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## The Cold War and Modern Memory: Veterans Reflect on Military Service

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### Abstract

This paper uses data from focused interviews to look at how veterans who served primarily during the peacetime Cold War portrayed the effects of military service. Most veterans described being a soldier, sailor, or airman as a neutral, transitional role. Veterans also described their service as having features that are consistent with views of such service as both a positive turning point and a negative disruption. However, only one veteran described military service as operating as a positive turning point in his own life, and just two described it as having been a disruption in their lives. In addition, veterans who served as officers described learning leadership and confidence in the armed forces, which may help explain an observed quantitative officer premium. This latter finding is consistent with a view of the armed forces as facilitating the accumulation of advantage.

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More than 5 million individuals entered the US armed forces in the years 1954–64, the decade of the cold war between the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Flynn 1993). According to the 2000 census, more than a third of men in their early sixties, those approaching retirement, served in this peacetime period. Yet, little is known about how the relatively common experience of this peacetime service affected the later lives of these veterans. The following paper looks at how some of these men interpreted the effects of serving in the armed forces on their later lives.

The paper extends previous research by looking at how veterans described the effect of military service when asked to do so themselves. Previous research has looked at how military service affected veterans, but much of this research has focused on quantitative effects. Economists and sociologists have explored the extent to which military service shaped veterans' educational, occupational, and economic attainment. Quantitative research regarding the impact of military service on individuals' lives has reached a variety of conclusions, suggesting that the impact of service depended on race, educational attainment, rank, draft status, and the timing and era of service. The quantitative effects of service were

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negative for some, but positive for others. On average, veterans had lower socioeconomic attainment than their nonveteran counterparts (Angrist 1990; Fitzgerald 2006; Imbens and Van der Klaauw 1995). For the most part, these negative effects were not long-lasting. Veterans may have had an initial disadvantage relative to nonveterans, but overcame that disadvantage with time in the civilian labor force (Card 1983; Maas and Settersten 1999). In some cases, veterans later surpassed nonveterans in their socioeconomic attainment (De Tray 1982; Teachman 2004; Xie 1992). In addition, some minority veterans and veterans with juvenile arrests experienced military service as a positive turning point, leading them to achieve better outcomes than they would have otherwise (Laub and Sampson 2003; Lopreato and Poston 1977; Poston 1979; Sampson and Laub 1996). Yet, the mechanism by which military service exerted a penalty or provided a premium is not known.

This paper builds on previous research that looked at how veterans who served in World War II and the years immediately afterward assessed their service (Elder, Gimbel, and Ivie 1991; Laub and Sampson 2003). It uses data from focused interviews to shed light on how veterans of the peacetime cold war described the effect of military service on their life course trajectories. It takes a long-term view of how military service shapes attitudes, presenting the interpretations of veterans who served in the military on average 40 years ago. I derive three predictions for how veterans will interpret their service by combining findings regarding the quantitative effects of military service on veterans' lives with the principles of life course research. First, military service may have had a negative effect on the life course, leading veterans to experience worse outcomes than they would have otherwise, and be viewed as a disruption (Hogan 1978). Second, it may have had a positive effect on veterans' lives and be viewed as a turning point (Elder 1986; Elder 1987; Elder and Hareven 1993). Third, it may have had a neutral effect on the life course and be viewed as a transitional role, similar to that of student (Marini 1984; Modell 1989).

### Three Views of Military Service

This paper derives expectations regarding veterans' interpretations of military service from the five principles of life course research: 1. human agency; 2. linked lives; 3. location in time and place; 4. timing; and 5. lifelong development. According to this perspective, individuals experience particular trajectories as a consequence of their family background and their personal characteristics. In combination with the effects of these characteristics, they are affected by their social and historical context. They have different experiences as a consequence of the intersection of age, period, cohort, or the timing of events (Giele and Elder 1998). In addition, they develop and change throughout the life course, as a consequence of aging (Elder and Johnson 2002). These factors interact to produce different life course trajectories.

Experiences of military service are shaped in timing and content by historical events. In general, individuals serve during the transition to adulthood, in their late teens and early twenties. However, the numbers of individuals serving and the content of their service are determined by the historical era during which the members of different cohorts came of age. Individuals who were born in the years around 1920 were eligible to serve in the military during the second world war. Thus, a majority of them served in the armed forces, and many

of these were sent abroad and exposed to combat. By contrast, individuals who were born in the years around 1960 came of age during the early 1980s, the era of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF). They were unlikely to serve, and if they did they were unlikely to experience combat. Thus, veterans had different experiences while in the military, and likely interpret the effect of their service differently based on their location in time and place.

While the role of history and culture are particularly relevant to the interpretation of military service, all five principles of the life course shape the way that individuals may view their service. For example, if individuals see military service as altering their life course trajectories, they may describe it as a negative disruption or a positive turning point. The timing of their service may also play an important role in the way that veterans portray their service. Veterans who entered when they were older, by some accounts, were more negatively affected by their service, and may therefore view their service more negatively. The effect of service on veterans' life course trajectories is further shaped by their particular social networks, including their relationships with their friends, acquaintances, and relatives. Thus, their interpretations may also be shaped by the principle of linked lives.

### Disruption

The timing of military service, generally occurring when individuals are in their late teens and early twenties, makes it likely to disrupt the order of the events of the transition to adulthood (Hogan 1978; Winsborough 1978). Indeed, some research has shown military service to be a disruption, leading individuals to more negative outcomes than they might have experienced otherwise. Individuals who served in the armed forces are socialized to be violent in preparation for combat, leading them to be more likely than nonveterans to commit crimes (Bouffard 2005; Wright, Carter, and Cullen 2005). Veterans of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars had worse socioeconomic outcomes than similar nonveterans, for at least a portion of their work lives (Angrist 1990; Angrist and Krueger 1994; Fitzgerald 2006).

In addition, military service may be particularly negative for particular types of veterans. Veterans from the recent all-volunteer era who entered the armed forces with a college degree had lower wages than nonveterans with similar educational attainment (Bryant, Samaranayake, and Wilhite 1993). Korean and World War II veterans who entered the military later in life experienced more negative outcomes than those who entered earlier (Elder 1986; Elder 1987). These veterans were already established in their work and family lives, and thus did not benefit from their service, but experienced it as a disruption. In addition, military service may be a particularly negative experience during wartime (e.g., Barrett, Green, Morris, Giles, and Croft 1996; Elder, Shanahan, and Clipp 1994; Elder, Shanahan, and Clipp 1997; Lee, Vaillant, Torrey, and Elder 1995; Neylan, Marmar, Metzler, Weiss, Zatzick, Delucchi, Wu, and Schoenfeld 1998; Savoca and Rosenheck 2000). Accordingly, veterans with higher education, as well as those who entered when they were older or during wartime, may interpret their time in the armed forces as a disruption.

## Positive Turning Point

By contrast, some theory and research suggests that military service provided a positive turning point that helped individuals overcome the disadvantages associated with their individual or family characteristics. According to this view, such service enabled individuals to shift from a negative to a positive trajectory (De Tray 1982; Elder 1986; Elder 1987; Elder and Hareven 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003). Military service may be a positive turning point in individuals' lives due to several features. It removes individuals from their families and friends, creating a break with what may have been a negative past (Brotz and Wilson 1946; Elder 1986; Elder 1987; Elder and Hareven 1993). Individuals who join the military often leave home, becoming independent for the first time, and frequently relocating to unfamiliar surroundings. They may also learn skills such as working with other people, operating within a bureaucracy, and meeting deadlines that they otherwise would not have had the chance to learn. They can take time out from their age-graded careers. In addition, an honorable discharge from the military assures employers that veterans have met the military's physical and mental requirements and completed their service, serving as a screening device (De Tray 1982).

Indeed, some quantitative research has found that military service had a positive effect on minority veterans, on those with lower pre-service educational attainment and on those with prior criminal records. For example, research conducted in the 1970s found that African-American and Mexican-American veterans earned more than their nonveteran counterparts because military service provided a "bridging environment" enabling these veterans to learn skills they would not otherwise have learned (Browning, Lopreato, and Poston 1973; Lopreato and Poston 1977; Poston 1979)- though Cutright (1974) did not find that military service benefited minority veterans. In addition, veterans who had a history of delinquency were less likely to commit crimes after their service in some cases (Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson and Laub 1996). Military service has also benefited high school dropouts (Berger and Hirsch 1983; Bryant, Samaranayake, and Wilhite 1993)—although Teachman (2004) found that high school dropouts did not benefit from service during the Vietnam era. Research on the more recent All-Volunteer Force (AVF) tends to verify that military service reverses disadvantages: white veterans have earned less than their nonveteran peers, while service in the AVF has increased the earnings of non-white veterans (Angrist 1998).

While most research suggesting that military service has positive effects has focused on veterans with fewer pre-service advantages, several papers have found that military service also benefited individuals who served as officers regardless of their pre-service characteristics. Veterans who served as officers have had greater success in their later civilian careers, in contrast with those who served in the enlisted ranks (Dechter and Elder 2004; Hirsch and Mehay 2003). At the end of World War II, and at the beginning of the All-Volunteer Force, officers were more likely than enlisted men to think that they got a "fair deal" in the military (Segal, Lynch, and Blair 1979). Because relatively little research has examined the effects of rank, there has been little discussion about the mechanism leading to the officer premium. Dechter and Elder (2004) speculate that officers entered a "pipeline" of connections that facilitated their later careers. It may also be that officers benefited, as did more disadvantaged individuals, from skills that they learned while in the military.

Research and theory regarding military service as a positive turning point has focused on particular types of veterans, suggesting that veterans with particular pre-service characteristics benefited from their service. Therefore, veterans who were members of racial minority groups, who had criminal records, as well as those who served as officers may interpret their service as having been a positive turning point.

### **Transitional Role**

Military service may also serve as a neutral transitional role in the lives of veterans. In this view, veterans' pre-service life course trajectories are not affected by their service. In the transition from adolescence to adulthood, individuals move from being dependent on their families of origin to being independent and starting their own families of procreation. As described above, some demographers have viewed military service as disrupting the transition, leading to negative outcomes like divorce (Hogan 1978; Winsborough 1978). However, others have viewed military service as a component of the transition. In this view, the role of soldier is a transitional one, akin to that of college student (Marini 1984; Modell 1989). Indeed, some research finds a neutral role of military service, once selection into the military is taken into account (Hirsch and Mehay 2003; London and Wilmoth 2006; Xie 1992). Veterans may therefore portray their military service as neither positive nor negative, but as a neutral transitional role.

## **Data and Methods**

### **The Interview Subjects**

To assess how peacetime cold war veterans portrayed the effects of their military service, I interviewed a sub-sample of the population represented by the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) in 2002 and 2004. The WLS is a one-third random sample of the approximately 30,000 individuals who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. The men in the population were covered by the draft. More than half of the men in the WLS served in the military. From this cohort, I contacted 27 veterans, of whom 20 (74 percent) agreed to be interviewed. I also contacted 11 nonveterans, ultimately interviewing 4 (36 percent). I informed the nonveterans that I was interested in how the possibility of military service affected their lives. Since I was most interested in the veteran experience, I did not persist in trying to convince the nonveterans to be interviewed if they said that they didn't think that the possibility of military service had affected them. The following analysis focuses primarily on the interviews with the veterans.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the interview subjects relative to those of the larger WLS sample. Twenty of the men had served in the armed forces, while four had not. Thus, the sample contained a much larger share of veterans than the larger WLS sample. Among the veterans, the interview subjects shared broadly similar characteristics with the larger sample. The majority entered the armed forces in 1957–1959, the two and a half years after they graduated from high school. Less than 10 percent of the subjects and the larger sample entered the armed forces after 1962, meaning that a very small share served during the Vietnam era. It is possible that the subjects who served in the wartime era were less likely than those who entered before that date to remain in the larger survey due to differential

mortality and response rates, and thus would be less likely to participate in these interviews. However, among the male WLS respondents who were veterans according to information collected by the survey in 1964 and 1975, those who entered the armed forces after 1962 were no less likely to complete the survey in 1992 and no more likely to be deceased by 2004. In both the interview and the larger samples, the majority of veterans served in the Army. Slightly more than ten percent served as officers and slightly more than ten percent had been drafted. Approximately a quarter of the veterans completed additional years of schooling after their service.

### The Focused Interview

The interviews were open-ended, but focused on particular questions (Merton, Fiske, and Kendall 1990; Weiss 1995). They lasted an average of an hour and a half. The shortest one was 25 minutes, while the longest was 2 hours and 20 minutes. I transcribed the interviews and coded them in NVivo (QSR 2002). Each interview began with an introduction outlining the broad question of how the tradeoffs between military service and other options affected the later course of the subjects' lives. Then, the subjects were asked to provide a biographical sketch touching on what they felt were the important events or experiences of their lives. Next, they were asked to reflect on the years between high school and their mid-twenties and to comment on what they felt was the most important decision they had made or event that had happened to them during that time. Finally, they were asked more specifically about military service, prompting the subjects to generally comment on what they learned during their time in the armed forces.<sup>1</sup>

### Predictions

As described above, the quantitative findings regarding military service have been mixed, with some positive, some negative, and some neutral findings regarding the effects of military service. To some extent, these different effects stem from the different eras and types of veterans examined in previous studies. Table 2 presents predicted interpretations of service by selected characteristics. The predictions are derived from prior quantitative combined with the principles of the life course perspective. The first column indicates the number of veterans interviewed in a particular category. The second column indicates the predicted interpretation for the specified category of subjects. For example, previous research has shown that the timing of service matters, with those entering the armed forces when they were older experiencing more negative outcomes than those who entered when they were younger (Elder 1986; Elder 1987). Therefore, the table predicts that older entrants will interpret their service as a negative disruption.

The following analyses hold constant era of service, and age at which veterans were interviewed. Therefore, they allow an examination of some differences in veterans' interpretations of military service though not others. The data are drawn from veterans who served primarily in the peacetime draft era. They do not, therefore, shed light on how veterans who served during different time periods may have interpreted their service differently. Veterans who served during the wartime draft years may have had more

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<sup>1</sup>Interview protocol is available on request.

negative interpretations of their experiences. In addition, they do not allow an examination of the veterans who may be most negatively affected by their service, those exposed to combat (Barrett et al. 1996; Dobie, Kivlahan, Maynard, Bush, Davis, and Bradley 2004; Elder, Shanahan, and Clipp 1994; Elder, Shanahan, and Clipp 1997; Erickson, Wolfe, King, King, and Sharkansky 2001; Hoge, Castron, Messer, McGurk, Cotting, and Koffman 2004; Laufer and Gallops 1985; Neylan et al. 1998; Pavalko and Elder 1990). Thus, the findings may be more positive than they would be otherwise.

On the other hand, the interviews may contain fewer positive interpretations of military service than would analyses based on a different sample. The data are based on interviews with white veterans who had at least a high school degree. They do not shed light on how the effects of military service may be interpreted differently by nonwhite veterans. Nor do they speak to how those effects would be described by high school dropouts or by individuals with pre-service criminal careers, by some accounts the veterans who most benefited from their service (Berger and Hirsch 1983; Bryant, Samaranayake, and Wilhite 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003). In addition, veterans who served during the past thirty years of the non-draft era may view their service in a more positive light than the subjects of this research, as they are more likely to have chosen to enter the military without the threat of compulsion. For these reasons, the findings may be more negative than they would be otherwise.

Despite these limitations, the analyses do allow comparisons of veterans who served in the enlisted ranks to those who served as officers and of veterans with pre-service college degrees to those with only high school degrees. In addition, they allow a comparison of interpretations by individuals who entered the military when they were younger to those who entered when they were older.

## Findings

The third column of table 2 presents the dominant interpretation for each category of veterans interviewed in the present analyses. Within each category of veterans, most veterans described their service in neutral terms consistent with seeing it as a transitional role. There are two exceptions to this pattern. Officers predominately referred to their service as having been a positive turning point, teaching them leadership and confidence. In addition, individuals who entered the armed forces with more than a college degree were equally likely to refer to their service as a positive turning point and as a neutral transitional role. This positive effect for individuals with higher education is related to the fact that they were more likely to serve as officers. Among the five interview subjects with pre-service college degrees, more than half attained officer status. None of the 15 interview subjects without pre-service college degrees served in this capacity. Within the larger WLS survey, 40 percent of veterans with college degrees served as officers, while only 2 percent of veterans without college degrees served as officers.

### Military service as a transitional role

Sixteen of the veterans said that the military broadened their experiences, which, I argue, coincides with a view of military service as a transitional role. These veterans were able to

travel to faraway places and to learn about race and diversity. This broadening effect was the most common way that veterans characterized their service. It is consistent with other research that suggests that military service is broadening (Brotz and Wilson 1946; Browning, Lopreato, and Poston 1973; Elder 1986; Elder 1987; Elder and Hareven 1993; Lopreato and Poston 1977). However, with several exceptions described below, the veterans did not describe the experience as providing them with a positive turning point, enabling them to achieve more than they would have had they not served. As one veteran said, “It was pretty much of an interesting experience, but not very helpful as far as my career went.”

The second most common way that veterans depicted their military service was as helping them to “grow up,” which is also consistent with seeing the military as a transitional role. Of the 20 veterans I interviewed, 12 used variants of the phrase “grow up,” to describe how the armed forces affected them. The veterans described growing up as a consequence of two facets of military service. First, they described the military as forcing them to take responsibility for their actions. Second, they described their service as the first time they were separated from their families. However, one of the nonveterans I interviewed said that he grew up because he did not serve in the military. Indeed, when asked to identify the most important event of their early adulthood, only four veterans identified their time in the armed forces. Fourteen veterans said that they learned responsibility and grew up less because of their military service and more because of their education, marriages, or jobs.

## Military Experience as Broadening

Along with fifteen other veterans, Lewis Jansen<sup>2</sup> described military service as broadening his experience. He grew up in the 1950s on a dairy farm in Northern Wisconsin and worked his way through a nearby college. Like all men who attended college at the time, he was required to take two years of Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC). He chose to continue in the ROTC for the final two years of college. Thus, when he graduated from college, he entered the Army as a second lieutenant, a commissioned officer. Between 1961 and 1963, he was stationed at the central unit that coordinated the 12 defensive missile sites surrounding Chicago. When Jansen left the Army, he worked as an educator and completed graduate work with GI bill funds. Here is how he described the effect of military service on his life:

I interact with some people, work with some people, who are now retired, semi-retired as I am. And we play bridge, and we play golf, and we interact with one another. I think overall I have a better education than they do because of my involvement with the military. I think I understand some facet of the world. They don’t know what it’s like to pitch a tent in the rain, as we were forced to do. They don’t know what it’s like to eat in a mess hall. They don’t know what it’s like to wear a uniform and work hard to keep your uniform looking neat and trim. Those kinds of things. They didn’t have those kinds of experiences, and I think I’m richer for those kinds of experiences. Can I say this one resulted in my making a thousand

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<sup>2</sup>All names of people are pseudonyms. All places have been altered to protect confidentiality.



dollars more? No. Can I say this person, this experience made me more respectful of my mother? No.

In the preceding description, Jansen expressed a common sentiment among the veterans that their lives were improved in some unmeasurable way by having been exposed to a diversity of unfamiliar experiences. Eleven veterans talked about going to foreign countries and being able to travel to different states around the country. As one veteran said, "I got to places I never would have."

In addition, the men I interviewed, like the rest of the WLS sample, came from Wisconsin, and therefore had little prior exposure to people of color. Four veterans mentioned that military service introduced them to people of different races. Jansen described his introduction to racial issues in the Army by saying:

It's tremendous diversity. Just to learn about some other people. So, going in the service and being around a mix of people from around the country, was a real eye-opener for me, coming from little old Ashland. I, golly, I don't think there was a person of color at Northland College. I can't remember any, certainly any that I encountered.

Thus, military service provided some men with an introduction to African-Americans and, more broadly, to racial issues. However, one veteran said that though whites and African-Americans worked together, they did not socialize together. Overall, the veterans described how military service broadened their experiences, taking them to new places, introducing them to new people and to people of different races.

## Growing up in the Military

Larry Gleixner is one of the 12 veterans I interviewed who felt that he "grew up" in the military. He was born and raised in Milwaukee by working class parents. After a disappointing year of college, he spent four years in the Air Force, two and a half of these years in Korea. He returned from service and worked for 31 years in a medical service position for the state. In the interview, Gleixner described basic training, which led him to discuss what he meant by growing up:

Like I said, when you look back on it, and I've talked to other guys that have gone through, everybody that's gone through basic training is, kind of, laughs about it. And actually you say, "I'm glad I went through it." Because they take you, they get boys and they turn you out to be men, let's put it that way. ... Well, you grow up. When you grow up in your house with your parents, you rely on them doing everything for you. When you become a man you've got to stand on your own two feet. You've got to think for yourself. And you've got to be responsible for yourself, and, you know, for your actions. That's the difference.

In the preceding exchange, Gleixner discussed how the training affected him. He equated "growing up" with learning to take responsibility, as did many of the other interview subjects. Similarly, eleven other veterans described how they "grew up" in the military, and particularly in basic training. Like Gleixner, they credited their maturation to having to meet

the rigorous standards set by the military. Also like Gleixner, they attributed their growing up to living away from their parents.

Veterans may see the armed forces as facilitating the process of growing up simply because of the timing of military service. Individuals typically serve in the military during their late teens and early twenties, the years in which they are expected to grow up and move from being classified as adolescents to being adults (Hogan 1978; Hogan and Astone 1986; Marini 1984; Modell 1989). However, individuals who do not serve in the military also make the same transition.

### **Military service as a positive turning point**

Though many described the armed forces as broadening their horizons and as helping them to grow up, nine veterans portrayed the military as providing them with training, education, and experience, potentially serving as a positive turning point in their lives. Three veterans described learning specific skills in the military, which they were able to use in their later civilian work. Three veterans used GI bill funds to complete graduate degrees after their service. One of these also served as an officer. All three of the officers described learning leadership and confidence in the military. Yet, only one veteran asserted that military service led him to experience better outcomes than if he had not served. Thus, though many veterans described the military as improving their skills and education, they were less likely to portray their service as diverting them from a negative trajectory.

### **Shifting from a negative trajectory**

Relatively few of the veterans described the armed forces as improving their lives. Four of the interview subjects mentioned a view of the military as a kind of reform school, where delinquents could straighten out their lives. Such a view is consistent with research that shows that individuals who have a criminal history are more likely to enter the military (Johnson and Kaplan 1991), and less likely to commit delinquent acts after they leave (Sampson and Laub 1996). For the most part, the interview subjects described this reformation as happening to others. Only one of the veterans interviewed asserted that military service fulfilled this function in his own life.

Mike Donovan grew up in a rural area in Wisconsin. After high school, he thought about working in a factory or driving a truck for a living. His father wanted him to do neither of these things and suggested that he go into the armed forces instead. Donovan enlisted in the Army, and served as a paratrooper in Germany for two years, before returning home to work in a warehouse and to drive a truck part-time. He described himself prior to his service as having been “a rowdy,” “a fun guy.” If he had not entered the service, he said, “I probably would have been no good. I probably wouldn’t have had nothing today. I would have pissed everything away. Not saved nothing for tomorrow. Got it, spend it. I probably wouldn’t have even been married. Getting married, and raising a family. I grew up in there.” Like Gleixner, Donovan credited his conversion to the “rigid training” of the military. He said that while in the military he learned to “respect the grown-ups,” and credited the armed forces with turning his life around. Yet, his prior aspirations did not differ much from his ultimate

occupational attainment. Nonetheless, he portrayed military service as a positive turning point in his life.

## Learning to Lead

Veterans also described the positive effect of military service differently by rank. Veterans who served as officers said that they learned confidence and leadership in the armed forces. For example, Lewis Jansen, along with the two other veteran officers, described his military experiences as helping him learn how to lead. Along with the two other veterans who served as officers and one who served as a non-officer, Jansen said that the military helped him learn to “make decisions.” In addition, it taught him confidence. As Jansen said, “You may not believe this, but I was a really meek and mild-mannered, wouldn’t say boo, even in my first couple years of college, but when I was forced to stand in front of other people, and yell out commands, it really helped my self-confidence, and that’s helped me in my career.” Similarly, the two other veterans who served as officers in the armed forces described how playing a leadership role in the military helped them to become more confident.

Such descriptions were rare among the veterans who served as enlisted men. Two veteran non-officers also discussed how military service taught them to be more confident. Only one of these veterans portrayed the military as teaching him how to make decisions. None of the veteran enlisted men described the armed forces as teaching them leadership.

## Learning to follow orders

By contrast, veterans who served as enlisted men often described learning “discipline” or how to “follow orders” in the military. Of the 17 veterans who served as enlisted men, 11 said they learned discipline in the armed forces. Indeed, four veterans said that they felt that everyone should be required to serve in the military to learn discipline. All of the veterans who described learning discipline served as enlisted men, none as officers. This difference may account for quantitative differences in the socioeconomic attainment of officers and enlisted men (Dechter and Elder 2004; Hirsch and Mehay 2003)

Like ten other veteran non-officers, Larry Gleixner said that he learned to follow rules and regulations while in basic training. It is during this period of military service that recruits are moved, in Gleixner’s words, from civilian to military life, and thus the training is most rigorous. Gleixner described the training as sometimes lasting 15 hours a day, and consisting of harsh physical and mental conditioning. The importance of such conditioning echoes Foucault’s description of military discipline (Foucault 1995). Gleixner described his sense of the purpose of basic training, as well as how it instills discipline:

First of all it’s discipline, because you have to have discipline in the military. If you didn’t you would have chaos. It’s, you know, the rank, you have to respect people above you: officers and NCOs. It’s just to get you from civilian life, because they’re not your momma. It’s just not there any more to get you up in the morning and dress you and get you into the military life. And when it’s all over with, you look back on it and said, “It was just funny, and it’s an experience, and it wasn’t all that bad.”

In the preceding exchange, Gleixner contrasted military life to the life that individuals have at home where their mothers take care of them. He emphasized the importance of respecting one's superiors. He further stressed the importance of hierarchy:

There's always somebody above you. You know, you always follow the orders of the people above you and you're always courteous to them. That's what you learned and that's the way it always is. Civilian life, you might be able to argue with your boss, or something like that, but you don't do that much, you just follow the orders. You may not think it's right, but you just do it anyhow.

The preceding discussion of discipline contains many features. As with many of his general statements, Gleixner began by presenting his view of the overall, institutional purpose of discipline: to prevent chaos. He expressed a relatively uncommon empathy with the goals of the armed forces. In this empathy, he reflected Weber's description of the need for military discipline as stemming from technological changes in warfare that led to the need for soldiers to coordinate their efforts (Weber 1946). In addition, he observed that the military teaches individuals to accept hierarchy. None of the veteran officers made this point. Another veteran enlisted man presented a more cynical view of how the armed forces instill discipline, saying that the "object was to kind of like brainwash them to follow commands like a dog." Further, he said that this is why the military relies on younger recruits, because young people are more likely to be obedient.

### **Military Service as a Disruption**

Half of the veterans portrayed the armed forces as having features consistent with a view of military service as a disruption. They described the military as teaching them to become less naïve, or to "grow up" in a negative way by exposing them to theft and violence. In addition, two of the veterans described the military as reinforcing existing social inequality. Yet, only two of the veterans described military service as having negative consequences, as disrupting their own lives. Only one of these two described the consequences of this disruption as long-term.

### **Stealing and Violence in the Military**

As described above, Mike Donovan felt that serving in the Army kept him from being "no good," and made him a better person. Yet, many veterans described the military as a place that fostered crimes against individuals and the military as an institution. Ten veterans reported experiencing, seeing, or hearing about other soldiers stealing. Some described how the military environment led to "borrowing," "trading," or systematic stealing. In addition, some veterans described violence against other recruits.

Half of the veterans reported that they saw stealing or had things stolen from them. Despite the fact that these observations were common, three veterans denied that stealing was a characteristic feature of the armed forces. When asked about stealing, they said that they were careful to lock up their belongings, but that this was no different from civilian life. Though his rosary was stolen while he was in the military, one veteran said:

Out and out stealing: there's as much stealing in the military as there is in the dorms of the universities, because you have the same type of person in both, they're the same age group. And there's not any more, just because they're in the military, and there's a lot of conniving going on everywhere, so the military in my opinion isn't the cause of it.

Three other veterans described stealing at a more systematic level, that is, individual recruits stealing or "borrowing" from other groups, or the general supplies of the military. Edward Kugel recounted several examples of this more systematic stealing. He grew up in a small town on the northern shore of Lake Michigan. In his senior year in high school, he took advantage of a newly formed program that allowed individuals to serve in the armed forces for 6 months of active duty, followed by 6 and a half years in the reserves (Flynn 1993). He joined the Army and was trained in the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of a mechanic. When he returned home after his six months of active duty, he was able to get out of his remaining obligation by finding a job that required him to work the same nights as the reserve meetings. In 1965, he went to work for the local streets department and when I interviewed him in 2002, he was planning to retire the next year. When I asked him to describe what he learned in the Army, he replied:

My MOS. What else did I learn in the Army? I learned how to steal. You would, I would go to supply, volunteer for supply. I'd say, "I've got to go the bathroom." You'd walk back to the barracks, what were you doing, you were counting clothes, with a jacket over your arm. You had another field jacket. And you'd ship them home. I often wondered, I know what I got away with in the service, and I know what other guys got away with in the service. Where did the buck stop? Where did the accountability for all that material—from blankets, to gloves, to socks, to jackets, to pants, to shirts. Now, if I, I know what I did, and I know what the other guys got away with.... And some guys were doing it in big quantities. Where did the responsibility of the material end, stop? That's the way of the world, that's the way of the Army.

Thus, he didn't describe military life as being particularly different from civilian life in the amount of theft.

In addition to describing theft, four of the veterans recounted instances of violence against other recruits in basic training. Images of the harshness of basic training or boot camp are common in books and movies. One of the veterans compared the experience to that portrayed in *Full Metal Jacket*, Stanley Kubrick's movie about Vietnam, in which a trainee is so brutalized that he shoots the drill instructor and then himself at the end of boot camp. The movie presented a version of the "blanket party" similar to that described by the four veterans. In a blanket party, according to one veteran, "You'd wait till he was in bed, sleeping, whatever. You'd beat the hell out of him, I mean, you'd just beat the hell out of him, and then see he can't identify anybody that – you know." In contrast to the systematic stealing, none of the veterans described participating in blanket parties. This was probably because the stealing had no overt victim, while a blanket party hurt another GI. As the veteran said, "Yeah, I seen some things. I felt sorry for a lot of them, I really did."

## Status reproduction

Of the veterans I interviewed, only four criticized the armed forces. Two of these expressed criticisms of the more recent “war on terrorism,” while two were more generally critical. These two generally critical veterans pointed to their perception of the inequity that members of particular social groups were more likely to serve in the armed forces and more likely to go into combat. In this, they presented views in line with analyses that show that the burden of combat is disproportionately borne by the poor and working class (Appy 1993; Fallows 1975; Mayer and Houtt 1955; Zeitlin, Lutterman, and Russell 1973).

Donald Eggers provided the most detailed criticism, stemming both from his family background and from his experience as an advisor in the early 1960s in Vietnam. Eggers grew up in suburban Wisconsin. He enrolled in college after high school, but found it too much like high school and decided to drop out. In 1962, at the age of 23, Eggers was drafted. He was assigned to the MPs, and then offered the possibility of going to an unspecified country overseas. He and the other enlisted men speculated that the country was Vietnam, because US involvement there had just started to appear in the news. He decided to accept the offer. At first he patrolled the airport and then was assigned to patrol the mountains. In describing his own attitude toward his service, he said, “In fact, I had told myself that if they ever wanted to put me in any situation that was dangerous I wouldn’t do it, even if they sent me back home and put me in jail, because it just wasn’t worth sacrificing my life for the cause that they were supposedly fighting.” None of the other interview subjects described this kind of covert objection to military service during their service.

In addition to his negative view of US engagements, Eggers shared with one other veteran a critical view of the systematic unfairness of service. When I asked Eggers how he got assigned to the MPs, he speculated that it was because he had some higher education. He explained: “Because that’s the first thing you find out when you go in the Army, is that all the people that don’t have any education are the ones that pick up the rifles and die. Anybody that’s got any education, you get up a little bit higher and less chance that they’re going to be fighting.” He said that he found this out by observing who served in the combat branches when he was in Vietnam. He said that from his experience he learned that the armed forces reproduced civilian status. He remarked that his time in the military “opened my eyes to the fact that it was the poor and the ignorant that did the bulk of the fighting in any war. And I suppose it’s been like that since time began. But that opened my eyes much more so to see it up front and close. It’s easy to talk about going to war, but it’s another thing to pick up the gun and go.” Thus, he presented a complex and negative understanding of a concept presented more positively by most other veterans, that military service was an “obligation.” He pointed out that everybody served unless they were “lucky or rich or had political connections.” When I asked how he knew this, he attributed this conclusion not to personal observation but to “what you hear and what you read about now.”

## Losing time

Ray Walters was one of only two veterans who described military service as a disruption. He was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After high school, he went to college and

graduated in 1961. A few months after starting a consulting job, he was called for an armed forces physical and was told that he would be drafted in a month. The fall of that year, he volunteered for the Army Security Agency in order to avoid the draft. During his technical training, he learned to intercept radar signals, and was then stationed in Japan for a thirteen months. Following that, he returned to stateside service in Arizona. In 1964, when his 3 years of service were up, he returned to his old job. At the time I interviewed him when he was in his early sixties, he was planning to continue running his own consulting business indefinitely. He described his time in the Army as a disruption:

I did lose 3 years of my career. So, when I came out people who were my peers were way ahead of me. It was actually a great time in my business because ... Johnson came out with all these new programs. I should have been in a better position to take advantage of it, because I was really starting at the bottom. If I had been there for a while and been further up the ladder already, I would have been able to take advantage of it. Kennedy was killed while I was in Arizona. And then I'm kind of always starting from zero. I really kind of never caught up. There's no question in my mind. You know, I've done all right, but I would have done even better, I think.

The only other veteran who described his service as a disruption was drafted in the same year that Walters entered the Army. As he said, "It disrupted my life." Yet, similar to Walters, he returned to his pre-service military job. In contrast to Walters, he did not describe the disruption as having negative effects on his later life course.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the ways that peacetime cold-war veterans portrayed the role of the military in the overall trajectory of their lives approximately four decades after their service. The most common way that these interview subjects interpreted their military experience was as fulfilling a "transitional role" with neither negative nor positive consequences, helping them to "grow up." More than half of the veterans spoke of their time in the armed forces in these terms. This finding is consistent with some previous quantitative research. When data regarding veterans of different eras are combined, some quantitative research suggests that military service had a net neutral effect on socioeconomic attainment (Hirsch and Mehan 2003; London and Wilmoth 2006; Mason 1970).

While the overall assessment of the effect of military service among these veterans was neutral, the interview subjects interpreted the effects of their experiences differently according to rank and, to some extent, according to pre-service educational attainment. The veteran officers described learning different lessons from their service than did non-officers. All three of the veterans who served as officers described learning leadership and confidence in the military. By contrast, veteran enlisted men portrayed military service as teaching them discipline or how to follow orders.

This qualitative finding sheds light on a relatively recent finding in the quantitative literature. Veterans benefited from time in the armed forces if they served as officers. When compared to those who served in the enlisted ranks, veterans who served as officers had

higher earnings and more career mobility in their later civilian lives (Dechter and Elder 2004; Hirsch and Mehay 2003). The preceding analysis suggests that the officer premium may stem from the fact that officers received different training and had different experience than did those who served in the enlisted ranks. Thus, the armed forces, like the family and the educational system, may teach some individuals to obey and to adapt to constrained possibilities, while providing others with the tools to improve their lives (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Kohn 1977; Lareau 2002; Willis 1981). Indeed, rank in the armed forces was closely related to performance in school. Most men who served as officers had first completed college, while those who served as enlisted men were more likely not to have a college degree. To the extent that officers disproportionately attribute their service with teaching them leadership skills, this attribution more generally benefited college graduates and very few individuals without a college degree. This suggests that military service may have enabled better educated men to accumulate advantage (Dannefer 2003; London and Wilmoth 2006).

In addition, some veterans portrayed the military as having characteristics consistent with it being a disruption. They described participating in and observing antisocial behavior while in the armed forces such as lying, stealing, and behaving violently. Nevertheless, few described their own service as having a disrupted their lives.

The finding that, in general, veterans assessed their service in neutral terms contradicts much previous research that has found that military service negatively affected veterans' lives (Angrist 1990; Angrist and Krueger 1994; Elder, Shanahan, and Clipp 1997; Laufer and Gallops 1985; Pavalko and Elder 1990). The predominately neutral finding may stem from one or several of four methodological characteristics of the interviews. First, the interviews took place long after the veterans' service, on average forty years later. They did not capture the veterans' immediate assessments of their service, whether positive or negative. Previous quantitative research has suggested that veterans were worse off when compared to equivalent nonveterans immediately after their service, but that they overcame this initial disadvantage (Teachman 2004; Xie 1992). Thus, veterans may interpret their service as a neutral transitional role when they reflect on their time in the armed forces several decades later, despite immediate negative or positive effects. Second, veterans who have more negative feelings about their service may have been less likely to agree to be interviewed. One of the potential respondents declined to be interviewed because he anticipated the interview being a negative experience. Another refused to be interviewed because, as he said, "You picked a subject I don't want to talk about. I was there for three years and I did my time." Third, those who agreed to the interviews may have been more inclined to make positive statements about their service, as they may have viewed such statements as more socially desirable. Individuals may make more positive statements in face to face interviews than they would have anonymously (Snider, Priest, and Lewis 2001). Finally, individuals may have experienced more negative or positive outcomes if they hadn't served in the military, but still may not interpret their service as a positive turning point or a negative disruption. They may perceive the effects of their experiences differently from the way that those effects would be classified according to more quantitative criteria.



A more substantive reason for the contrast between this paper's predominately neutral finding and the negative findings of previous research may be that the negative effects of military service stem from wartime service, while peacetime service has a neutral effect on the lives of veterans. Previous research showing a long-term negative effect of service on veteran health has focused on veterans exposed to combat (Barrett et al. 1996; Lee, Vaillant, Torrey, and Elder 1995; Neylan et al. 1998; Savoca and Rosenheck 2000). Research showing that military service negatively affects socioeconomic attainment has focused primarily on veterans of the Vietnam War (Angrist 1990; Angrist and Krueger 1994) – though some research on the recent all-volunteer force finds a negative effect on these peacetime veterans (Angrist 1998). Peacetime veterans may be more likely to experience military service as a neutral transitional role, while wartime, and particularly combat, veterans may be more likely to experience their service as a disruption. Only two of the interview subjects served during the years of the Vietnam war. Another veteran served in Vietnam prior to the official beginning of the war. None of these three veterans experienced combat. Had they served in wartime and been exposed to combat, these veterans might have suffered more stress and described their service in more negative terms. This qualitative finding suggests that future research should clearly distinguish between the effects of peacetime and wartime service. In more formal terms, such research needs to take into account explicitly the life course principle of location in time and place.

The preceding analyses have implications for future research regarding both the qualitative interpretations and quantitative effects of military service. Future quantitative research should examine whether officers benefited in terms of their health and marital status, as they appear to have done in their socioeconomic attainment, and in their interpretation of the effect of their service. Future qualitative work should examine how more diverse groups of veterans interpret their service. For example, interviews could be conducted with veterans who are members of minority groups. These veterans may describe their service differently than the white high school graduates in the preceding analysis. Interviews conducted with veterans who had pre-service criminal records suggests that military service was viewed as a positive turning point by a significant portion of these veterans (Laub and Sampson 2003). In addition, the preceding findings should be compared to results from interviews with a sample of veterans who experienced combat or served during wartime, as well as with a sample interviewed immediately after service. Interviews with such a range of subjects could shed additional light on the mechanisms that lead some veterans to experience military service as a disruption and others to experience it as a positive turning point.

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**Table 1**

Characteristics of interview subjects and Wisconsin Longitudinal Study male respondents

Total sample characteristics	Interview Subjects		WLS sample	
	Number	Proportion	Proportion	
Veteran	20	0.83	0.57	
Non-veteran	4	0.17	0.43	
Veteran sample characteristics				
Date of Entry	1957–9	11	0.55	0.62
	1960–2	8	0.40	0.30
	> 1962	1	0.05	0.08
Method of entry	Volunteered	17	0.85	0.89
	Drafted	3	0.15	0.11
Branch of service	Army	14	0.70	0.52
	Air Force	4	0.20	0.16
	Navy	2	0.10	0.17
	Other	0	0.00	0.14
Location of service *†	US	11	0.50	--
	Germany	6	0.27	--
	Vietnam	1	0.05	--
	Other	4	0.18	--
Officer	3	0.15	0.10	
Length of service	< 1 year	4	0.20	0.24
	2 years	10	0.50	0.24
	3 years	2	0.10	0.17
	4 years	3	0.15	0.19
	> 4 years	1	0.05	0.16
Benefits used *†	None	13	0.65	--
	Education	3	0.15	--
	Other	5	0.25	--
Pre-service education	HS grad	13	0.65	0.77
	Some college	2	0.10	0.11
	College grad	5	0.25	0.12
Post-service education *	None	16	0.80	0.72
	Some college	0	0.00	0.11
	College grad	2	0.10	0.07
	Graduate degree	3	0.15	0.09

\* Total adds to more than sample, because one veteran has multiple values.

<sup>†</sup> Information not collected by the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study.

**Table 2**

Predicted and dominant veterans' interpretations of military service based on quantitative findings

	<b>N</b>	<b>Predicted interpretation</b>	<b>Dominant interpretation</b>
All veterans	20	Disruption or transitional role	Transitional role
Veterans by educational attainment			
with less than a college degree	15	Positive turning point	Transitional role
with a college degree	5	Disruption	Positive turning point
Veterans by age of entrance			
Younger	11	Positive turning point	Transitional role
Older	9	Disruption	Transitional role
Veterans by rank			
Enlisted	17	Transitional role	Transitional role
Officer	3	Positive turning point	Positive turning point
Veterans by combat			
Non-combat	20	Not predicted	Transitional role
Combat	0	Disruption	n/a
Veterans by race			
White	20	Disruption or transitional role	Transitional role
Nonwhite	0	Turning point	n/a
Time since service			
Immediately	0	Disruption	n/a
~40 years later	20	Transitional role or positive turning point	Transitional role