, which is on my left right here, about 18 inches away, sitting shoulder to shoulder. After about a month or so in the dirt like that together, you start talking about family. You start talking about everything . . . family, friends, what is going on, and your life in general pretty much, what is not right at home. Everything.

While some soldiers referred to the relationships between soldiers as "friendships," most tried to convey the depth of the relationships by using the analogy of the family. One soldier insightfully noted:

> You are away from your family and everybody--I don't care who you are, even if you are in the States and you are not in the military--you are going to look for something to attach yourself to. In the military, especially when you come out to the field, you have no family. Everyone here becomes your family. With my wife, for the first couple years of being with her, I had to learn to live with her--her routine in the morning and how my routine fits in with that, who uses the bathroom first and what have you. It is the same thing with a bunch of Joe's walking around. You learn everybody's personality--who is grumpy in the morning, who is grumpy at night, and who is grumpy when they miss chow and let them up in front of you. It is pretty much the same deal.

Another soldier echoed the family analogy by stating:

> We eat, drink, [go to the bathroom]--everything--together. I think that it should be like that . . . I really consider these guys my own family, because we fight together, we have fun together. . . . We are to the point where we even call the squad leader "Dad."

Despite the academic debate concerning social cohesion and its effects on performance, social cohesion remains a key component of combat motivation in U.S. soldiers. Social cohesion is what motivates

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soldiers not only to perform their job, but also to accept responsibility for the interests of other soldiers. At the same time, social cohesion relieves each soldier of the constant concern for personal safety as other members of the unit take on that responsibility.

Reporting the War.

To provide another perspective on cohesion in combat units, the researchers solicited views from members of the embedded media, who presented a unique point of view for two reasons. First, they could describe small unit dynamics in combat from an observer viewpoint. Because they were essentially outsiders, they did not have to be committed to the unit's mission or contribute to the unit effort. Second, and more importantly, embedded media could relate their own experiences with relationships in their embedded units. It was expected that most of the embedded media would avoid becoming too emotionally connected with soldiers to maintain their objective, neutral journalist role. Staying aloof would avoid predictions that the media embeds would "end up 'in bed' with their military protectors."[29] As CBS anchor Dan Rather warned early in the war, "There's a pretty fine line between being ***embedded*** and being entombed."[30]

Embedded media were asked if their intentions were to establish close bonds with the soldiers and then to describe the eventual outcome as far as establishing emotional bonds. Surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the media interviewed did not attempt to prevent any bonds from forming. One journalist commented, "I knew they would form, I just didn't know how strong they would be."[31] For the media, cohesion provided the assurance that their personal safety would not be imperiled. One media person noted, "We were going to war. It was potentially dangerous. I needed to get to know people to figure out who to trust if things got ugly." Another stated, "My intention all along was to form as close a bond as possible, since my main objective was to come home safe, second to telling the story."

Nearly all of the embedded media stated that close emotional bonds did form, although the bonds were not instantaneous. Similar to the experience of soldiers, time spent together provided an

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opportunity for relationships to develop. As one embed stated, "It's impossible to spend that much time living and working with people round-the-clock and not develop both a rapport and an affection." In the words of another journalist:

> I felt at first the soldiers were very suspicious and leery of me. But as the days went by and I faced the threats they faced and I went through the hardships without complaint, and I helped wherever I could, and I tried to do good deeds for them whenever possible, they came around and actually ended up feeling quite a bit of affection for me. I certainly did for them.

Another reporter related how he became close to his "minder":

> At the battery level, I rode with this young lieutenant who was "in charge" of media relations through the initial race across Iraq in the opening few days of the war. We faced snipers and an enemy artillery attack together and I think that helped form a bond. When we finally made camp out in the desert and stayed there for a week or so, he and I often chatted for hours on end (there not being much else to do most of the time).

To many of the embeds, the relationships that formed were surprising and profound. One reporter stated, "I don't really have many close male friends back here at home. So I didn't expect much in the way of close emotional relationships. I was pleasantly surprised that I made some very close friendships with some of these guys." Another journalist reflected upon the experience and stated:

> I am still in contact with the wives, who pass on messages from their husbands. We also learned after we returned home that the two cots [I and my photographer] used . . . were still in place and no one else was allowed to sleep there, either out of respect for us or because they think we might be back. Either way, I thought it was a nice tribute and demonstrates in some small degree the respect they have for us and the friendships we developed while telling the story of Charlie Co.'s war.

Interestingly, once a level of personal trust was established via the emotional bonds with the soldiers, the embedded media felt as if they could accomplish their job better. With their personal safety

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assured through the trust gained by closer personal relationships, the media could fully concentrate on reporting the war. One embedded journalist contrasted his experience in the Gulf War with the Iraq War. In the Gulf War, he felt like an outsider and "a spy." In the Iraq War, he was able to deliver a better product--reporting the war uninterrupted by a lack of trust. He commented, "War is a barrier by itself, so you don't need another barrier with a lack of trust." Another reporter noted, "I became so familiar with them that I became part of the team. I was serving my nation as well, in a different way, just like the soldiers."

As far as becoming too close to the unit and losing objectivity, the embedded media saw that the trust that comes with cohesion works both ways. They could trust the soldiers, but the soldiers could also trust the media to report fairly. After a serious incident occurred in one unit, a reporter commented how the relationship he had formed with the brigade commander allowed him to report on the incident:

> What was really helpful was that by then, he and I had already got to know each other. I liked him and trusted him. When he said he was concerned about releasing certain information, he would give me a reason, and the reason made sense. That is not generally the case even in civilian life when dealing with officials in a crisis.

Another reporter, after experiencing the combat intensity of purposefully driving into ambush after ambush on a "Thunder Run" into Baghdad, described how the bonds he had formed helped him overcome his reluctance to go again:

> The company first sergeant, in whose APC I rode, asked me if I wanted to stay behind that day because he knew it was going to be bad. But I felt that if I opted out of that, it would be abandoning those guys. I felt I had to be there to tell their story of the day they went into Baghdad to stay. So, despite a great deal of concern, I went with them.

The perspectives of the embedded media are important because they were a group that could choose their approach to establishing relationships. While the bonds the embeds described were often qualitatively different from the intense, almost familial

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relationships described by soldiers, the presence of soldiers with whom relationships had been established gave the embedded media a reassurance of their personal safety and an empowerment to do their job.

Motivated by the Cause.

The conventional wisdom established by post-World War II studies done on the American soldier is that soldiers fight for each other. This generalization was and continues to be reinforced in American society through media ranging from Mauldin's *Willie and Joe* cartoons to movies such as *Blackhawk Down* or *Band of Brothers*. Indeed, the findings of this study add yet another example of how cohesion serves as an important component of combat motivation for U.S. soldiers.

Cohesion is not, of course, the only source of combat motivation. The notion of fighting for one's comrades has usually been contrasted with the possibility that soldiers may be motivated in combat by idealistic principles--fighting for the cause. Past researchers almost always concluded that ideological notions are not prime sources of combat motivation for American soldiers. For example, Civil War researcher Bell Wiley studied both the Confederate and Union armies. Concerning the Confederate soldiers, he wrote that "it is doubtful whether many of them either understood or cared about the Constitutional issues at stake."[32] Concerning the Union soldiers, he wrote, "One searches most letters and diaries in vain for soldiers' comment on why they were in the war or for what they were fighting. . . . American soldiers of the 1860s appear to have been about as little concerned with ideological issues as were those of the 1940s."[33]

The soldiers in the 1940s were the subjects of Stouffer's *The American Soldier* studies. In that work, he noted that, "Officers and enlisted men alike attached little importance to idealistic motives--patriotism and concern about war aims."[34] He added that except for expressions of flagrant disloyalty, the strongest taboo in World War II combat soldiers was "any talk of a flag-waving variety."[35]

Surprisingly, in the present study, many soldiers *did* respond that they were motivated by idealistic notions. Liberating the people and

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bringing freedom to Iraq were common themes in describing their combat motivation. In the words of one soldier, "Liberating those people. Liberating Iraq. Seeing them free. They were repressed for, I don't know how many years, 30 something years. Just knowing that they are free now. Knowing that is awesome to me." Another soldier noted:

> There were good times when we see the people. . . . How we liberated them. That lifted up our morale. Seeing the little children. Smiling faces. Seeing a woman and man who were just smiling and cheering 'Good! Good! Good! Freedom Good!' . . . That lifted us up and kept us going. We knew we were doing a positive thing.

One embedded media person wrote, "By far the most powerful motivation for many soldiers here is the belief that they will improve life for the Iraqi people."[36] Another embed commented that soldiers did fight out of a sense of camaraderie and a duty concept, but an "icing of patriotism guides their decision to go down this path."

Three points are important here. First, this combat motivation centered on bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq. It was not nationalism or even a national security issue, but a more fundamental outcome addressing the people of Iraq. Although much of the official rationale for the war was much more complex, e.g., "Operation IRAQI FREEDOM is the multinational coalition effort to liberate the Iraqi people, eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and end the regime of Saddam Hussein,"[37] soldiers focused only on the more fundamental liberation aspects of the war aims.

Second is the timing of this response. Many soldiers described how this motivation was revealed to them as combat progressed. The images of Iraqi citizens, especially the children, helped the realization of liberation as a motivation to emerge as the war developed. As one soldier related:

> After everything settled down we actually got to see some of the people we liberated and we got to talk to them. I think that was the most rewarding part of it. Getting to do presence patrol and seeing all the little kids coming out and waving, everybody honking their horns, everybody being happy because we came over here and we kicked some ass.

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Another infantryman noted:

> We were down for a while because we were in cities--all we did was get shot at and we didn't see no civilians until like now . . . I didn't see it at first, and then I saw the people coming back who are happy, it was like, 'Thank You!' That really was the turning point. Now I know what I am doing.

It appears that today's soldiers are motivated in actual combat by fighting for their buddies, but once the war outcomes become apparent, the motivation shifts to more ideological themes. Additionally, these soldiers were interviewed just a few days after major combat operations, but before units transitioned to the peace enforcement role. Possibly, as soldiers experience a protracted deployment supporting the Coalition Provisional Authority, this motivation may shift again.

Third, while it is no longer taboo to talk about idealistic notions --especially after September 11th, soldiers still find it difficult to express this moral dimension of their combat motivation. It was not uncommon for soldiers to tell of the difficulty of describing morally charged values. Comments such as, "You just have to be there and see it for yourself" or "You can't really explain it" were frequent. As one tongue-tied infantryman put it:

> It may be a cornball answer, but believe me, I'm not into all that, but just actually seeing some of them waving and shooting thumbs up. They are like, 'We love you America!' . . . I am not like a very emotional person, but the kids come up to you, they give you a hug. One lady came up to one of our soldiers and tried to give him the baby so that the baby could give him a kiss. It was like, 'Whoa!!' It was a heartfelt moment there for me.

Despite the results of previous studies and the subsequent conventional wisdom that American soldiers are not motivated by ideological sentiments, many soldiers in this study reported being motivated by notions of freedom, liberation, and democracy. Why would today's U.S. soldiers be more apt to speak of being motivated by idealistic aims? Two possible reasons emerge.

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First, U.S. soldiers throughout history may have had ideological motives, but did not realize it. In his study of American enlisted men, Moskos argued that while cohesion is often the primary combat motivation, supplementary factors (other than training and equipment) must exist to explain why cohesion alone does not determine battle performance. He posited that cohesion will "maintain the soldier in his combat role only when he has an underlying commitment to the worth of the larger social system for which he is fighting."[38] He called this commitment a *latent ideology* that supports the role of cohesion as a combat motivation. According to Moskos, soldiers may not acknowledge or even know about this latent ideology, but it nevertheless exists. Thus, while today's soldiers still feel awkward speaking of idealistic motivations, they may be relatively less inhibited about articulating idealistic notions compared to soldiers of the past.

Civil War historian James McPherson proposed another possibility concerning why soldiers sometimes fight for ideology. McPherson argued that ideology did serve as a combat motivation during the Civil War. He proposed that three situational characteristics were present during the Civil War that helped ideology emerge as a combat motivation for both sides of that war. First, he noted that the Confederate and Union armies were the most literate armies in history to that time. Over 80 percent of the Confederate soldiers and over 90 percent of the Union soldiers were literate. Second, most of the soldiers were volunteers as opposed to draftees or conscripts. They were not forced to take up arms. Finally, McPherson noted that Civil War soldiers came from the world's most politicized and democratic society.[39] Soldiers voted, read newspapers, and participated in discussions concerning national issues. The interaction of these three factors provided the conditions where soldiers were able, inclined, and encouraged to debate ideological notions. Soldiers who are educated, comfortable discussing ideological topics, and volunteers are more apt to fight for the cause. As a result, McPherson argued that Confederate soldiers fought "for liberty and independence from what they regarded as a tyrannical government" while Union soldiers fought "to preserve the nation created by the founders from dismemberment and destruction."[40]

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Interestingly, the same three conditions exist today. Soldiers are well-educated. The average education of a new soldier in 2002 was 12.1 years of education. That implies that the average new soldier is more than a high school graduate; he or she has some college experience. Soldiers are also older and more mature than we think. In 2002, the average new soldier was 21.1 years old.

Soldiers are also amazingly in touch with the pressing issues of the day. Via the Internet, Fox News, and CNN, they know the world situation, who the key players are, and the essence of the policy debates. When *The New York Times* quoted an infantryman of the 3rd Infantry Division as saying, "You call Donald Rumsfeld and tell him our sorry asses are ready to go home,"[41] it was not only surprising to hear such a direct message being conveyed up the chain of command, but it was also eye-opening that a Private First Class (PFC) would even know who the Secretary of Defense was.

One embedded journalist commented on the underestimated sophistication of today's soldiers and said, "Soldiers I encountered were trained, ethical, thoughtful, and intelligent. It was not unusual to talk to a Private or PFC and be absolutely astounded at how well he could talk about why they were there [fighting in Iraq]." Additionally, soldiers are attuned to ideology, values, and abstract principles. Since the day they took their enlistment oaths, they have been bombarded with idealistic notions. New soldiers are socialized to be comfortable talking about value-laden ideas ranging from the seven Army values to the Soldier's Creed.[42]

Finally, today's soldiers are volunteers. They were not coerced into service, and they did not approach the military as the employer of last resort. They come from a generation that trusts the military institution. In 1975, a Harris Poll reported that only 20 percent of people ages 18 to 29 said they had a great deal of confidence in those who ran the military.[43] Compare that with a recent poll by the Harvard Institute of Politics that found that 70 percent of college undergraduates trust the military to do the right thing either all or most of the time.[44] Soldiers understand that they are professionals in a values-based institution. They trust each other, their leaders, the Army, and they understand the moral aspects of war.

The U.S. Army has matured from a conscript army, through a

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fledgling all-volunteer army, to what is now a truly professional army. Professional soldiers still fight for each other, but professional soldiers also accept the responsibility that the Army has entrusted to them. Evidence of this transition is found even in the families of today's soldiers. When reporters interviewed wives about their husbands' delayed redeployment from Iraq, one sergeant's wife commented, "As military spouses, we know our husbands have responsibilities. They are professionals doing their jobs." Another spouse added, "I wonder how [complaining] must sound to someone who's lost someone."[45] Still another spouse noted, "I could have married anyone else who would have been at work 9 to 5. The job (my husband) does is an amazingly honorable one."[46]

Conclusion.

Shortly after the latest Iraq War, Colonel Abdul-Zahra of the former Iraqi Army commented that, "The U.S. Army is certainly the best in the world. But it's not because of the fighting men, but because of their equipment."[47] Colonel Abdul-Zahra missed the point. The Iraq War showed that while the U.S. Army certainly has the best equipment and training, a human dimension is often overlooked. As military historian Victor Davis Hanson observed shortly after the end of major combat operations in Iraq:

> The lethality of the military is not just organizational or a dividend of high-technology. Moral and group cohesion explain more still. The general critique of the 1990s was that we had raised a generation with peroxide hair and tongue rings, general illiterates who lounged at malls, occasionally muttering 'like' and 'you know' in Sean Penn or Valley Girl cadences. But somehow the military has married the familiarity and dynamism of crass popular culture to 19th-century notions of heroism, self-sacrifice, patriotism, and audacity.[48]

The soldiers interviewed for this study presented an impression that was often crude, vulgar, and cynical, yet that impression was leavened with a surprisingly natural acceptance of the institution's values. The U.S. Army is the best in the world because, in addition to possessing the best equipment, its soldiers also have an unmatched level of trust. They trust each other because of the close interpersonal

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bonds between soldiers. They trust their leaders because their leaders have competently trained their units. And they trust the Army because, since the end of the draft, the Army has had to attract its members rather than conscripting them. Unable any longer to obtain labor by force, the all-volunteer Army was "compelled to transform itself into an institution that people would respect and trust. Bonds forged by trust replaced bonds forged by fear of punishment."[49] Because our soldiers trust the Army as an institution, they now look to the Army to provide the moral direction for war. As this study has shown, soldiers still fight for each other. In a professional army, however, soldiers are also sophisticated enough to grasp the moral reasons for fighting.

Implications.

Two implications result from this study. First, cohesion, or the strong emotional bonds between soldiers, continues to be a critical factor in combat motivation. One of the main purposes of the Unit Manning System is to increase unit cohesion. While critics may attack the implications of the Unit Manning System because of the effects on leader development, total force turbulence, or increased personnel management complexities, denouncing cohesion as either irrelevant or detrimental is nonsensical. Likewise, attempting to dissect cohesion into social or task cohesion and then comparing correlations with performance is best left to the antiseptic experiments of academia. For those interested in overturning the DoD homosexual conduct policy, it may be prudent to choose a strategy other than questioning the linkage between cohesion and combat performance.

The Iraq War confirms what every combat soldier already knows--cohesion places a shared responsibility for the success of the unit on each individual while giving each soldier the confidence that someone else is watching over them. Spending large amounts of time together, usually in austere conditions, develops this trusting relationship. The Iraqi and American armies provide an interesting contrast in cohesion. In the former, the absence of cohesion made the surrender decision easy. In the latter, the presence of cohesion

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was a primary source of combat motivation.

The second implication concerns the transformation of the force to a professional army. The move from a struggling all-volunteer army to a truly professional force has not been easy. Early problems in the "hollow" Army included declining enlistment propensity, low quality recruits, high attrition, and plummeting morale.[50] Seven years into the experiment, Richard Nixon, who introduced the all-volunteer Army, wrote, "The volunteer army has failed to provide enough personnel of the caliber we need for our highly sophisticated armaments."[51] The Army rebounded in the 1980s with "Be All You Can Be" and a recruiting overhaul, but the 1990s dismantled much of what had been accomplished through a demoralizing downsizing. The survivors picked up the pieces, however, and overcame another recruiting crisis in the late 1990s. Today, the "Army of One" is the culmination of 30 years of movement toward a professional Army. It is a high-tech, highly trained, and highly *professional* force.

The bonds of trust among soldiers, their leaders, and the Army as an institution, however, are not invulnerable. Horror film director John Carpenter was once asked what he thought scared people the most. His answer: "Uncertainty."[52] Uncertainty can unravel the trust that provides the underpinnings for the professional Army through two means.

First, uncertainty can be introduced by subjecting the Army to a major downsizing. The research is clear that downsizing severely damages the psychological contract between an organization and its downsizing survivors.[53] Those left behind grapple with uncertainty in the form of wondering about the magnitude and duration of the downsizing, the management of the downsizing, determining who will pick up the remaining workload after the reductions, and wondering if their turn is next. In the rush for lessons learned after the Iraq War, there has been enough talk of trading force for speed that the specter of an Army downsizing in the future is real.

Second, uncertainty can be imposed on the Army through open-ended deployments. Soldiers will salute and deploy to distant parts of the world when ordered, but when their redeployment date is uncertain, trust with the institution is strained. Much like the society they represent, today's soldiers view wars in terms of weeks,

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not months, e.g., a CBS poll early in the war showed 62 percent of Americans believing that the war would be "quick and successful."[54] While today's wars may be prosecuted quickly, the ensuing peace operations continue indefinitely. As a result, the Army is increasingly stretched over 120 countries, and the ability to redeploy soldiers home after an operation has diminished significantly. After observing the current situation, Michael O'Hanlon noted, "It would be the supreme irony, and a national tragedy, if after winning two wars in 2 years, the U.S. Army were broken and defeated while trying to keep the peace."[55]

This study set out to examine why soldiers fight. The findings showed that U.S. soldiers continue to fight because of the bonds of trust between soldiers. They also fight, however, because of the bonds of trust established with the Army as an institution. Our soldiers are professionals and are the culmination of 30 years of an all-volunteer force. While that may be cause for commemoration, it is also cause for consideration as policymakers chart the course for the future.

ENDNOTES

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11. Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly,* Vol. 12, Summer 1948, p. 281.

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16. U.S. Code, Title 10, Subtitle A, Part II, Chapter 37, Section 654, (a) (15).

17. Elizabeth Kier, "Homosexuals in the U.S. Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness," *International Security,* Vol. 23, No. 2, Fall 1998, p. 18.

18. Robert J. MacCoun, "What is Known About Unit Cohesion and Military Performance," in RAND, *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment,* Santa Monica, CA: National Defense Research Institute, MR-323-OSD, 1993, p. 298.

19. David R. Segal and Meyer Kestnbaum, "Professional Closure in the Military Labor Market: A Critique of Pure Cohesion," in Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins, eds., *The Future of the Army Profession,* New York: McGraw-Hill Primus, 2002, p. 453. See also Stephen B. Knouse, *Keeping "On Task": An Exploration of Task Cohesion in Diverse Military Teams,* Patrick Air Force Base, FL: Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, 1998.

20. Unit Manning Task Force, *https://www.unitmanning.army.mil/Overview_*

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items/mission_statement.htm.

21. The Iraqi soldiers required special consideration due to their status as captured combatants. Both the Geneva Convention and specific guidance from Department of Defense (Department of Defense Directive 3216.2, *Protection of Human Subjects and Adherence to Ethical Standards in DoD-Supported Research,* Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 25, 2002) protect enemy prisoners from exposure to the idly curious and from use as human subjects in behavioral research. Questions were therefore restricted to issues involving individual and unit military effectiveness and followed the advice and consent of staff judge advocates in Iraq, Kuwait, and CONUS. Although camp rules dictated that prisoners remain under military guard at all times, the interview setting was made as comfortable as possible. A U.S. military intelligence officer oversaw the collection of information from EPWs.

22. Colonel Terrence Potter is an Arabic professor at the U.S. Military Academy and conducted all the interviews.

23. While 16 U.S. Marines were interviewed, the majority of the U.S. sample consisted of U.S. Army soldiers. No noticeable differences in demographics or attitudes were noted between the Marine and Army infantrymen interviewed.

24. Subsequent quotations from soldiers are taken directly from the transcribed interviews.

25. Perhaps the Iraqis would have been expected to fight because that is what soldiers do when their country is attacked. *Sumoud* (as in the *al-Sumoud* missile) means "withstanding" or "steadfastness" in Arabic, and soldiers might have been expected to respond that they fought just to resist the invaders.

26. Absent Without Leave.

27. Soviet armored personnel carrier.

28. Such questions are sensitive in a prison setting and responses may have been influenced by social desirability concerns. It should be noted that during the interviews, significant numbers of prisoners were being released from the camp—as many as 350 per day during the final 2 days of interviews. Under such circumstances, prisoners may be less likely to express defiant or nationalistic attitudes to military interviewers. On the other hand, knowing that freedom was imminent may have allowed them to speak more freely.

29. Howard Kurtz, "After Invading Kuwait, Reporters Need Boot Camp," *The Washington Post,* March 10, 2003, p. C1.

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31. All embedded media interviewed for this monograph were assigned to U.S. Army ground units. One could expect different responses from Air Force or Navy embedded media as well as from journalists embedded to higher headquarters. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from embedded media are taken from phone, email, or personal interviews.

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33. Bell Irwin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union,* Indianapolis: Wiley, 1952, pp. 39-40.

34. Stouffer, p. 111.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

36. Ann Scott Tyson, "Oceans Away, US Troops Crave Approval at Home," *The Christian Science Monitor,* April 8, 2003, p. 1.

37. Photo caption insert on all Operation IRAQI FREEDOM imagery, Joint Combat Camera Center, a division of the American Forces Information Service (AFIS), a field activity of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs).

38. Moskos, p. 147.

39. James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For: 1861-1865,* Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1994, p. 4. See also Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat,* Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997, pp. 97-102, for a discussion of the role of "The Cause" in the combat motivation of Union soldiers.

40. McPherson, p. 7.

41. Steven Lee Myers, "Anxious and Weary of War, G.I.'s Face a New Iraq Mission," *The New York Times,* June 15, 2003, p. 1.

42. The seven Army values are Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless-service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. These values are on posters, wallet cards, and even tags to accompany each soldier's identification tags (dog tags). The Soldier's Creed is issued to soldiers with their Soldier's Manual on the first day of basic training. It contains statements such as, "I am doing my share to keep alive the principles of freedom for which my country stands."

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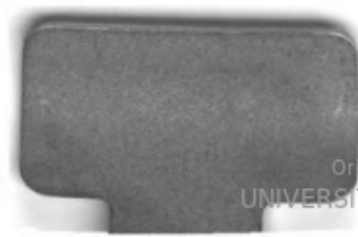

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