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**COURTESY OF THE RED,  
WHITE AND BLUE**

**A MIDWEST AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE  
ON TROOPS, WAR AND NATION**

**SARAH SALAMEH**

**MA THESIS, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

**UNIVERSITY OF OSLO**

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*Hey Uncle Sam  
Put your name at the top of his list  
And the Statue of Liberty  
Started shakin' her fist  
And the eagle will fly  
Man, it's gonna be hell  
When you hear mother freedom  
Start ringin' her bell  
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you  
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue*

**Toby Keith, chorus in the song "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)"**

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Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue. A Midwest American Perspective on Troops, War and Nation.

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## ***SUMMARY***

This thesis takes as its starting point American warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan as of 2008, and explores how American service members, as well as their families and friends, look at these wars. Information is collected throughout a six month fieldwork, carried out in 2008 in a small town in the Upper Midwest, USA. Participant observation and interviews conducted during fieldwork constitute the basis for the empirical descriptions.

The main questions the thesis offers answers to are: What do American service members see themselves as fighting for in Iraq and Afghanistan? To them, why is their country waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan? And furthermore, what informs service members' and other Americans' perspectives on these matters? This thesis suggests that the answers to these questions are not so much connected to the specifics of the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as to how military and American warfare in general is perceived within the limits of an American nationalistic world view.

The thesis explores the above mentioned theme through a look at speech and practice in informal as well as formalized, ritual situations. The many settings the reader is introduced to includes an Army recruiting office, a public elementary school, Memorial Day celebrations, the motorcycle group the Patriot Guard Riders' missions, and the celebration of a National Guard unit returning home from Iraq. One gets to know people ranging from Army recruiters to the girls they helped enlisting at the age of 17, the concerned mother of a soldier, and a bunch of rather unconcerned 5<sup>th</sup> graders performing their patriotic duty decorating their town's cemetery with Star Spangled Banners. Through these different persons and settings, just as differing perspectives on the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are offered. The wars are justified both with regard to them being part of the Global War on Terror, as well as being liberating missions on behalf of the Iraqi and Afghani people. The wars are resisted based on suspicions that the US government might be waging war with crooked intentions, like quests for oil, as well as on insufficient knowledge with regard to for example the presence of weapons of mass destruction. 'Support Our Troops' as an idea is explored, and argued to be defining for the American patriotic paradigm, and thus being a constituting element for both support and resistance to American warfare.



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# ***PREFACE***

At some point early spring 2007 I started playing with the thought of how an anthropological project focusing on American service members possibly could be done. Little did I know at that time that those vague thoughts would, within a year bring me to the cold, wooden north of the USA's Midwest. But forget the cold; never have I experienced a warmer welcome! A number of people are responsible for making both the welcome and the rest of the stay a warm and worthwhile experience. I cannot thank you enough.

Two people do however stand out in this incredible crowd. To you: by the end of my stay I thought of you as close family.

A special thank to the Patriot Guard Riders, and the two good friends who let me ride with them. I will never forget you for introducing me to the freedom of the road, and the heartbreaking experience of families' goodbyes with their loved ones, as well as their joy when reuniting.

A great thank to all Americans who took the time and effort to answer my questions, share their free time, job time and family time with me! Thanks to you I look back at the six months I spent in the upper Midwest as the most interesting and mind blowing time of my life. I hope that the ones among you who take the time to read this thesis get the feeling I have understood at least something about your point of view.

Thank you to my academic supervisor, Arnd Schneider. Extreme gratitude must be extended to Camilla Andres, Stine Bruland and Jørgen Jensehaugen for proof reading this thesis and giving helpful academic advice. Aslo, thank you to Tore Holberg for a great cover page! A range of fellow students deserve hugs and kisses for their inspiring presence, academic advice, humor, loving care, and unforgettable parties throughout the past years!

Last, but not least, I send my love to my many good friends and my loving family. I don't know what I should have done without you. Thank you for always being there for me.

Sarah Salameh

Oslo, December 2009





# 1:

## *Introduction*

On October 7, 2001 the USA (United States of America) and the UK (United Kingdom) launched an attack on Afghanistan, later aided by NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces. On March 20, 2003 Iraq was invaded by a multinational force led by troops from the USA and the UK. Between 2003 and 2008 1,6million US troops were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>1</sup> (The Medical News, 2008.04.18. [URL]). At the time of writing, both wars are still being waged. As of today 4369 US troops have been killed in Iraq, 922 US troops have been killed in Afghanistan and 35,991 US troops have been wounded in action (IAVA, 2009.12.02 [URL]). In spite of President Barack Obama's promises to end the war in Iraq, the slow and difficult pullout combined with an intensification of the American presence in Afghanistan carries a prospect that thousands more servicemen and -women still await deployment. This affects not only individual service members, but also their friends and family. With a military that counts between 2,4 and 2,6 million service members (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009.03.31 [URL]: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, 2004.09.09 [URL]), all of which run smaller or larger risks of deployment, the reality of war is present in millions of American lives, even though the war does not take place on American soil.

There are offered many different reasons for the two wars, from various sources. The War in Afghanistan began less than one month after the terrorist attacks on the USA on September 11, 2001 (henceforth 9/11), and was, and still is, commonly acknowledged as connected directly to those attacks. However, even though there is a general agreement on the idea that the Taliban allowed al-Qaida to have training camps in Afghanistan, the debate has raged on why Afghanistan had to be attacked, when many of the persons who carried out the attack on 9/11 were, for example, from Saudi Arabia. Official reasons for the invasion of Iraq, on the other hand, have spanned from suspicions regarding Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and the regime's sponsoring of terror, to presenting the invasion and later occupation as a mere Samaritan mission on behalf of the USA. In the last case, the

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers I am operating with here do not include private contractors. Private contractors make up a large part of the institutional-, security- and military landscape in Iraq and Afghanistan and is in itself an interesting field of study. Private contractors will however not be treated in this thesis.

argument goes that what the USA is doing is that of overthrowing a tyrannical dictator, and thereby creating democracy and development. Add to this range of reasons the flourishing landscape of conspiracy theories on the subject, and you face the question ‘perhaps there are no true answers?’ But one thing seems clear: It is hard to remain neutral in ones positioning towards these questions. This goes for the anthropologist who conducted the fieldwork constituting the basis for and the writing of this thesis; that is, ‘me’. Not only did I enter the field with certain predetermined opinions on the issues in focus in this thesis. I would perhaps never have entered this specific field had it not been for these opinions. I will return to this issue of positioning specifically in chapter two. For now it should suffice to underline that I entered the field with a critical stance towards the USA’s undertakings in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that the making of this thesis was done within a critical anthropological outlook.

Anyhow, the point in this introduction has been to sketch out the large and diverse landscape of explanations for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The thesis will take as its outset this rather confusing landscape, and ask ‘which explanations do the people who fight these wars believe in?’ During a six month fieldwork in the first half of 2008 in Lumber City, a small town in the USA’s upper Midwest, I talked and spent time with active American military service members, veterans, their friends and families, and tried to figure out their perspectives on the two wars. At times my observation and interaction extended to include people falling outside these categories, yet still belonging to the community Lumber City. The town itself, then, as a community, will on a few occasions (see especially chapter four) appear as a subject of particular interest in its own, as its citizens act together in large ceremonies. The main issues of interest throughout the thesis are however: To the service members themselves, why do they fight and what do they see themselves as fighting for in Iraq and Afghanistan? In the research subjects’ eyes, whether they are service members themselves or family or friends of a service member, why is their country waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan? And furthermore, what can explain their explanations? Based on what the research subjects told me, and what I observed them doing during my six month stay in the USA’s upper Midwest, the theoretical analysis in this thesis will center on nationalism and how *what it is to be an American* influences the research subjects’ ideas about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. That is, a repeating argument throughout the thesis will be that what the research subjects communicate regarding their perspectives on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not so much connected to the specifics of these two wars, but to how military and American warfare in general is perceived within the limits of an American nationalistic

world view. This thesis will be an exploration of what the research subjects' ideas are: how these ideas are communicated; and how different forms of communication, including both different forms of practice and speech, might influence these formations of ideas.

This introductory chapter will present the most central theoretical assumptions that prepare the ground for the analysis of the empirical findings presented throughout the thesis; a brief mentioning of alternative analytical approaches that I have chosen to leave out; and an outline of the thesis' different chapters.

### **Analytical approach: nationalism invoking apathy and preparedness**

John L. Comaroff (1996:180) asks in his essay "Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Politics of Difference in an Age of Revolution"

Why, in some circumstances, do appeals to national consciousness evoke apathy, even antipathy, while in others citizens are prepared to risk life and limb – at times for polities in which they are obviously oppressed? And why do subjects respond, especially if, as is often the case, it seems in their mortal disinterest to do so? When and why does nationality take priority over other forms of identity – specifically, social class, ethnicity, gender, race?

These are questions that I too ask in this thesis. In Lumber City I witnessed both apathy and preparedness. Apathy in regard to questioning the tasks the US government placed on its military service members, and a strong preparedness in regard to performing those tasks, even when, as Comaroff (1996:180) writes: "it seems in their mortal disinterest to do so". When the research subjects explained their perspectives on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and mostly legitimized both the US military presence there, and their own individual participation, they did so with a reference to themselves as Americans – their national identity.

When, in this thesis, I describe how the apathy and preparedness in a small town in the USA's upper Midwest took form, I will do so while focusing on how nationalism might have a say in this formation. I do *not* do this with the assumption that nationalism is either the only, or the most central factor in the formation of the research subjects' ideas about the wars, their reasoning for their participation in them or their resistance to them. Economic incentives are often central when people decide to join the military in the first place. Thus, to get a comprehensive understanding of why many Americans put their life on the line, economy, as a factor, cannot be left out. A thesis could have been written on economy as incentive alone. Thus, even though the focus of this thesis is another, some economic opportunities that exist

within the US military will be presented briefly in chapter two for the reader to get an idea of the wider context the nationalistic statements and practices presented occurred within. Aside from economy, social or attitude problems were presented as reasons for some of my research subjects' enlistment. Two<sup>2</sup> of the research subjects were experimenting with drugs at the time of their enlistment, and the military straightened them up – to the relief of themselves and their closest ones. Others again joined the military simply because they wanted to flee what they perceived as a boring small town, or they saw the military as the institution with the best competence on their issue of interest (like space rockets or airplanes), and thus also offered the best education in that field. Any attempts at giving a comprehensive explanation for why certain Americans join the military, or why they legitimize or oppose the War in Afghanistan and the Iraq war the way they do, should take account of all these things. It is the interplay between nationalism, economy, education, a sense of adventure, gender, social class and ethnicity that form Americans' point of view on the issues of military and war. In retrospect I see the data collected throughout my fieldwork as having opened up for writing much more about many of the different factors mentioned. The decision to focus primarily on nationalism came about as a result of coincidence and exciting happenings in the field which made me delve into American nationalist identity at the expense of other issues. Hence, I have chosen a rather narrow focus in the exploration of possible factors influencing my research subjects' ideas on military and war.

#### **A SENSE OF CONTINUITY – THE PRESENT LEGITIMIZED THROUGH THE PAST**

Because the research subjects were referring, directly and indirectly, through action and speech, to former events in American history when treating the issue of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it became apparent that they don't view today's wars as major disruptions in the history of the USA, or anomalies to the USA as a nation. Rather, they see these wars as representing a historical continuity. Their sometimes direct acts of connecting past and present led me to search for such connections also in their statements and actions where they did not make the connection openly. In this search I have looked at specific ways of legitimizing and resisting the wars, and explored how these acts find resonance in certain ways of perceiving American history and identity. When focusing on legitimization, today's wars and the troops' participation in those wars can be observed as legitimized by placing both wars and troops

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<sup>2</sup> - at least two. As I did not get to know all of the research subjects closely, many of them might have left out information on their past that they didn't find suiting to tell a researcher.

within a national historical framework where both the troops' actions and the wars' goals are simply seen as a continuation of acts that, put together, constitute the history of the American nation. One example: Through mentioning today's troops and veterans in ceremonies on Memorial Day, which became a holiday after the Civil War, soldiers 'sacrificing' themselves in Iraq and Afghanistan today are seen as continuing a tradition of sacrifice that has been going on since the constitutive days of the USA as an independent nation.

The basic idea here is that the past is used as a resource to fit some cognitive needs of today's Americans. Americans' *needs* are for example to justify two long wars, both which the research subjects at times expressed difficulties in comprehending, and to justify their own participation in those wars. The *past* might be everything from the Civil War, the Declaration of Independence, the Second World War (WWII) or migration stories – their own families' migration stories fitting within the national migration myth, taking the form of 'home-making myths' (Øverland 1996).

The idea that we, from an analytical point of view, need to understand the past to understand the present is an established one in social anthropology (cf. Cohen 1985, Eriksen 1993, Krohn-Hansen 2001). But how do we understand the past? By what do we mean when we use the word past? Cohen (1985:99) argues that the past is selectively constructed and that it resonates with the contemporary, which makes the past-reference salient, adding that history might take the form of myth:

in the sense which Malinowski gave to the word: a 'charter' for contemporary action whose legitimacy derives from its very association with the cultural past. Myth confers 'rightness' on a course of action by extending to it the sanctity which enshrouds tradition and lore. Mythological distance lends enchantment to an otherwise murky contemporary view.

This past, when its representation takes the form of myth, takes an ahistorical character and becomes "impervious to the rationalistic scrutiny of historians, lawyers and others who may dispute precedent and historiographical validity." (Cohen 1985:99). The manner in which the past is invoked can be a very selective practice, and it responds to present needs and pressures. (Cohen 1985, Eriksen 1993). When Americans are in need of legitimizing present wars, they base their arguments on certain version of the USA's past. A relevant point of reference in the USA's history might be the nation's efforts in WWII; presented as taking side and sacrificing own citizens in a just fight against Nazism. The apparent selflessness and sense of justice showed then can be used as a parallel to today's efforts. A different version of

history, which I was never offered by the research subjects, is that the USA engaged in WWII only after they were attacked by Japan (Pearl Harbor), and was thus forced into it, and four years later unnecessarily abused its military power and technology when bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs. This version of the past might be used to claim that the USA takes side only when it is in their interest, and is not trustworthy regarding responsible use of military power. This last version of American WWII history parallels a version of the present which supports the argument that the Iraq war and the War in Afghanistan are the opposite of selfless and just, and rather supporting American interests with no regard for other people's fortune.

However, the past is more than mere myth. What, for example, nationalist historians write is not all make believe (Eriksen 1993:93). In our case: the Civil War did happen and the Declaration of Independence was written. The articles and amendments that stand out today as important and that are referred to as communicating central American values are not words invented today to legitimize current governments and their actions, but were actually written into the founding documents. It is this, 'what actually happened', together with the 'representations of what happened' (for example in the form of myth) that must be taken into account when trying to understand what frames people's world views in the present. It is the mixture of these elements that have had an impact on people's material situation today and their world view. To quote Eriksen (1993:93): "There are only so many plausible versions of history".

Based on these guidelines for how to understand the concept of 'past', these are some of the guiding questions for this thesis: What is this 'past' that has created the structures that frame my research subjects' world views? How is this past conceived? How is this 'past' used in their speech and practices? And what are the consequences of this for how they conceive the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their own/their family members' or friends' participation in them?

### **CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY**

The framing of how this text treats the understanding of the 'past', leads to the question of "whose past?" One community this thesis will focus on is the American nation. This is not the *only* significant community for the people I met in Lumber City, nor is it the only form of community whose past might structure their world view. However, it is fair to argue that this is *a* significant community which they identified with and made references to when they

spoke about today's (and former) wars. The community 'the American nation' carries within it many other communities as well, and parts of the text will focus on situational and dual identities (Waters 1990, Øverland 1996) among Americans. One example is a research subject's feeling of belonging to both an ethnic community of Macedonian-Americans, and simultaneously a feeling of belonging to a national community – the USA. Another is a US soldier who, when legitimizing his personal participation in the Iraq war, did it through an identification with the American *people*, rather than the American *government*. The text, however, will suggest that these multiple belongings do not necessarily weaken people's sense of belonging to the American nation. Preparing the ground for analysis of these themes, the next paragraphs will present a possible analytical framework on identity and community in general, mentioning ethnicity but treating nationalism more thoroughly.

In the famous "Introduction" to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Fredrik Barth (1969) outlined a theory on ethnic groups that has been guiding for anthropological analysis of not only ethnic groups but any form of identity and community up until today. He stresses that it is when people meet across community lines that they become aware of their own belonging to a certain community (or ethnic group which is the example Barth (1969) uses). People become aware of their own identity when they are confronted with a significant other. It is in this meeting that certain characteristics are given importance as boundary markers between persons and then contribute to a categorization of different persons into different groups. This perspective contributes much to explaining why the research subjects emphasized their American identity when the conversation's topic actually was their view of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the wars 'new' significant others are introduced to many Americans' worlds. In the war discourse, the whole idea of dichotomies is prominent. It is us and them, the good and the bad, soldiers and insurgents, and Americans and Iraqis/Afghanis.

Furthermore, varying combinations of identities are produced, depending on what the goal of a particular situation is. Mary Waters (1990), a sociologist inspired by Barth, uses the term 'situational ethnicity' when treating this issue. In our case: sometimes it is the identity as an American that serves the present situation, at other times being a member of the American people rather than the American government serves better.

This perspective is a constructivist one. It assumes no necessary connection between a group's *perception* of being a community, and its shared set of cultural characteristics (rituals, clothing). Put differently, "many ethnic groups stay the same through time, while their culture changes" (Roosens 1994:84). The (ethnic) group may claim that they have a continued, shared cultural tradition and a common ancestry, but it is not these things that are

the real mechanisms that constitute them as communities or ethnic groups – rather it is their *perception* of sharing these things (ancestors and culture) that makes them into a community.

Anthony P. Cohen (1985) follows these thoughts in his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. Barth's (1969) theorizing suggests that different situations infer different boundary-making actions and characteristics. What is made relevant as boundary-making characteristics depends on which persons meet and in what situation. Cohen underlines the non-objectivity in what constitutes the components of a boundary. The boundaries and the components of the boundaries "may be thought of, rather, as existing in the minds of their beholders. This being so, the boundary may be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of it, but also by people on the same side." (Cohen 1985:12). This does not interfere with the sense of belonging together, with the sense of being a community, because, as Cohen (1985:16) continues

the quintessential referent of community is that its members make, or believe they make a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to specific and significant interests, and further, that they think that that sense may differ from one made elsewhere.

He is concerned with the meaning people infer on boundaries, about the symbolic construction of these boundaries, and hence the symbolic construction of community. Communities are symbolically constructed "as a system of values, norms and moral codes which provides a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members." (Cohen 1985:9). Members of a community certainly *experience* their community as a bounded whole without it necessarily objectively being so.

Barth (1969) and Cohen (1985) both focus on self-ascription and ascription by others when community is (re)constructed. This ascription occurs in social action, wherein it is communicated in certain ways. Cohen shows that this communication largely happens through symbolising. A community is communicated through a set of shared symbols, and also a shared set of values, norms and moral codes. These, however, are all surface elements and what each individual actually interprets from these symbols and official values, norms and moral codes might differ. These symbols, values, norms and moral codes are official and agreed upon elements for communicating people's belonging or sense of community. There are certain symbols that are officially positively sanctioned, acceptable to use, and there are certain moral codes that everybody needs to adhere to, or else be negatively sanctioned and perhaps excluded from the community. What people interpret from these symbols or what the



specifics are in their interpretation of the moral codes they on the surface seem to agree upon, are not communicated in official settings, but are saved for more private situations. Americans might for example agree upon the Star Spangled Banner as the symbol of the American nation, and they might agree that freedom is the most central value for Americans. They do not, however, have to agree completely on the specifics on what their flag or freedom really means, as long as they don't debate this in any significant way officially. It is enough that people in America agree upon the Star Spangled Banner as the symbol of the nation for them to feel as a community. They do not have to agree *completely* on what that nation should entail, stand for or do. The very strength of such a symbol, Cohen (1985) argues, is actually that it allows for different interpretations. A community is built up of individuals, and they have both shared and differing experiences which make them interpret the world in concurring and differing ways. The 'openness' of certain symbols, like the Star Spangled Banner, allows all citizens to identify with it, even though they have different experiences, that is, different tools to interpret it with.

The characteristics that often are focused on, like a certain way of dress or a certain dance, are mere tools in the reconstruction of community. These characteristics, however, are something the members of the community themselves have agreed upon as shared, and the anthropologist, standing on the outside, can acknowledge and focus on these shared elements without walking into a primordialistic trap of essentialising the community. The sense of community is constructed, and the observable, shared symbols and moral codes contribute in the reconstructing of this constructed sense of belonging.

An argument in this thesis will be that in the reconstruction of the community 'the American nation', certain values, norms, moral codes and symbols (Cohen 1985) are reproduced as central, and their position as guidelines for how to interpret, for example, the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, are strengthened. This allows for an analysis which acknowledges individuals' subjectivity and does not overstate the structuring power of shared symbols, values, norms and moral codes in the minds of the individual – the mentioned elements may be shared, but what people make of them might differ. As long as people *believe* they share the same interpretation of the symbol, the Star Spangled Banner, or of the values 'freedom' and 'sacrifice', the fact that they might have very different interpretations of these symbols and values does not have to interfere with their sense of identifying with each other.

## IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND NATIONALISM AS RELIGION

Having outlined an approach to identity and community in general, let us move our focus to one specific form of identity, *nationality*, and one specific form of community, *the nation*. The ‘nation’ and ‘the nation state’ are historical phenomena. As such, we find ourselves living in the age of nationalism, wherein the nation, as a modern construction, figures prominently in our understanding, or ordering, of the world. Nations are today’s way of socially organizing cultural groups (Helbling 2007:19; Eriksen 1993:98). Like any other community the nation is constructed, but it needs to be distinguished from ethnic groups in anthropological analysis for at least two reasons. One reason is the nation’s relation to a modern state. Nationalist ideology postulates that the community that makes up a nation is “embedded in the state, where people’s loyalty and attachment should be directed towards the state and the legislative system rather than towards members of their kin group and village.” (Eriksen 1993:104-105). This embodiment of the community ‘nation’ in a nation-state suggests that it can be effectively ruled, and nationalism is thus politically effective (Eriksen 1993:105). Another reason is that there is no necessary one-to-one relationship between ethnic group and nation. Ethnic plurality within a nation is no obstacle for the establishment and continuity of a nation (Eriksen 1993). The USA serves as an example in this paper. The national myth is the telling of migration from other parts of the world to ‘the New World’ – whether it be European immigrants or African slaves (Øverland 1996; Waters 1990).

According to Benedict Anderson (1991:6) the nation is *imagined* “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” The nation is furthermore imagined as limited, sovereign and as a community. *Limited* because each nation has boundaries and the “most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation” (Anderson 1991:7). It is imagined as *sovereign* because nations ‘dream of being free’. The concept of nation “was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.” (Anderson 1991:7). The idea is one of freedom, and it implies that no nation should be subjected to the will of another – either nation, church or another institution; if anything, only God, and in that case, directly so. The nation is imagined as a *community* because, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” (Anderson 1991:7). Anderson continues, stating that it is this fraternity that enables the huge amount of people to willingly die for the imagining, the nation. The fact that

people are willing to die for their nation indicates its extraordinary force, and Anderson is concerned with understanding this force and the persistence of national identity and sentiment. According to Eriksen (1993:101), Anderson argues that nationalism derives its force from the fact that its politics cannot be purely instrumental. Without its emotional power nationalism would not make people want to die for its fulfilment and continuation. Nationalism must then “involve symbols which have the power of creating loyalty and feeling of belongingness” (Eriksen 1993:100). Because nationalist imagining is concerned with death and immortality it should be categorized with religion rather than ideology (Anderson 1991:5,10). According to Anderson (1991:10-12), religion, in contrast to ideology such as for example Marxism, has an imaginative response to the burden of human suffering and to the questions surrounding death. Religion’s answer is immortality; death is not the end but a continuation of life. Anderson mentions the place and time of the dawn of nationalism: Western Europe and the eighteenth century. It brought with it rationalist secularism and an ebbing of religious belief. However, the questions that religious belief earlier had answered had not disappeared. “What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation.” (Anderson 1991:11). Still today nationalism offers

security and perceived stability at a time when life-worlds are fragmented and people are being uprooted. An important aim of nationalist ideology is thus to recreate a sentiment of wholeness and continuity with the past; to transcend that alienation or rupture between individual and society that modernity has brought about. (Eriksen 1993:105).

Nationalism can do this through appropriating “symbols and meanings from cultural contexts which are important in people’s everyday experience.” (Eriksen 1993:108) That way, nationalism borrows its symbols and meanings from an already established cultural context existing also ‘outside’ nationalism, but whose symbols now appear to represent the nation state. Although the nation is an imagined community, constructed and not ‘natural’, it cannot base itself on just any set of symbols and meanings, but needs to find its basis in something that can resonate with people’s already existing life worlds and thus appear meaningful. It must be founded in a specific past; a past which is not only a pure political construct created by cynical politicians. The fact that this past is specific (actually happened), is not the same as saying that it is not also imagined in the sense that the past is framed in view of the present, just as the present, within a nationalist discourse, is framed within the light of the past.



# 2:

## ***Method, field location and research subjects***

This chapter includes a presentation and discussion of the methods I used in the field, as well as a thorough presentation of the location of the fieldwork. Ample space is designated to a discussion of my choice of research subjects, and how this choice reflects ethical and theoretical wishes on behalf of me, both as an academic and an individual with a specific background.

### **Method**

#### **INITIAL ACCESS TO THE FIELD AND THE CHOICE TO USE INTERVIEWS AS THE CENTRAL METHOD**

During the six months in which I did fieldwork I lived in one town: Lumber City. Before I arrived I had managed to get in touch with a family there, the Thomas family, who not only were possible and willing research subjects (three of their children served in the military), but also offered me to live with them the first month I was there. During that month they helped me find an apartment and a car, and in every other way made sure I felt safe and happy. My rather coincidental friendship with this family was a strike of luck, as it was a well known and much liked family in town. To mention that I had lived with, and was a friend of the Thomas family contributed in a significant way to making others trust me.

I spent time with the research subjects in many different arenas. At their home, eating dinner, watching TV, chatting with wives and mothers in their kitchens, and with their husbands in the garage. I spent time with others at their place of work; i.e. the recruiters at the recruiting station; National Guard (NG) service members at Lumber City's NG's facilities; and I interviewed and talked with several shop keepers in their shop, at quiet hours. I talked with people at pubs and parties, and I participated in many family gatherings, including birthdays, celebration of a family member returning from a military deployment, or high school graduation party. I ended up on road trips with research subjects, and pushing 10 hours in a car certainly opened up for interesting conversations. Road trips also included three one day long motorcycle trips with the Patriot Guard Riders, a group that will be given much

attention in chapter four and five. I furthermore went to church, and I observed national and religious holidays, with the ceremonies and social gatherings that followed.

As will be shown later in the thesis, much of people's ideas on the wars were communicated in different forms of practices, for example through bumper stickers on cars, in ceremonies and on motorcycle rides. However, a huge part of the empirical material I have collected is collected through *talking* with many different people who one way or the other are connected to the military. This does not mean it was a simple task to gather oral statements and explanations from people on the issues of interest to my research. Interestingly, in Lumber City, it was not usual to discuss how one views the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in everyday conversations. As a matter of fact, it was a topic people usually avoided. It was thus up to me to create space or situations where this topic could be discussed. Interviews, usually with one or two at a time, became the easiest way to create such a space.

I discussed different matters on the military and the wars with more than one hundred persons. Among these I interviewed about seventy, half of them troops and veterans, and the other half family and spouses of troops and veterans. Among these seventy I interviewed twenty six on more than one occasion. Two families were to become my closest friends in the field, and they were very helpful as sources of information. This extensive amount of research subjects has given me a solid comparative ground. The two families that became closest to me, the Thomas family and the Kinnunen family, did not appear as 'typical' military families, but stood out in the crowd in two very different ways. Thus, these two families will not occupy much space in the empirical descriptions in this thesis compared to other research subjects. They have, however, served as a significant ground for reflection and comparison, and their cases have helped me much in understanding and analyzing other cases.

I never used a tape recorder during the fieldwork. That means that what people told me in the usually very informal interviews, or everyday chit chat, either was written down in key words during the talks and then rewritten in full later the same day or the next day, or, because of the informal style of the conversation was transcribed when I came home later the same day or the next day. An implication of this is that I have almost no exact quotes. I have, however, done my best to recall what people said and when I later claim that people have said certain things it should be trusted as being very close to the original statements. Thus, when I later use quotation marks (I have chosen « » as quotation marks for when I am referring to a research subject's statement), the statements quoted are simply what I remembered that a certain person had said when I later transcribed the conversation.

## **ANONYMITY AND CONTEXT: A RELATION OF TENSION**

At one and the same time the anthropologist gets access to private details about people's lives – details that must be administered in a way that will not harm the research subjects – while she also has to adhere to the anthropological tradition of thick description (Vike 2001). My research subjects not only shared private details, but informed me on their position with regard to the potentially controversial themes of this thesis. Many of them became willing research subjects first when I assured them about their anonymity. I have therefore replaced all names, of places and people, with fictive names. This will hopefully prevent people from outside the area of my fieldwork from recognizing places and people. I have chosen not to change people's stories – for example their military career, reasons for enlisting, and place of deployment – as these are things that are central to communicate an understanding of their lives, and thus their world views. This might enable some people in the Lumber City area to recognize who I am writing about. Vike (2001:80) underlines that the basic question when balancing between anonymity and context should be whether anyone pays an unacceptable price for our study to become not only published, but so well documented that it can become part of a larger production of anthropological knowledge. I have done my best to guarantee the avoidance of such an “unacceptable price”.

## **The US military<sup>3</sup>**

### **TERMINOLOGY**

Troops and service members are usual terms for any person serving in any branch. A soldier is a person serving in the Army or the National Guard, whilst an airman is a person serving in the Air Force. A marine serves in the Marines and a sailor serves in the Navy or the Coast Guard.

There is a difference between Non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and Commissioned officers (COs) in the US military. The usual terms in everyday conversations, however, is that of enlisted service member (NCOs) and officers (COs). The COs have college- or university education in addition to their military training, and there are special college/university educations that merge this civil education with military training, termed the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC).

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<sup>3</sup> Information provided under this subheading is collected throughout fieldwork, and the rather general descriptions of the certain areas of the US military is based on my fieldnotes.

The two military operations the US military uses most resources on at the moment, and that receive the most attention, domestically and internationally, are the ones taking place in Iraq and Afghanistan. The military operation in Iraq is termed both The Iraq War, the Occupation of Iraq and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF); the last term being the one used by the US military. The War in Afghanistan's official US military term is Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan (OEF-A). This operation is only one among other operations in what is known as the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Which term one uses signals different ideas about the military operations. Some disagree that what is happening in the two countries is war, and thus avoid terms involving 'war'; as variations of the terms the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan. This does not mean that everybody who had objections on that matter were consequent in their naming of the military operations. Most of the people I met in the field used the terms the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan, and these are the names I will use when referring to the military operations in the two countries.

'To be deployed' means to be sent on a mission by the US military, both within the borders of the USA and outside. Both troops on active duty and troops in the military reserves, the latter including the National Guard (NG) (Army and Air Force) can be deployed. Lumber City has a NG in town, and both its facilities and its soldiers were prevalent and very visible parts of town. Lumber City's NG was deployed to Iraq the year before my arrival. Another NG unit located a couple of hours drive from Lumber City was deployed during my stay, and returned just a few days before I left.

### **A VOLUNTEER MILITARY**

The USA had up until 1973 compulsory military service, known as 'draft'. Today, the US military is an all-volunteer military force, and recruitment is secured through recruitment offices that are dispersed throughout the country.

In Lumber City there was one recruitment office for the Army, Air Force, the Marines and the Navy located at the Mall, and a separate recruitment office for the NG located at the NG unit's facilities in another part of town. If somebody is interested in enlisting, they meet with a recruiter and discuss their opportunities within the military. The person's police record is checked, and if he/she has a record, it might either limit the person's job opportunities in the military, or prevent the person from enlisting at all. There are also quite high physical and medical standards for joining. When you have signed 'the dotted line', as was people's usual



term for having signed up and made a contract with the military, you have to stay in the military for the amount of time your contract says.

When enlisting, different forms of economic deals are offered. A person enlisting can, for example, receive a ‘sign on bonus’ – a bonus you receive immediately simply for signing ‘the dotted line’, which differs depending on the job you choose to do. Beyond the sign on bonus there is also the GI Bill, which is an umbrella term for many different military economic deals, but usually used when talking about education money. The GI Bill education money usually constitutes a larger sum if you choose active duty and wait with civil education until after your active duty. It varies depending on the amount of years you enlist for. The military also offers different forms of medical insurance, both for the service member and that person’s closest family. The USA’s health care is based on people having insurance to be able to pay for medical expense. This insurance can be expensive, and receiving insurance through your job, in this instance the military, constitutes an economic relief for many.

## **Lumber City**

### **DOWN TO EARTH MIDWESTERNERS**

«In the Midwest and Southeast proportionally more people serve than on the coasts», Hanks said. I was sitting in Lumber City’s Army recruiting office talking with two recruiters: Hanks and Scott. Neither of them was sure what the explanation for the intra-national difference in density of servicemen and -women could be. But Hanks said that based on the experience he had from working as a recruiter in different places in the USA he knew that people seemed more patriotic in the Midwest and Southeast than on the East and West Coast. An example Hanks gave of how he pinpoints the degree of patriotism in an area is the density of flags. In Lumber City, which is located in the Midwest, you see flags hanging outside many houses. According to Hanks the same is true of his hometown in Florida, a place he characterized as patriotic. He told me that he used to be stationed at a recruitment office in Oregon on the West Coast, and there he couldn’t see many flags at all. He claimed that people there were anti-military and anti-war and recruiting was not easy. Furthermore, «They were environmentalists», or, as he jokingly added, «the kind of people who don’t want to cut down trees but still want to wipe their asses with paper.»

Hanks’ comparison of the Midwest and the West Coast is a good starting point for describing the area where I did fieldwork. I lived in the small town, Lumber City, in the upper

Midwest. The town had approximately 13,000 citizens and was the center of Forest County. Forest County is located at the fringes of a vast area called the Northern Belt. The Northern Belt makes up one third of its respective state's area, but only 3% of the state's citizens live there. The area's natural landscape is characterized by large forests, lakes and rivers, and is part of the USA's 'Snowbelt'. Winters are harsh, cold and long, and summers mild and short. If one was to make a stereotype<sup>4</sup> about the typical Northern Belt citizen, then Hanks' West Coast environmentalist is the perfect contrast. In the Northern Belt people live with and in nature. They hunt, they ski, they do ice fishing, and ride their snowmobiles for fun and for practical purposes. The stereotypical Northern Belt citizen is also conservative, patriotic and down to earth. The Northern Belt citizen knows that paper is made of trees as he/she works at the factory that realizes the transformation. The following paragraphs will explain this last comment a little closer.

#### **ECONOMY**

In Lumber City various sorts of industry connected to lumber employs a solid part of the population. Especially paper mills constitute corner stone employers in many towns. Except for what the forests offer, resources are also found underground, and mining used to be a huge industry. The mining ores, many of them iron ores, were in large part what made people migrate to the area in the first place. The mining ores are now mostly barren, and the area was hit hard and continues to struggle with the deindustrialization in the USA that started in the 1970s and still goes on. Katherine S. Newman (1985, 1989, 1994) is an anthropologist who has studied the phenomenon of deindustrialization and macroeconomic processes' impact on the American middle- and working class. The processes she has pointed out are processes also prevalent in the Northern Belt: industry is moved to the south of the USA where unions traditionally have been weaker than in the north, or it is moved to Mexico or other low income countries; both options offer lower costs on wages. Another, and prevalent, process is the complete close down of certain industry. A result of this in the Northern Belt is that the whole area is increasingly struggling with low wages and unemployment. An instance that received much attention in the local newspapers and was much discussed among the citizens

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<sup>4</sup> When people in the Northern Belt described themselves it was the stereotype presented here that they too presented - sometimes jokingly and sometimes in complete seriousness. This stereotype appeared as something that symbolized a community of Northern Belt citizens, and this stereotype was both self ascribed and ascribed by others (Cohen 1985; Barth 1969). Even though the stereotype did not at all constitute all aspects of their identity it certainly constituted one part of it. As the reader will get to know some Northern Belt citizens a little closer during the reading of the thesis I will let the stereotype stand as an introductory, though incomplete, description.

in the area can serve as an example. A paper mill in a neighboring town closed down during my stay in Lumber City. This threw more than 300 people into unemployment, pushing the labor market to its limits, not only in that town, but in neighboring areas as well. One of my neighbors was unemployed and she told me that there were no jobs available because of all the people who suddenly were thrown into the labor market with the closing of the paper mill. Furthermore, shop owners in the town where the paper mill was located feared lower sales as many of the paper mill's workers from now on would not come to that town and shop anymore. Another visit at the recruitment office illustrates how the general economic situation in the area has consequences for military recruitment:

Scott said that in the part of the Northern Belt that is his office's responsibility they need to recruit 75 persons each year. I asked whether they usually manage to recruit as many as that. Scott said they usually recruit more than that, and explained it by saying «People are poor here», and added that the average income is \$12,000 a year. «I just ask them if they want to earn more money than their parents. Their parents earn \$1000 a month; I can easily give them a job with \$1600 a month. They can earn more money in six months than their parents earn in a whole year.»

Scott's assumption about the local average income is too pessimistic, as a comparison with official numbers show (per capita income about \$18 000). Unemployment rates are high, however, and 9% of the population lives below the poverty line.

As I was lucky enough to have many people willingly stepping up as research subjects during my stay in Lumber City, I was also presented with many different economic situations. Some held two low income jobs in bars and shops to make ends meet, and worked 16 hours a day. Others again held steady blue collar jobs, often in one of the many paper plants in the area. Then again I got to know teachers, bank personnel, IT-consultants, doctors and drug-reps.<sup>5</sup> There were also the housewives, some of them willingly unemployed, but some also trying to contribute to the household income by starting up businesses at home, like day care and piercing studios.

Not only your personal and your family's economy, but also your neighborhood's situation overall influences your statistical chances of joining the military. Research suggests that youth from low- to middle-median income neighborhoods are over-represented among new Army recruits (National Priorities Project, 2008 [URL]). This in itself constitutes an interesting field of study, but except for these introductory, contextualizing paragraphs and the

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<sup>5</sup> Drug representatives: working for a pharmaceutical company selling medicines to doctors.

last part of chapter five, economy will not be the focus of this thesis. Income might of course influence people's perspectives, and social- and economic class are very real structures in American society (Ortner 2006). Still, these are themes I have had to lay aside for the most part in this thesis.

### **Studying the understudied group - white, middle-class Americans**

Much anthropology has been done on the USA. However, according to Ortner (2006:21), most of these studies have focused on marginalized groups like street gangs, retirement communities and different ethnic minorities. Exceptions exist, like Ortner's own studies, the aforementioned Newman and her studies of the white middle class, and Watanabe, whose statement echoes Ortner's:

White, middle-class Americans are among the most understudied groups in the anthropology of the United States, despite of (or perhaps because of) their hegemonic presence in society. It is worthwhile to study this group because cultural "others" are often constructed by reference to them, and because they often represent "America" in the eyes of foreigners. Watanabe (2005:5)

98% of Lumber City's citizens were 'white', and all of my research subjects, except for two Native Americans whose stories I have not been able to include in this thesis, belonged to this demographical category. All the research subjects who have contributed to the making of this thesis are furthermore Christian; none of them could be categorized as poor; and all talked of themselves as middle class<sup>6</sup>. The numbers mentioned in the thesis' introductory paragraph suggest that the job 'military serviceman or -woman' is quite a usual job for an American to either have or have had. Thus, in spite of the apparent narrow selection of research subjects, as they are all connected to the military in one way or the other, I argue that the group that is studied in this thesis constitutes what Watanabe (2005) argues is the most understudied group in the anthropology of the United States.

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding this last point, taken into consideration how stretched this category 'the American middle class' has become, I will argue that their statements can be assumed to hold statistical truth when counted in income numbers, although they ranged from the low- to the upper middle class, and, economically, living very different lives.

## Said and McGrane's critique of the study of the Other

McGrane (1989) suggests that anthropology with its use of culture as a differentiating term between people is a continuation of a European colonial tradition where the white man continuously has constructed its Other – in McGrane's analysis constantly an Other who is a native in Europe's colonies – as a negative reflection of himself. Just using the more democratic term 'culture' does not remove a hierarchic way of thinking of, and describing the Other as a little lower than his/her describer. Edward Said suggests some of the same things in *Orientalism* (1978), although with a more specific look at the European-American tradition of describing the Orient.

McGrane (1989) and Said (1978) can be read as suggesting that most attempts at describing Europe's or the USA's Other is bound to be trapped within an intellectual tradition where our Other is not only hindered from representing itself but also hindered in being represented in a way that has anything to do with what is its reality. This does not mean that McGrane or Said suggest there are any essential truths yet to be discovered about the Orient or other spaces where the Other might exist. It simply means that Western attempts at describing the Other will ultimately have its reference less in the Other's reality, than in a Western discourse which leads intellectual efforts within it, in large part, to result in a reconstruction of a Western identity, and through that using the Other as the negative contrast.

So, as long as it seems to be ourselves we are describing and analysing anyway, why not take the full step and study ourselves openly? How does the white, American middle class reconstruct their identity? Not to claim that I am part of the white, American middle class, but I am at least situated on the same side of the West/East, North/South, rich/poor divide, and I thus see my project as at least moving towards a self-reflexive study on behalf of the West/north/rich. The Occident/Orient divide is a different matter, and which side I belong to here will be discussed later on – my mixed ethnicity, half Palestinian and half Norwegian, places me on the edge of this divide.

Said (1978:21) by quoting Marx: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented", makes the point that although Marx's intentions are good, he assumes that *they* (the Orientals) would represent themselves if they could. Since we cannot see them representing themselves, we assume they are unable to do it and thus we must help them – we must represent them. Many anthropologists have the same good intentions; they write about oppressed groups of people, in for example earlier European and American colonies, or within our own societies (the Sami population in Norway, or Native Americans in the USA are cases

in point). Read in its uttermost consequence for anthropology, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) analyses how, by assuming that we can represent these marginalised groups, we disconnect their mutedness from the anthropologist's own history and actions. We don't see that it is still a case of us attempting to represent them, instead of letting them represent themselves, and that it is through this that we keep them muted.

Again, I tried to avoid studying a group of people who fall into the category of 'muted'. I tried instead to study a group of people who is seen as absolutely able to speak for themselves, a group of people who, in stark opposition to being culturally marginalized, is seen as having global cultural hegemony – the American, white middle class. This, in contrast to studying African Americans, homosexuals or homeless people in the USA, which again would be to fall for the temptation of studying yet other groups whom we somehow think cannot represent themselves.

### **Study up? - When the research subjects constitutes the researcher's radical other**

I might have avoided at least the core of Said's and McGrane's critique of much Western academia. However, an ambition at the outset of my fieldwork was also to 'study up'. However, does 'not studying down' equal 'studying up'? A further discussion of both the research subjects' situation and the researcher's position in relation to her research subjects is in place.

When the ambition was to study up, talking to people who either are the ones performing the actions of what is perceived as the strongest military in the world, or their closest friends and family, appeared to me as a task perfectly fitting that ambition. How do the people who perform tasks on behalf of a power-institution legitimize performing these tasks? Do they believe in the missions they are hired to perform? By studying this group of people I thought that I would have solved not only the ethical difficulties pointed out by Said (1978) and McGrane (1989), but that I would also get access to a form of elite, not only in their own society, but on a global scale.

I soon realised a few things: The people who work for this immensely powerful institution actually feel *powerless*. I also quickly realised that even though these people appear wealthy and lucky on a global scale, many of them struggle economically relatively in the USA; family members of troops struggle with strong fear that their loved ones will die

during deployment; and the troops themselves struggle twofold: fear for their own life and fear for their fellow troops', that is, their friends', lives.

Another factor is the relationship between researcher and research subject. No matter the relative status of the research subject in other matters, the relationship researcher – research subject will be uneven in favour of the researcher. According to Vike (2001:77) the most radical critique of anthropological representation states that it is impossible to avoid that the people studied become, when the researcher interprets and writes, somehow absorbed by the researcher's discourse. Furthermore, even though the anthropologist's method is to let the research subjects decide what topics are interesting (the anthropologist tries to learn from the people she studies) it is still the anthropologist who somehow decides the overarching topic of study; i.e. American service members' ideas on the Iraq war. In the next instance it is also the anthropologist who decides what among all the things the research subjects have said will be written down. For instance, after a whole day spent with the Patriot Guard Riders, some things stood out as interesting and worth writing down, while other things were excluded. The power difference in the relation researcher – research subject is even further disturbed when the anthropologist leaves the field and starts analyzing the collected material. The research subject is no longer there in any 'live' form and cannot correct the anthropologist's interpretations (Mintz 1979).

Thus, even though I might have avoided the ethical problems of studying somebody who is hierarchically below me in political, cultural and economic terms, the uneven distribution of power in the personal relationship between anthropologist and research subject disturbs the idea about a clear cut instance of 'studying up'. The issue becomes even more complex when the former presented idea about the researcher, me, studying an 'us' that I perceive myself as part of, is disturbed by the fact that this 'us' is such a hybrid group that among this 'us' my 'radical other' exists.

A critique of the tradition of ethnographic realism in anthropology is that the anthropologist, as writer, has been left out from the text, with the result that the reader reads the text without the proper context to interpret it within (Howell 1994). Who the author of the text is, is important in terms of what form the analysis has taken. Therefore I will present relevant elements in my background here. I am born and brought up in Norway, but my father is Palestinian. My father's family have a strong political tradition, working for the Palestinian cause, and I have followed in those footsteps. My mother's family is positioned on the Norwegian political left, and I am no different in that case either. That I opposed both the

invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 should thus come as no surprise.

Laura Nader (1969:285) writes

Today we have anthropology students who are indignant about many problems affecting the future of *Homo sapiens*,[...] they are studying problems about which they have no “feelings.” Some think this is the only appropriate stance for a science. Yet the things that students are energetic about they do not study. I think we are losing something here. The normative impulse often leads one to ask important questions about a phenomenon that would not be asked otherwise, or to define a problem in a new context.

Meeting my ‘radical other’ in the field, does not, according to Nader (1969), necessarily imply a less insightful study. She gives the example of Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, where Benedict tried to understand opponents in war. To quote Nader’s (1969:285) reflections on Benedict’s project: “The normative impulse here, generated by patriotism and loyalty, considered appropriate in World War II, was responsible for an insightful book and the development of new techniques for studying culture at a distance.”



# 3:

## *Justifying the wars*

In this chapter I present six research subjects, and a selection of their accounts of how they view the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Different elements in their reasoning of justification of the wars are given focus. It is argued that these elements constitute interconnected ideas which not only tell us how the research subjects view one or both of the wars, but also how the research subjects' views on the wars are influenced by the ideas they already have about the USA. More specifically, this chapter will establish the idea that how war is perceived is intrinsically connected to how American identity is perceived. In this chapter this is showed through accounts where the wars are attempted justified. As will be shown in chapter 5, however, the connection is just as valid in accounts of resistance.

### **At the recruiting office**

The two recruiters that were introduced in chapter 2, Hanks and Scott, both working at Lumber City's recruitment office, stand out as examples of how the war(s) are justified. They are both in their late thirties, married, have children, and have worked in the Army between 10 and 15 years. Hanks enlisted after dropping out of college, and Scott enlisted after having worked as a policeman for some years. Unlike Scott, who has deployed to Iraq, Hanks has deployed neither to Iraq nor Afghanistan. Because of this the focus during our talks was on the Iraq war, and not on the War in Afghanistan.

The recruiters welcomed me to hang out in their office and talk with them and watch them work. The account below is a selection of what they said about the issue of war in general, and the Iraq war specifically, during my many hours spent in their office.

I always met the recruiters at the recruiting office, and never in private. That is, I met them while they were working for the US Army. While in uniform, soldiers are not allowed to speak negatively about the President. Because Hanks and Scott worked as recruiters when I knew them, it was their job to portray the Army as positively as possible. This had consequences for how they could speak about the Iraq war. Their accounts can thus be assumed to represent the official view of the US Army.

Hanks and Scott often focused on how Iraq has developed with the US presence. Before the USA came there, they insisted, there were only a couple thousand cell phones in Iraq, but now there are millions. Furthermore, after the USA intervened in the country, there have come into existence a lot of American fast food chains. These types of businesses started to appear there in 2005, they said, because the US presence opened up for investment in Iraq. It is not Americans who profit from this though, Hanks and Scott remarked; the shops are owned by local people, and it is local people who make money. They also insisted that under Saddam Hussein there were no news publications, but now they've got fifteen.

Hanks once said, «What soldiers in the Army do is to give up their life for others' freedom, and not only Americans' freedom». Scott followed up on this statement by telling about his deployment in Korea. There he got handshakes and 'thank yous' from older people, but not from the young people. He experienced the same thing when he deployed to Iraq. His explanation for this was that the younger generations are worried that the USA will take over the country, while the older are grateful. The young Iraqis are worried that Iraq will become another Korea. They don't want US soldiers to stick around in Iraq for the next 50 years, and they worry about Americanization.

Hanks commented on the irony that is visible in such situations: the USA is trying to enforce 'help' on people who don't want it, and he said laughingly, smashing his fists on the table: «We will help you! We are coming, and we are helping you!» Both Hanks and Scott said they understand that people, whether in Iraq or Korea, worry about having 'help' forced on them, like governmental systems or other things that are foreign to their original ways of living. Still, they insisted, because all the USA wants to do is to help the Iraqis form their own government and then get out, the US presence in those countries is legitimate and should be accepted. «We are going to help them govern themselves», Hanks said, and continued explaining the importance of a good form of governance: «Freedom is bigger than the President; the *way* we Americans elect is bigger than *who* we elect. It is a bigger mentality sort of. There will not be a civil war if the Democrats win. Americans see the system as well functioning, and will rather keep the system than have a civil war if their candidate does not win the election». And he continued: «We are not in Iraq for the adults. We can't change old minds. We are doing it for the kids. We encourage them to stay away from crime and terrorism, and we teach them democracy.» Then he told me about a website he likes: [www.operationiraqchildren.org](http://www.operationiraqchildren.org). The website belongs to an organization with the same name, and his brother in law flew a helicopter in Iraq handing out toys to children on a mission for the mentioned organization.

Scott has experienced three elections in Iraq. He said that during those he had been sitting on a rooftop with his machine gun making it safe for the Iraqis to vote. He underlined that to him that is something meaningful, and something he is proud of. Hanks mentioned his deployment in Somalia where all he did was hand out food to people who were starving.

«The USA is hyped up to be a warmonger», Hanks stated, and added, «I'm happy with peace, but there are some things you need to fight for. As a soldier you pray for peace and train for war.» He continued by making a comparison to the Second World War (WWII) and pointed out that taking a neutral stance in a conflict is not something you necessarily should desire.

Regarding the question of oil, Hanks comment was: «Does the war come down to oil? No! It is about stability in the area. The USA has spent trillions on this war, spent too much money for the war to be about oil. It is not like we have profited on this war. We give more than we take». However, he and Scott added, when stating this, they are not talking about Halliburton or how the President and the Vice President have profited personally. They talk about the reasons for the government's decisions, not how private companies and people profit from it second hand, as unforeseen side effects.

According to Hanks, when you join the Army you go through a change of mentality: from local to global. When he grew up his attitude was «Why should we care?». He would much rather just stay home in the USA. But, and Scott confirmed this: «We would much rather fight terrorists in Iraq than on our own soil.» Hanks continued and said that violence will always be there, it is part of human weakness. Scott agreed, and added, referring to his personal experience in Korea: «They just like to kill each other». On the other hand they pointed out that American history is based on war. The USA broke off from England through a war.

## **A just war**

In the recruiters' accounts there is an understanding of the Iraq war as that of justified actions – a just war. But what constitutes a just war? The following pages will show how the recruiters' conceptions of just wars find resonance with a contemporary trend in the American-European world, as described by Hannah Arendt (1990).

Yet if it was amazing to see how the very word freedom could disappear from the revolutionary vocabulary, it has perhaps been no less astounding to watch how in recent years the idea of freedom has

intruded itself into the centre of the gravest of all present political debates, the discussion of war and of justifiable use of violence. (Arendt 1990:11-12).

In the two recruiters' explanation of how they view the Iraq War the theme of freedom appeared several times. Through the direct use of the word freedom; as in, "what soldiers in the Army do is to give up their life for others freedom"; and indirectly, through describing what can be assumed they think of as freedoms resulting from the soldiers' sacrifice<sup>7</sup>. That is, how Iraqis' lives have improved through the introduction of democracy, an increase in news publications (freedom of speech), and increased foreign investment. Although acknowledging the military undertakings in Iraq as war, the recruiters mainly talked about the USA's presence in Iraq not in terms of war, but in terms often reserved for a humanitarian development project.

Hannah Arendt (1990:13) writes that during Roman times, any war that was necessary was just. This means that a war based on conquest, expansion, defense of vested interest, conservation of power or support of a given power equilibrium were legitimate motives of war. Scott and Hanks don't share this Roman attitude to how wars are justified. If the Iraq war is about oil that would be a war based on the mentioned motives. Hanks made clear that the war certainly doesn't come down to oil, and thus underlined how he cannot imagine oil as a just cause for a war conducted by the USA.

What can explain this attitude difference between the ancient Romans and our two American recruiters? Arendt suggests the First World War (WWI), with its demonstration of "the horribly destructive potential of warfare under conditions of modern technology" (1990:13) as the time when "The notion that aggression is a crime and that wars can be justified only if they ward off aggression or prevent it acquired its practical and even theoretical significance" (1990:13). Interestingly, the few times the recruiters talked about the American presence in Iraq specifically as a war, they justified it in that way. Scott's comment that he prefers to fight terrorism in Iraq rather than on American soil suggests that he sees the Iraq war as warding off aggression, both at home and in Iraq. Hanks' implicit comment about the potential for/reality of civil war in Iraq in connection with elections, suggests an idea about the Iraq war as preventing and warding off aggression internally in Iraq.

Another prevalent change that appeared after WWI, according to Arendt, was that "we almost automatically expect that no government, and no state or form of government, will be strong enough to survive a defeat in war." (1963:15). Wars, according to Arendt, have

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<sup>7</sup> I will return to the theme 'sacrifice' in chapter four.

politically become a matter of life and death. A revolutionary (in a non-Marxist sense) change in government “belongs today among the most certain consequences of defeat in war” (1990:15). And certainly, Iraq (and Afghanistan) is now experiencing the difficult movement from dictatorship to democracy. Removing Saddam Hussein from power was not only an expected outcome of the invasion of Iraq, but an outspoken goal and legitimizing factor on the side of the US government at the time of the invasion. Governmental change was also a central point in Hanks’ and Scott’s justification of the Iraq war, for example in their focus on teaching Iraqi children about democracy, and Scott monitoring Iraqi elections.

It seems that in the minds of the recruiters, the wars are just (they ward off aggression), and the necessary outcome of them – freedom and a revolutionary change of government – is proven. Arendt’s theorizing sheds light on the recruiters’ accounts, helping us see how their ideas are typical for the time in history in which they are presented. Said differently, the justifications share many of their basic ideas with a general trend at this moment in history. Arendt’s theory is general (for the European and North American world), and the rest of the thesis will have a more narrow analytical approach, trying to figure out whether there is perhaps something more specifically *American* about the world view that forms the research subjects’ accounts. However, because the USA is not cut off from the rest of the world, I believe showing how the research subjects accounts are also formed by a larger, international historical context, was a relevant digression, and an important thought to have in mind as we move on to a US-specific focus.

Before narrowing down the theoretical analytical approach to something more specific for the USA, I will present the accounts of a future soldier, her mother and stepfather. Her explanations for wanting to join Army show how there is a close match between the presented US Army view of the Iraq war as a just war and the justification she and her family used regarding both the Iraq war and the War in Afghanistan.

## **A future soldier**

I learned from the Army recruiters that the 17 year old girl Jennifer had shown interest in enlisting. Fortunately she let me join Hanks on his first meeting with her and her family. At this first visit by the recruiter, Jennifer’s mother, Theresa, and Jennifer’s stepfather, Harry, were present. When I later visited this family alone, I always spoke with the three together.

## **FROM THE PEACE CORPS TO THE ARMY**

One of the many interesting things I learned from my meetings with Jennifer and her family was Jennifer's motivation for joining the Army. During our first meeting, on my visit with the recruiter, she explained that ever since she was a child she wanted to save the world. Back then her father used to tease her because she wanted to travel to Africa and help the starving people. «To me, joining the Army is a way of proving to him that I can do it, that I'm actually able to make the world a better place». I remember Hanks answered enthusiastically, «I joined for the same reason as you; help people!» He then told Jennifer, Theresa and Harry, as he and Scott had told me before, about Hanks' deployment in Somalia, and the signs of 'development' apparent in Iraq.

On a later visit I asked Jennifer to tell me more about her childhood desire to help the starving people in Africa, and how that had made her want to join the Army. Interestingly, she answered that her initial thought was that if it was possible to make a living by working in the Peace Corps, she would like to do that. However, she had concluded that the Army is better. «You get so much powerful experience. You acquire leadership skills. In the Peace Corps you help, but you don't get as much a feeling of not only doing it for yourself. In the Army you are not only doing it to make yourself look good. You are helping the whole country; serving your country at the same time as you acquire a clean conscience. It is a bigger cause, something outside yourself. It is not only about making yourself look better. People are suffering. There are natural disasters. People don't always want it, but we are there to help». This direct connection between the Peace Corps and the Army is highly illustrative of the understanding of the Army as an institution not of aggression, but as a force for good.

## **AMERICAN RESPONSIBILITY: «We are not the perfect nation, but we do have certain values»**

On my direct question on what their thoughts are on the Iraq war, Harry said: «I always knew the USA needed to be in Iraq. All these other countries with nuclear weapons; it can't be like that. Many people there are terrorists and extremists with no value for human life. If we don't stop it, it will come to the USA sooner or later. Anytime there is a war, it is bad, and when it drags out, you want to shorten it. It is unfortunate that this one is so long. But we need to be there with all those soldiers fighting.» Jennifer said, inspired by Harry's last statement, that many are upset because American troops die, «but we must remember that the US military is still a voluntary thing. And, if we pull out now, all that dying would be for nothing». Theresa added that she is amazed how short people's memory is and pointed to the fact that during

WWI and WWII «we lost more soldiers in just a few days than we have lost so far during five years in Iraq. In Iraq we have not even reached the number of lives lost on 9/11». Adding, «now we at least contribute to letting voices of people not formerly heard being heard». Jennifer agreed, but pointed out how her mother's last point is not, according to Jennifer, given proper attention. Jennifer blamed the media for forming people's opinions in a negative way by only focusing on the bad things. «What about the positive changes?» she asked. «Some people over there are appreciative of what the USA is doing. They get opportunities they would not have if the USA was not there. But the media tears it».

Theresa made an interesting comment where she compared how the US military is a volunteer military with how she perceived the Iraqi military system to have been at the time of the USA's invasion. «Our family is not being punished just if some in our family don't want to go to war. We are not forced into the military. In Iraq on the other hand they had no choice. That is why it was necessary to protect the people over there from Saddam's regime». In Theresa's eyes, the US military not only *brings* freedom, through its actions, it *is* freedom, through its function as a volunteer institution, and she legitimizes the Iraq war through this idea.

Theresa's brother is an NCO in the Army and served in the First Gulf War and in Afghanistan. After returning from Iraq he told Theresa about how badly the Kurds were treated there. When the USA decided to go back into Iraq in 2003, she thought about the Kurds and hoped this second intervention would better their situation. With this introduction Theresa started talking about how her ancestors who had migrated from Macedonia to the USA in the beginning of the 1900s. She pointed out that because she has roots in the area she thought a lot about the people in Kosovo and Serbia during the Balkan war in the 1990s, and about what Milosevic did. She then drew a parallel between the Balkan war and the Iraq war. «Imagine the poor people who have to live under that kind of rule. When people think about what the USA is doing in Iraq and Afghanistan they usually think about the fighting aspect, and forget the humanitarianism that follows and which make people's lives better.» It appears that Theresa's Macedonian ancestry gives her a separate experience of concern for people in Balkan; an "extra" experience which reinforces her sense of responsibility, possibly extending to include any people experiencing oppression.

Theresa continued her account by mentioning that when her brother was in Afghanistan, he told her about how poor people there are. To this, Harry added: «An average Afghani's life expectancy is 40 years. That is pretty crazy! It is like Theresa and I would be dead now». Jennifer said it upsets her too. «Think of all the medicines, shelters and food

supplies we have. And there is a 30 year difference in life expectancy between an American and an Afghani! It is mind blowing! They have such small care for individual life. It is so easy to increase the life expectancy, but their leaders will not do it».

I asked them whether they think Iraqis and Afghanis would revolt against their oppressors on their own, without the US presence. Jennifer replied that «if one person disagrees, and he is not informed that others disagree, there is no chance he will revolt on his own. It is different when they know they have the US backing them. It is more realistic that something will be done then. And if they don't want our help, then don't take it».

Jennifer said it makes her mad that people can oppose the Iraq war:

«Nobody knows the real reasons for being there except for the President, and that is how it should be. Nobody should argue with why we are there – argue with us trying to make it better. Some people want help, just not all. We are not the perfect nation, but we do have certain values. And if we pulled out of Iraq today, the terrorists would still be there. It is foolish to think that the fighting would stop if the USA leaves. And if we left now, all the sacrifices that are made there will be for nothing. They were fighting all along, not because we are there. They are not becoming terrorists because of us; terrorism is not rising just because we are there. And more people would die if we were not there».

Theresa also suggested a generational explanation for many Americans' lack of support for both the Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan:

«WWII veterans are dying and Americans thus don't have their grandparents to tell them about the horrors of that time. Equally, they don't have their first generation grandparents to tell them about communist countries anymore. Americans don't know anybody who suffered under that rule anymore. Americans generally have a different mindset today than during WWII. Back then Americans accepted our rule around the world. But it has gone decades between then and now. Today the American people in spite of all the info we have access to are more isolated and selfish in our minds. We think it is not in our place to fix it. During WWII there was no question whether we should go into the war and help the Jews. If we had waited during WWII it would have been too late. Today we are making change that is good. Not only good for the USA; a lot of neighboring countries can be affected too. And anyway, if we don't help others they will not help us».

From here she continued telling about a meeting she had joined some time ago. A holocaust survivor had come to Lumber City to tell about his experiences in a concentration camp during WWII. Theresa felt that reminded her of «why we are doing what we are doing. It is hard for people in America to imagine any conflict anymore. Nobody here can imagine how it is to live worrying for a sniper to shoot you, worrying about being bombed». For her,



therefore, and the others presented so far, the role of the US military is both that of preventing an infringement on American freedoms and that of exporting, by example, the American system of democracy and freedom. By ‘exporting by example’ I mean that, in the eyes of the research subjects, the USA, through its very being, constitutes an example for others to follow. The USA tells others to both ‘do as we say *and* as we do’.

This idea of “exporting by example” was also exemplified in discussions over the US Rules of Engagement (ROE). ROE is a set of rules controlling what troops can and cannot do in war. Some service members I talked with said they find the ROE as unnecessarily putting American troops in a disadvantageous situation when confronting the enemy (whether it be the Taliban or Iraqi insurgents), as the enemy doesn’t have such rules. Jennifer saw it differently. She said that «the fact that our military has rules shows that we care a little more, that we act more with a purposed cause, and that we are more efficient and organized. Their version of war, on the other hand, includes that innocents get hurt and involved. We are not allowed to do that».

The idea of exporting by example, however, must be combined by some amount of force, as a response to my questions on whether diplomacy would work better than war, showed. Theresa replied:

«if peace was as easy as that. I don’t think diplomacy works with people that are that radical and extreme. If they believed in diplomacy they would not be bombing. They would not recruit more people, among them women and children, to kill themselves if they believe in diplomacy. If you want to use diplomacy you have to work with people who are willing to talk».

Harry added that when the terrorists kill civilians it is intentional. «They know what they are doing. The USA goes after the terrorists; the civilians are only killed by accident». Theresa added: «They don’t value life the same way as us», and Jennifer followed up by saying «these people don’t want to talk, so the military has no choice. Military language simply talks more to them than diplomacy».

## **Nationalism as a justifying language**

Much of the above presented understanding of the role/mission, of the USA and its military, can be understood within the context of civil religion, wherein the nation is the focus of

belief, and its endeavours overseas is the spreading (missionary function) of the values inherent in the ‘national belief’.

Anderson (1991) claimed that nationalism resembles religion, or rather *civil* religion (Krohn-Hansen 2001:88). Nationalisms or civil religions, like other religions, give agents a language through which they can explain and legitimize intolerance, violence, and fatal sacrifice. In the case of civil religions or nationalisms, it is done on behalf of nations (or nation states). An explanation of such a legitimizing language might be found in the symbolic representations of violence and evil which can be incorporated in nationalisms (Eriksen 1993; Krohn-Hansen 2001). Krohn-Hansen (2001) argues that the origin of the symbolic representations which now contribute to the reproduction of a certain world view, and hence the reproduction of legitimization of certain forms of violence, can be found in the representation of the nation’s own origin, in representations of the past.

#### **AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION**

This tendency of using an understanding of the past to legitimize the actions of the present are highly relevant in the case of the USA, and particularly in understanding the view of war as investigated here. In the essay “American Civil Religion” Bellah (1966) introduces an analysis of dominant constructions of the USA’s past, and shows how these constructions not only contribute to American nationalism’s form, but also constitutes a specific historical and normative backdrop from which intervention in other countries can collect legitimization. He does not focus on violence explicitly, but with this thesis’s explicit focus on the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it will emerge how Bellah’s analysis can explain much of the justifying ‘language’ or explanations the research subjects offered for the two wars.

Bellah (1966), like Anderson (1991), treats nationalism as a religion, or as Krohn-Hansen (2001) states, a *civil* religion. Bellah bases his ideas on Jean-Jacque Rousseau and what he writes about civil religion in the Social Contract (first published 1762, my edition 1968). There Rousseau “outlines the simple dogmas of the civil religion: the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance. All other religious opinions are outside the cognizance of the state and may be freely held by citizens.” (Bellah 1966:7). Rousseau (1968:185-186) states furthermore:

Now it is very important to the state that each citizen should have a religion which makes him love his duty, but the dogmas of that religion are of interest neither to the state nor its members, except in so far

as those dogmas concern morals and the duties which everyone who professes that religion is bound to perform towards others. [...]There is thus a profession of faith which is purely civil and of which it is the sovereign's function to determine the articles, not strictly as religious dogmas, but as expressions of social conscience, without which it is impossible to be either a good citizen or a loyal subject.

The point is not to compel people to believe in the dogmas of the civil religion, but to “banish from the State anyone who does not believe them; banish him not for impiety but as an antisocial being, as one unable sincerely to love law and justice, or to sacrifice, if need be, his life to his duty.” (Rousseau 1968:186). Basically, civil religion is something that makes the citizens of a state stay loyal to that state, its values and its rules, but through an apparent free will and not through violent force.

With nationalism as a civil religion prevalent in politics, assuming the existence of God, but not assuming a specific church, the separation of church and state does not deny the political realm a religious dimension (Bellah 1966:5). The common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share “have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere” (Bellah 1966:5-6). Mottos like “In God we trust” and inclusion of the phrase “under God” in the pledge to the flag, communicates that even though sovereignty in American political theory rests with the people, the ultimate sovereignty implicitly, and often explicitly, is attributed to God. “The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong. The president's obligation extends to the higher criterion.” (Bellah 1966:6). This higher criterion, God, is “actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America.” (1966:9). It is as if Americans are the chosen people. Bellah continues his analysis suggesting, both metaphorically and explicitly, a comparison between USA and Israel. “Europe is Egypt; America, the promised land. God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all the nations.” (1966:10). This idea of a New Jerusalem is a Christian idea, not to be confused with Judaism's idea of Jerusalem. This ‘promised land’ dimension of civil religion and political life in the USA provides a transcendent goal for the political process: an obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth. Bellah (1966:10) presents a few sentences from President Johnson's inaugural address:

They came already here – the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty,

bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.

### **THE COVENANT ENACTED**

What some might perceive as violence towards Iraqis and Afghans are in the previous accounts instead presented as acts of helping the Iraqi and Afghani people towards a better life. Based on Bellah's theorizing, it is possible to suggest that this ability to transform violence into help is enabled through interpreting the two wars within the realm of American nationalism. That is, through a specific understanding of the USA's, and its citizens', position in the world.

When Jennifer, Harry and Theresa reflects over the differences in wealth, security and life expectancy between Afghans and Americans, this resonates with Bellah's description of American civil religion as portraying the USA as the promised land, and Americans as the chosen people. Being chosen by God comes with a responsibility, and therein the idea of exporting (freedom) by example, not only as a possibility, but as an obligation. The USA as a concept stands for, and is freedom, and thus, as exemplified by Theresa's comparison of the US military system with the Iraqi, so does/is their military. Instead of the military appearing only as the American state's most powerful tool of violent force, it is just as much a symbol of freedom itself. This, combined with the God-inferred responsibility of the chosen American people to "inspire the hopes of all mankind", as according to President Johnson (quoted in Bellah 1966:10), make Jennifer's likening of the US Army with the Peace Corps possible.

The responsibility of the 'chosen people' is again underlined when Theresa says that the feeling of responsibility among Americans seems to shrink with the passing away of former generations; the ones who experienced WWII, and the first generation Americans who had experienced the difficulties of life outside the USA. These people knew what kind of promised land the USA was to them at their arrival, and what kind of promised land the USA still is. It was they who made the covenant, referred to in President Johnson's inaugural address, and they who could remind their descendants to keep its terms.

This idea of the promised land ties in with what Orm Øverland (1996) writes about 'home-making myths'. The American-Israel theme outlined by Bellah can be seen to constitute one such myth. Home-making myths are myths of belonging. They "are a particular construction of ethnic memory with a special view to ensuring and improving an ethnic future." (Øverland 1996:6). Through their reference to an ethnic group's past they are claims to this group's special status in the present; in Øverland's and my case, a status as legitimate

members of the American nation. Like Anderson (1991), Øverland's (1996) idea is that the construction of nations as imagined communities depends on the development of a sense of shared history. The shared history in the case of the US, according to Øverland, is migration; a manifold experience, made up of people travelling to the USA from all over the world. An interesting consequence of this specific story of migration as the home-making myth is that the very claim of a unique and separate status, for example being Macedonian as in Theresa's case, is what constitutes the claim of being recognized as American (Øverland 1996:2). Said differently, you need to claim a separate status from the very people you wish to be categorized with to be recognized as taking part in a national fellowship with them.

Theresa uses her home-making myth (her ancestors having migrated from Macedonia to the USA) in a specific way when legitimizing the war in Iraq. Through her home-making myth she explains how she, as a Macedonian-American, is in a position wherefrom she is especially able to understand and empathize with people experiencing oppression and suffering; no matter whether they are victims of the Balkan war, or are Kurds in Iraq. Theresa's ancestors' experience exists within her – an ancestral experience existing within all Americans – reminding her of her specific *American* responsibility to help people not living in the promised land of the USA towards a better life. As long as the American home-making myth centres on each individual's unique and separate family migration story, the covenant the first generation immigrants made with the land will bind today's Americans, and, by implication, serve as a legitimizing tool for a selection of the USA's undertakings, at home and abroad.

## **Innocents and terrorists – a critical divide**

Having shown some central constructions in American identity and how they connect to one way of perceiving Americans' role in the world, let us now move on to what, according to Bellah (1996), are the more negatively critical aspects of civil religion. He points both to the domestic scene where what he names an American-Legion type ideology “that fuses God, country, and flag has been used to attack nonconformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds”<sup>8</sup> (1966:16), and to America's international undertakings. In the latter case he claims the dangers of distortion from what he perceives as the positive elements of American civil religion (all people are equal before God, democracy etc.) to be even greater, and the built-in

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<sup>8</sup> I will return to the fusing of God, country and flag on the domestic scene in chapter four (and five) and specifically to American Civil Religion implications for how Americans can resist war in chapter five.

safeguards of the tradition weaker. The theme of the American Israel he claims can be “overtly or implicitly linked to the ideal of manifest destiny that has been used to legitimize several adventures in imperialism since the early nineteenth century.” (1966:16). Bellah (1966:16-17) continues saying

The issue is not so much one of imperial expansion, of which we are accused, as of the tendency to assimilate all governments or parties in the world that support our immediate policies or call upon our help by invoking the notion of free institutions and democratic values. Those nations that are for the moment “on our side” become “the free world”. A repressive and unstable military dictatorship in South Vietnam becomes “the free people of South Vietnam and their government”. It is the part of the role of America as the New Jerusalem and “the last best hope of earth” to defend such governments with treasure and eventually with blood. When our soldiers are dying, it becomes possible to concentrate the struggle further by invoking the great theme of sacrifice. For the majority of the American people who are unable to judge whether the people of South Vietnam (or wherever) are “free like us”, such arguments are convincing.

Bellah suggests here a perspective where the world is divided into two blocks; people on Americans’ side and, by implication, people *not* on Americans’ side. This division parallels the us/them divide focused on so far in this chapter, made up of Americans/the rest of the world. Among the group ‘the rest of the world’ there are people whom it is possible to help (people on Americans’ side / members of ‘the free world’), and people *impossible* to help – yet possible to eliminate. The violent aspects of war have largely been avoided in the accounts presented so far, but it was mentioned and justified. The matter of how violence against some, but not others, is legitimate, and how a certain amount of force is legitimate and necessary in the USA’s undertakings no matter which of the ‘two others’ one is facing, will be the focus of the rest of this chapter. The issue is portrayed in an interesting way in the soldier Jane’s account of her perspectives on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

#### «MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, ONE ROUND AT A TIME»

As with, Jennifer, Hanks was the one who recruited Jane to the Army in the first place, and like Jennifer, Jane was only 17 years old at the time. One year after enlisting, she was about to deploy to Iraq. Jane was comfortable with that, but her parents feared for her life and were able to get her transferred to the officers’ program (ROTC), thus avoiding that their 18 year old daughter was deployed to a war zone. Her family lived in Lumber City and she attended ROTC at a college a few hours away in the Northern Belt. Jane had two older siblings in the

military and a boyfriend in the Army who had deployed to Iraq three times. I usually met Jane when she came home to visit her family in Lumber City during weekends or vacations, but also when I joined her family when they travelled to visit her at her college. One time I also visited her alone and spent a few days at her college. The following is an account of her views on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan offered on this trip.

Jane is tired of the war. «Not because I doubt that the USA is in Iraq<sup>9</sup> for good reasons,» she said,

«but because the war doesn't seem to help. The reason for this is that the Iraqi government is not doing its job. The USA, on the other hand, is so nice and kind and stays there and tries to help them, spends a lot of money and gives the Iraqi government more and more time to fix things when the fact is that the Iraqi government actually don't want to fix anything. They have had five years now and they should have been able to fix something. The USA is sticking its nose into everything, so eager to help everybody even when they don't want any help.»

It makes her sad, Jane said, when the US government says they might have to stay in Iraq for 10 more years while nothing seems to help.

On the other hand she insisted that the war in Iraq also is about the Global War on Terror. She does not think the USA should pull out immediately from Iraq just because it doesn't seem like they are able to help the Iraqis to a better life. «It is a war, and you can't quit before you have won it. If the USA sticks around in Iraq the terrorists will not dare to do anything. If the USA leaves though, the terrorists will think «Ok, let's go get them», and they will attack the USA again.» Jane admitted that 9/11 made her «pissed off» and that her immediate thought back then was «Go get them!». «9/11 justified a counterattack. However, even though the USA sticks around we will never be able to kill all of the terrorists. There are always born new ones. There are thousands of Osama's children. There's a lot of people we need to kill before there will be peace.» «However» she added, «I am not sold on the fact that we need to kill them.»

I encouraged her to continue on the issue of why an American presence is necessary:

«Iraqis could not fix their troubles themselves [...] Taliban was around and they had a weak government<sup>10</sup>. Someone has to control them, and nobody was controlling them before the USA came

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<sup>9</sup> After getting to know Jane I realized, and she confirmed, that when she said 'Iraq', she usually meant any country 'over there', whether it be Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Kuwait or somewhere else. This will be apparent when she later mixes in 9/11 and the USA's attack on Afghanistan while talking about terrorism and Iraq. I experienced many others mixing up the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was also very usual to mix up Iraq and Iran.

there. It was a terrorist run state like Iran. Saddam as a dictator kept control, but he killed his own people. But, again, maybe that is what you have to do over there. It is a different mindset, they think differently. It is hard to switch to democracy from that. Their way of thinking of life is centered round the five pillars of Islam. Those pillars constitute their basic human values. Suicide and martyrdom is seen as a good thing among them. Among us that is a bad thing. You are miserable if you do that. Not all of them are like that of course. But it is a fact that they can give a kid a rifle or make it throw stones at American troops. We can't change their mindset. It is like telling a teenager not to drink. It makes him want to do it even more. However, if the USA pulls out, it will be chaos. They will think there are no laws if the USA is not there. Their government can't control them. The USA training their military might help though. However, complete peace like there is in Germany where the USA also have had military bases for decades, is not something that can be expected in Iraq. There is a different way of life there, different beliefs. There will always be people there who want to fight. There will always be terrorists. There are so many messed up people in the world who don't care about whether you have been nice to them. They don't care that you say you love them; they will just keep killing American troops. I am old enough to know that the world is fucked up and full of fucked up people».

«The USA needs to go other places and fight there to prevent a fight on American soil. We must help them so they don't want to fight here. Thus, we are helping ourselves by helping them», she added, and continued by pointing out again that the mission in Iraq is both about democracy and getting rid of terrorists. «What we are doing in Iraq is a good thing. Democracy is important so the people don't have to fear the government. It needs to be fought through though. World peace is something beauty queens want. The world is too fucked up for a peace and love attitude.»

Jane had maintained quite serious throughout our talk, and it was about here in her reasoning her attitude changed, and she added laughingly that the USA is «making the world a better place, one round a time!» – 'round' referring to a round of ammunition.

#### **A TWOFOLD OTHER, AND WAR AS A CIVILIZING PROJECT**

Jane, like the other research subjects, admitted that it seems like the people the USA tries to help do not always want that help. Still, like the rest, she maintained that the USA's efforts are legitimate. The USA is helping, even though the receivers don't always perceive it as such. It is as if the people on the receiving side of, what by the Americans is presented as 'help', are not in a position to judge whether what the US presence offers is good or bad.

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<sup>10</sup> Again we see that she is mixing Iraq and Afghanistan.



What can explain this perception of the lack of judgement among Iraqis and Afghans? Parallel with the above suggested ideas about the USA's specific responsibility to help 'all mankind', is also an idea about the direction of the world's development in general, taking the form of evolution. There is an objective goal for the human world's development. This goal might be perceived as decided by God, as according to American Civil Religion, but is just as much constructed and defended within a scientific development paradigm in the 'West' generally (Nustad 2003). Countries not displaying the same development as the 'Western world' are perceived as in a condition of pathology. And in the very same act as 'the West' thus *diagnoses* other countries as less developed, 'the West' also categorizes them as passive (they are weak, ill), thus allowing for a paternal role. The countries now in a role of recipients are not given much say regarding their present situation, the reasons for this situation, or which direction they should move in; both because these questions are already 'objectively' answered within the established development paradigm, and because, due to their diagnose, and state of passivity, they can't, or at least, are not perceived as able to.

Jane admits that the lack of understanding on the 'receiving' side makes the job of 'helping' harder, and she draws a rather pessimistic picture of the prospects for the USA's endeavours in Iraq and Afghanistan. The situation, as it appears in her account, is made up of an almost naive USA (committed to help no matter what); a varied group of subjects not wanting that help (from the Iraqi government to 'Osama's children', the Taliban, terrorists, Islamists and 'fucked up people' in general); and the ones wanting and needing the USA's presence – in Jane's account appearing as a rather weak group, following whoever takes the lead, exemplified by a kid being given a rifle.

An additional theoretical backdrop for understanding why Iraqis and Afghans are perceived as lacking the ability to judge what is good for them, can be found in Said's *Orientalism* (1978). With Barth (1969) it was established that identity is constructed through mirroring. To have an identity, you need an Other. Said (1978) showed how people in the East, the Orient, have been constructed as the negation of people in Europe and the USA, the Occident. People in the Orient have frequently been portrayed as more passionate, more violent and barbaric, as well as culturally determined. They are, in the extreme, perceived as 'savages', and although sometimes noble savages, this 'savaging' of the Orientals has justified European and American imperialism throughout history, often presented as a civilizing project (Said 1978).

Jane speaks of «their mindset», shaped by Islam, the recruiters of «their original ways of living», apparently foreign to the ways of democracy, and Jennifer, Theresa and Harry

underlined on different occasions the difference in values between Americans on one side, and Iraqis and Afghans on the other. Through this the resistance against the US presence and the change attempted conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan can be excused as culture, instead of well thought through and legitimate resistance, that is, resistance worth listening to. The youth metaphor offered by Jane suggests similar ideas. Like a youth who will want to drink more if a grown up tells him not to, an Iraqi and Afghani, following the five pillars of Islam and perceiving martyrdom as positive, will resist when Americans tell them to switch to democracy. Unlike Americans, who, according to Hanks, have «a bigger mentality», Iraqis (in Jane's account transferrable to Afghans as well) are not able to understand that even though 'the other candidate wins', peace and the governmental form democracy are in the long run better than civil war and dictatorship. Like a rebellious youth, Iraqis and Afghans are not able to transcend what seems important in the present, and a grown up, here in the form of Americans, should, in the name of care and common sense, force the young rebel, the Orientals, to do what is best for them. When they grow up, that is, have reached a new and better level of societal order, they will understand.

The earlier described dichotomous 'othering' in Jane's description of what she perceives as a hopeless situation in the two countries the USA is fighting wars, also exists in the other research subjects' accounts. There is the 'good Other' who takes the form of some sort of deprived, but possible, allied and member of the 'free world'; in the accounts above termed 'innocents', 'civilians', 'the people' (of Afghanistan and Iraq), or simply 'Afghans' and 'Iraqis'. Opposed to this, exists a 'bad Other' that cannot possibly be helped, thus only fought. This bad Other carries many different names, among them 'terrorists', 'insurgents', 'extremists', 'radicals', and to a varying degree also the Iraqi and Afghani 'leaders' and 'government' are included. Except for the already mentioned culture-factor as an explanation for the Other's (in general) deprived condition, is the factor of this bad Other. The bad Other fits easier into a black and white enemy picture, and the few times the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was talked about as actual, violent wars, it was these bad Others whom constituted legitimate targets. They constitute the savage in its most barbaric appearance; not following ROE, killing civilians intentionally, recruiting women and children to suicide missions, etc. In other words, the American nemesis. Whereas the 'innocents' (good Other) only have different values than the Americans, the 'terrorists' (bad Other) have none at all. They are not trustworthy, and they have nothing to discuss. They are a threat to both the USA and to civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, it is not the USA who chooses war instead of diplomacy; it is the terrorists who are not willing to talk. Or, as Theresa said, «Military

language simply talks more to them than diplomacy». By portraying portions of the Iraqi and Afghani people as barbaric savages, as people one can neither understand nor help, one has created a justification for eliminating them.

### ***Our civilization in their language***

Jennifer argued that «More people would die if we were not there» (Iraq), whereas Jane stated that pulling out would result in chaos, and that the society would become lawless without the US presence. This pessimistic prophecy for an independent Iraq must be seen in connection with the above outlined perspective. On one side the ones that cannot be helped, only fought, that is, terrorists, insurgents, extremists, etc. are not yet eliminated. On the other side, the deprived allies are still just savages needing leadership. If this is not offered by the USA, they will be dominated by the enemy, the bad Other. Jane could not imagine Iraqis «fix their troubles themselves», and Jennifer could not perceive Iraqis (or Afghanis) revolting against the oppressors without the USA backing them up. They are used to one way of living, and one kind of leadership, and will not easily, and certainly not alone, be able to change this. Thus, no matter which side of the twofold Other you focus on, it is still an Other, representing a mindset so unlike the American one that, according to Jane, it might prove impossible to change, and complete peace cannot be expected. Again, the conclusion is that the USA must stay as a controlling factor.

Saddam Hussein controlled the Iraqi people – by killing them. The USA needs to be a better example for Iraqis than their fallen dictator, but at the same time the US needs to follow his example because that is the ‘language’ the Iraqis are perceived to understand. The USA need to stand as an example of a better way to govern a society, at the same time as the USA, because the Other doesn’t understand any other language than violence, must use ‘their methods’ to make them understand what is acceptable and not.

The very beginning of the whole Iraq war can perhaps sum up some of the points made in this chapter: Taking out Saddam Hussein, the nemesis of the American version of a president, was both part of the ‘war as revolution’ method, as well as a necessary eliminating of an enemy/bad Other, while letting him be tried, sentenced and executed by his own people was a proof of the necessity of regime change and the Iraqi people’s gratitude towards Americans. The execution was at one and the same time a violent punishment – a removal of the very symbol of the Iraqi bad Other, *and*, through letting the Iraqis make this decision and

carry out the execution themselves, helping the Iraqis towards a new system of law, order and democracy. The parallel and continuing killing of terrorists and insurgents is a way of showing the Iraqi people, the good Others, that they can follow neither the former regime nor the terrorists' way. By acting violently and hard the USA keeps both the Iraqi civilians *and* the terrorists/insurgents on track; this last conclusion is possible to apply also to the perspectives offered on the War in Afghanistan. The punishment is part of the salvation.

# 4:

## ***Commemoration***

In this chapter I will shed light on aspects of the ceremonies surrounding Memorial Day in Lumber City, and explore how they communicate an official nationalistic perspective of the USA, its wars and its troops. That is, in addition to exploring *what* the ceremonies communicate to the participants and spectators, I will explore *how* the ceremonies, understood as rituals, *work*. On the one hand it will be shown that there is continuity between the individual statements presented in this and the last chapter, and what is communicated in ritual. The theory in this part is based on Paul Connerton (1989) and how he relates personal and social memory. This chapter will also move further, and look at how communication is done in a very different way in ritual than in more informal settings. This allows for certain things to be communicated in ritual which perhaps cannot be communicated through more informal communication. Examples here are the sacredness of the flag, and the symbolic connection between flag, nation and troops. At the same time ritual communication effectively excludes other issues. In our case an example is the matter of resistance to wars. Theoretical inspiration is Maurice Bloch's (1974, 1977 and 1986) writing on how ritual's form influences ritual's content, and how not only ritual performance/ritual's form has the consequence of a different kind of communication, but also a different kind of knowledge. Connerton's (1989) analysis of the connection between habituation and ritual's effectiveness also plays in.

### **Sacrifice and social memory – a connection?**

Regarding what was communicated in the Memorial Day-connected ceremonies I observed, *sacrifice* was a central theme. Sacrifice was also a recurring theme in the accounts presented in chapter three. Hanks said that «What soldiers in the Army do is to give up their life for others' freedom». Jennifer insisted that if the USA pulled out of Iraq now, «all the dying would be for nothing». Theresa said that during WWI and WWII the USA «lost more soldiers in just a few days than we have lost so far during five years in Iraq», and that «now we at least

contribute to letting voices of people not formerly heard being heard», thus pointing out that when the cause is good, sacrificing American lives is worth it and must be accepted.

The first person to introduce me to the matter of sacrifice was Tony Poletti, a school teacher and Army and NG veteran. When I asked him his opinion about the Iraq war, he answered: «Now we are in the mud. We can't leave. Do we need to be there? No. But we must be there; we must make the sacrifice that earlier soldiers have made worth it.» Following this comment he stood up and pulled down a newspaper clipping, a photo, he had hanging on one of the closet doors in the kitchen. The photo was of a soldier handing out food to Iraqi children. The soldier was from an area not far from Lumber City. Tony told me this was the man who became platoon leader instead of Tony, when Tony in 2004, as serviceman in the National Guard (NG), was facing a one year long deployment to Iraq but was then given the choice to stay home with his pregnant wife; an opportunity he welcomed. When Tony faced his military commander and accepted the NG's offer to stay home, his commander pointed out that he was free to stay home, but made Tony aware that he was letting his country down. Quite early into the unit's deployment the new platoon leader was killed. He had made what Americans term 'the ultimate sacrifice'.

Our experience of the present depends on our perception of the past. The accounts presented thus reflect each of the research subjects' perceptions of the past, or as according to Connerton (1989), their individual memory. Individual memory is, however, never independent from social memory; a group's shared ideas about the past (and thus present), or their "remembering in common" (Connerton 1989:39). To the degree people's statements and practices concur, one can also assume a degree of shared memories/social memory. The recurring theme of sacrifice gives hints to such a social memory.

To Connerton (1989), social memory is habitual. Because it is habitual, it is something else, or at least more, than what Cohen (1985) meant when explaining perceptions of history as taking the form of myth. Social memory is not only an alternative way of expressing certain beliefs, or "humanity's much touted propensity to explain the world to itself by telling stories" (Connerton 1989:70). If social memory is habitual it cannot simply be presented and transferred between generations through verbal representations. It is ritualized *practices* throughout life that produces cognitive social memory, and also what social memory *is*. Thus it is these "acts of transfer" (Connerton 1989:39) which must be studied if one wants to grasp both the very formation of social memory, and the shared knowledge it holds.

## **TONY POLETTI – SCHOOL TEACHER OF THE YEAR**

One central “act of transfer”, according to Connerton (1989), is commemorative ceremonies. An important commemorative ceremony in the USA is the celebration of the national holiday Memorial Day. During my stay I observed and participated in the preparations for, and the observance of this celebration.

The already mentioned Tony Poletti is one of the persons who included me in preparations for Memorial Day. Before moving on to the description of what we did, some additional information on his background is useful. Tony spent a total of 15 years in the US Armed Forces. He was deployed 1½ year in Germany, and during the Gulf War he deployed to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq. He came home in 1991 and started college, paid by the Army. He transferred from the Army to the NG and went into the Military Police in the NG where we worked for 13 years.

Much of the time Tony was in the NG he also worked as a teacher at Lumber City Public school, and at the time of my fieldwork he was teaching 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. In 2008 he was selected ‘Teacher of the Year’ by both the district’s Veterans of Foreign War (VFW) and the state’s American Legion<sup>11</sup>. Reasons listed in the local newspaper was his “teacher’s competence, community involvement and patriotism/Americanism”. The superintendent who nominated him for the American Legion award wrote in the letter of nomination that “Tony has incorporated his military experience within his own classroom and for the entire district. He puts his heart and soul into his classroom.” Furthermore, the nomination said that “He is deeply involved in the Veterans Day program every year, even bringing a military Humvee<sup>12</sup> vehicle to give students rides. He also instructs students in flag etiquette and has them lower and raise it each day at school.” He was recognized as “a tremendous role model for youth”. Furthermore:

He reminds the students what it is to be an American and what our veterans and active members in the Armed Forces have done for us and our country. Every year, he instructs his students in proper flag etiquette and how to fold and unfold the flag and take care of it. Each day, two of his students are responsible for raising and lowering the school flag. This includes lowering it to half mast in honor of fallen service men and women.

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<sup>11</sup> The VFW and the American Legion are veterans’ organizations Their work covers veterans’ interests. The American Legion also focuses on ‘Americanization’ and teaching youth about American values.

<sup>12</sup> Humvee comes from the military term High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV).

It was also mentioned that Tony “works with the Department of Veterans Affairs each May and has his students go to the cemetery to put flags on the gravestones for Memorial Day.” This annual event is the one I was invited to join, and which the following pages will describe and analyze.

#### **MEMORIAL DAY PREPARATIONS FOR TONY’S 5<sup>TH</sup> GRADERS**

Memorial Day is celebrated on the last Monday in May. The holiday has its origin in the Civil War, and was a day originally meant for commemorating the fallen soldiers in that war (Marvin and Ingle 1999:126). According to Bellah (1966), the great loss of life in the Civil War sharpened the already formulated ideas in American civil religion about the connection between God and nation, with the addition of the more explicit Christian themes of death, sacrifice and rebirth. More than 140 years after its creation Memorial Day still gives ritual expression to the themes of the American civil religion, and “Memorial Day observance, especially in towns and smaller cities of America, is a major event for the whole community involving a rededication to the martyred dead, to the spirit of sacrifice, and to the American vision.” (Bellah 1966:13) After WWI, Memorial Day became a day of remembrance for fallen service members in all American wars (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009 [URL]).

It is a common tradition all over the USA that veterans’ organizations put out flags on veterans’ graves before Memorial Day. There are about 2000 veterans’ graves at Lumber City’s cemetery. The help Tony’s 5<sup>th</sup> graders provided the veterans in this Memorial Day preparation eases the job tremendously.

On the morning four days before Memorial Day I met Tony and his class at school. This day began like every other day at the Lumber City Public Elementary School. When all the students had entered the classroom we heard the principal’s voice through speakers (present in all rooms) addressing students, teachers and others working at the school, telling them to stand up to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Tony’s 5<sup>th</sup> graders stood up, faced the flag on the left side of the blackboard, put their right hand on the left side of their chest and said the Pledge simultaneously with the principal’s voice. Everybody knew the Pledge by heart and said it out loud:

*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands: one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*



At 08.30 we left school and walked to the cemetery. Two students' mothers went with us to help out. At the cemetery we met some older veterans, including a member of the American Legion, the director of the Office of Veteran's Affairs, a World War II veteran, a Vietnam Veteran (also a member of the American Legion), as well as Tony's father Kevin – a Vietnam Veteran.

The children sat down on the grass at the entrance of the cemetery, and Tony instructed them in how to put out the flags. The directions were to only put flags on the graves where a veteran is lying and not on the auxiliary graves as they were not veterans. Tony also urged the children to read thoroughly on each grave to learn about the person resting there, and his/her achievements; branch of the military, company, medals received, and wars participated in. The children were told not to mess with any flags or decorations that are already there, since these are things family members have put out and probably are emotional about. One of the veterans continued and listed up some further do's and don't's at the cemetery, like «do not throw garbage in the cemetery».

Then the veterans started handing out flags they had lying in their cars. They made sure all the children received both new and old flags so both old and new flags would be dispersed evenly all over the cemetery. The children received a bunch of flags each, and Tony and two mothers present to help out, friendly corrected the children when they had trouble handling the flags in a proper way. The kids' small arms, combined with an eager and proud attitude towards the task expected of them, had the result that some flags sometimes would touch the ground, while at other times the children almost lost the whole bunch. When all flags were handed out the children approached the task eagerly, and acted almost like if it was a treasure hunt, a little competitive. Soon the whole cemetery seemed to be covered in red, white and blue Star Spangled Banners.

On our way back to school I spoke with one of the mothers helping out and she told me her son was angry with her because she had embarrassed him when she told some of the children they had to act better. They had been treating the flag badly, she said, swaying it all over and making it touch the ground. She had asked them in a strict tone whether they didn't know how to treat the flag.

On Memorial Day the year before, Tony was asked by the Office of Veterans Affairs to make a speech at the town's Memorial Day arrangement. After we had returned to school around midday he asked his students whether they remembered him giving that speech last Memorial Day, and he decided to read it to us. This is what it said:

*I would like to thank the director of the Office for Veterans' Affairs for inviting me to speak this morning! It is a great honor! I would also like to thank everyone here who took time out of their day to honor and remember American fallen soldiers. It is on this day that we remember those before us who have given so much so that we may live in freedom.*

*Courage, Honor, Patriotism, Sacrifice. These words stir emotion and describe our fallen heroes.*

*We need to ensure that our children understand what was sacrificed by others so that they may live, love, and learn under the blanket of freedom. It is our responsibility to educate our children in the meaning of Memorial Day. Yes, it is a day out of school with picnics, parades and camping, but it is also a day of remembrance.*

*For the past four years a fellow teacher and I have taken our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes to the Lumber City Cemetery to help place flags on the graves of our veterans. This year, a husband and wife who were tending to a gravesite stopped me as I walked by. They wanted to tell me about the young boy whom they saw place a flag in a holder next to a gravestone, step back, and then salute. A message from his heart to acknowledge the veterans courage, honor, patriotism, and sacrifice. (Tony then recited a poem)*

*'THE FLAG', by Baxter Black*

*LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I GIVE YOU THE FLAG  
THAT FLEW OVER VALLEY FORGE  
WAS TORN IN TWO BY THE GRAY AND BLUE  
AND BLED THROUGH TWO WORLD WARS*

*I GIVE YOU THE FLAG THAT BURNED IN THE STREET  
IN PROTEST, IN ANGER AND SHAME,  
THE VERY SAME FLAG THAT COVERED THE MEN  
WHO DIED DEFENDING THEIR NAME*

*WE NOW STAND TOGETHER, AMERICANS ALL,  
EITHER BY CHOICE OR BY BIRTH  
TO HONOR THE FLAG THAT'S FLOWN ON THE MOON  
AND CHANGED THE FACE OF THE EARTH*

*HISTORY WILL SHOW THIS FLAG STOOD A FRIEND  
TO THE HUNGRY, THE HOMELESS AND LOST  
THAT A MIXTURE OF MEN AS COMMON AS CLAY  
VALUED ONE THING BEYOND COST*

*AND THEY'VE SIGNED IN BLOOD FROM BUNKER HILL  
TO SAIGON, KUWAIT, BOSNIA  
KABUL, BAGHDAD AND TOKO RI.  
I GIVE YOU THE FLAG THAT SAYS TO THE WORLD  
EACH MAN HAS A RIGHT TO BE FREE.*

*In ending, I would like to quote a line from a column someone submitted to the newspaper: "Remember those who have paid the ultimate price when you wrap yourselves in the blessings of liberty."*

*Thank you.*

### **THE FLAG AS TOTEM, AND BLOOD SACRIFICE AS AN AMERICAN GROUP TABOO**

Graham Carr uses the expression "education of social memory" (2006:62) when he, analyzing WWII commemoration in Canada in general, also writes of a situation resembling the above described act of children putting out flags on veterans' graves. Education of social memory points to the same process as Connerton (1989) describes when writing about 'habituating' as the very mechanism at once producing and being social memory. The ritualized practices carried out throughout life constitute the shared memory – social memory – of a community. When writing about the education of social memory, Carr (2006) puts weight on the transfer of social memory between generations. The subsequent parts of this chapter will analyze both the acts of transfer with regard to how the transfer is done (the mechanisms of transfer), and describe some central ideas in the social memory transferred.

As social memory is a way of understanding the past constituting a way of understanding the present, social memory helps legitimize certain ways of acting in the present. Relevant examples here being waging war and enlisting to the military. Through their analysis of the American flag, Marvin and Ingle (1996,1999) point out some interesting elements in American social memory and how it connects to legitimizing war and military duty. These insights are helpful for analyzing the practices centered on the flag, described above. Marvin and Ingle (1999:1) write: "The sacrificial system that binds American citizens together has a sacred flag at its center." They describe the Star Spangled Banner as a totem in accordance with Durkheim's understanding of it: "the emblem of the group's agreement to be a group" (Marvin and Ingle 1999:1) and "the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from

the others...It is at once the symbol of the god and the society.” (Emile Durkheim quoted in Marvin and Ingle 1999:10-11).

As for Durkheim, Marvin and Ingle’s concern is the sustainment of community (in their case, the nation), and they argue that blood sacrifice on the account of society’s own members, not on account of the enemy, preserves the nation. The knowledge that “society depends on the death of its own members *at the hands of the group*” (1999:10-11), however, is a collective group taboo. It is a taboo in the sense that the group that is sustained by the mentioned violent mechanisms, hesitates in acknowledging their partaking in it (Marvin and Ingle 1999:12). The totem, which represents both the society and the mentioned set of sacred beliefs which infers the idea that blood sacrifice sustains the nation (and because of its sacredness is taboo), is itself sacred and surrounded by taboos. That is to say that the community members follow specific, often ritualized, rules for how to act around the totem.

In other words, Marvin and Ingle treat nationalism as religion, and ‘faith’ is expressed in rituals where the sacred is celebrated, where the group taboo is honored (1996:769). Collective victimization constructs American national identity, and as nationalism incorporates a primitive belief in the transformative power of the totem, the totem is central in the formation of American national identity (Marvin and Ingle 1999:10-11). Thus, and here we find similarities to Connerton’s (and Bloch’s) analyses, it is ritual performance which reproduces the group taboo – social memory.

The 5<sup>th</sup> graders at Lumber City Public School are thoroughly introduced to the taboos surrounding the totem the Star Spangled Banner. Tony teaches them flag etiquette throughout the whole year: how to lower and raise the flag and how to fold it (which is a very ceremonial act, needing at least two persons, as the flag must never touch the ground and the end result should be a nicely folded triangle). Additionally they start every school day confirming their faith in the totem, and thus the group taboo, by saying the Pledge of Allegiance while facing the Star Spangled Banner. Learning about the group taboo is done through Tony instructing them in flag etiquette as well: when the children must lower the flag to half mast in honor of fallen servicemen. The repeating practices habituates the students’ way of acting upon, and relating to the totem. Through that they also learn, in a bodily way, the ideas inherent in the totem – aspects of the American social memory.

The sacredness of the totem also became very apparent in the preparations for Memorial Day at the cemetery. Tony and the two mothers rushed to when the children were about to lose the flags or allow them to touch the ground. The veterans’ effort to disperse old and new flags throughout the whole cemetery was part of the concern among most people I

met – that the flag should be clean, whole and new. The usage of old flags in the situation described here, probably done because of economic concerns, was attempted hidden through dispersing the old flags among the new ones. When we categorize the flag as totem, and thus as something standing for the whole nation, this concern about the state of the flag can be seen as a concern for the state of the nation. The flag ceases to be just a symbolic piece of cloth, in effect, it *is* the nation. Just as the flag should be new, whole and clean, the nation should be these things. Disrespecting these aspects of the flag equals disrespecting the whole nation. The virtues of the nation becomes imbued in the properties of the flag, is also stated in the poem Tony recited in front of his class: It is the flag (not the troops) that bled through two world wars, the flag that stood a friend to the hungry, the homeless and lost, and the flag that says each man has the right to be free. Manifesting the nation – the totem does, and the totem says.

Marvin and Ingle suggest that when a group member submits to the group taboo and sacrifices himself/herself, and when the submission results in death “this body becomes more than American, it becomes a totem god of Americans, the apotheosized sacrificial body.” (1999:15). The actual sacrificing is done in ritual, and not only is the most powerful enactment of this ritual war (Marvin and Ingle 1999:5), but the nation is defined as the memory of the last sacrifice (war). According to Marvin and Ingle (1996:775), not all wars are successful blood sacrifice rituals; some might threaten the continuity of the group rather than reconstruct it. They argue that WWII was the last successful blood sacrifice ritual for the USA. The great controversy surrounding the Vietnam War inhibited it from counting as blood sacrifice, and inhibited the dead Americans in that war from becoming totem gods. From what I experienced in the field I find this conclusion too static. Not only have Vietnam Veterans done much to make the rest of the American community acknowledge what they did as sacrifice in spite of one’s disagreements regarding the righteousness of the war<sup>13</sup>. The ceremonies I observed before and during Memorial Day confirmed that *all* war-related American deaths, in any wars, are at least tried to be perceived or made into sacrificial deaths, and the dead bodies transformed into sacred bodies, or totem gods. Tony’s 5<sup>th</sup> graders and the veterans put out flags on the graves of *all* veterans and fallen servicemen- and women. As the totem has transformative powers, putting the flag on veterans’ graves is perhaps not only a blessing of the sacrifice made. It might be that the acknowledgement of their deeds, through the totem touching their graves, is what makes their deaths sacrifice, what makes the dead not

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<sup>13</sup> - an issue that will be treated more thoroughly when examining the Patriot Guard Riders, which in the Northern Belt had a huge portion Vietnam Veterans among their active members.

only part of, but standing for the nation. If it is so that the community of the American nation is sustained because of blood sacrifice on the account of Americans, it is both necessary with wars where these sacrifices can be made, and necessary with rituals wherein the deaths can be recognized, and *made into*, sacrifices, and new generations are habituated to perceive the sacrifices exactly as such.

#### **WHEN SOIL TURNS INTO DIRT**

In some of the same instances where the flag was treated as sacred and the taboos surrounding it appeared, the issue of pollution emerged as well. Mary Douglas (1966) argues that where pollution appears we are given hints to a society's system of categorization. Where there is something unclean there must be something clean. This system of clean and unclean cannot be reduced to having significance only for the instances where for example purification rituals appear (as when some tribes perform purification rituals before cooking), but should be interpreted as telling the anthropologist something about ideas concerning pollution, categorization, and power in other aspects of society as well. Douglas (1966) suggests that pollution can be related to order and disorder. Because different things belong in different categories, transcending the borders of category means moving from (categorical) order to disorder, and hence something that is clean in one situation can be unclean in another, due to its categorical transgression. If transferring these ideas posed by Douglas onto the American reality presented in this thesis the matter of the Star Spangled Banner not being allowed to touch the ground stands out as an interesting case. Tony and the mothers correction of the children when they displayed difficulties and/or recklessness in their behavior around the flags, is an act of teaching the children a bodily practice which implicit message is that the flag stands for/is the nation, and that the nation should not be polluted or disgraced.

The ground, or soil, is, however, not always regarded as unclean. As a matter of fact, in other instances people's concern is exactly how to not pollute the soil (instead of how the soil is/caused pollution). It is, for example, in the soil where food is grown. The cleanness or 'health' of the soil in the Northern Belt is a concern among Northern Belt citizens as what is grown in it is their main income (trees), and the tourist industry is based on the Northern Belt's reputation as untouched wilderness with great woods, deer and clean rivers with fish. Still, when put in connection to the Star Spangled Banner, (clean) soil becomes (unclean) dirt. Using Douglas' interpretive tools this can tell us that the flag and the ground belong in different categories. It is perhaps the mixing of categories which makes the instance of the

flag touching the ground not only taboo, but specifically a *polluting* situation. Soil becomes matter out of place when it comes in contact with the flag, and, in the form of dirt, it pollutes the flag. The flag is totemic and “To be totemic is to be set apart.” (Marvin and Ingle 1999:31). The totemic, by definition, belongs in an essentially different category than anything else, and the act of transgression into the totem’s sphere demands whoever or whatever doing this to transform. I will use the example of flagburning. A soldier, Robert Armstrong, whom we will get to know better in the next chapter, told me that if he saw anybody burn the American flag in a demonstration he would «go to jail for beating somebody». Flagburning is taboo. However, if a flag is torn or old, a ritual burning of it is required (instead of simply throwing it in the garbage). The problem of violating the taboo in the ceremonial burning is solved by it having to be done exclusively by people who have gone through a kind of transformation, in Douglas’ terms, a purification: veterans, “who have touched death in the service of the flag and are themselves set apart”, and Boy Scouts who use “procedures that protect against desecratory danger” (Marvin and Ingle 1999:31).

## **Official Memorial Day celebration in Lumber City**

### **MEMORIAL DAY PROGRAM IN THREE DIFFERENT LOCATIONS IN LUMBER CITY**

The official town celebration of Memorial Day began 9.am in front of Forest County Court House. The main road was closed off, and both sides of the road in front of the Court House were crowded with people. A parade marched through town, approaching the Court House. In the very front two police cars drove slowly, using their sirens. After them, five men carried flags: one Star Spangled Banner and the rest of the flags representing different veterans’ organizations existing in town. After them again two bands followed, one from each part of town, and a group of scouts. In the end of the parade two Humvees drove and some NG servicemen marched. When the march had come to an end in the front of the Court House the two bands played the National Anthem. All people who were not already standing, stood up, held their right hand on their heart, faced the flag, and sang:

*Oh, say can you see by the dawn’s early light  
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming?  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,  
O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?*

*And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.  
Oh, say does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*

Angela, with whom I attended this ceremony, shed tears while singing. Shortly after the National Anthem it was announced to the crowd to stand up once again and remove hats if worn, as it was time to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Once again, all put their hand on their heart, faced the flag on the hill in front of the Court House, and said the Pledge quietly together.

Different people then gave speeches, including a newly appointed doctor at the local Veterans Administration hospital<sup>14</sup> (VA); a Mexican immigrant and veteran of the US Armed Forces. The theme of his speech was why he and others joined the military. He claimed it was love for country and family. After his speech a reverend said a prayer. He prayed that people should honor properly the ones who have sacrificed for the nation; veterans and service members, living and dead. In the prayer they were described as someone who «stood in the place of protector and defender of this nation».

Following this a group of American Legion members in blue uniforms performed 'firing party', followed by the playing of 'Taps'. Taps is a bugle call, played at military ceremonies, including for example military funerals, flag ceremonies, or, as in this case, on Memorial Day. In the firing party three rifle bearers shot simultaneously three times into the air on command, in accordance with "the American military custom of firing "three volleys of musketry" over the graves of fallen comrades" (The American Legion, 2009 [URL]). All honorably discharged veterans are entitled to this kind of ceremony at their funeral (Wood, 2009 [URL]). Memorial Day being a remembering of all fallen service members thus takes the form of a funeral for all who have served.

The second ceremony took place outside the VA, and resembled the first one, but without a parade and presenting a different set of speakers. The main speaker at this ceremony was the leader of Lumber City's NG Family Readiness Group (FRG). The FRG is a support network working for and consisting of the families of service members in the different US Armed Forces. In her speech, the FRG leader read a letter from her husband when he the year before was deployed in Iraq. The letter stated that this day should be a day of remembrance

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<sup>14</sup> Hospital for military veterans. The VA constitutes a major employer in Lumber City.



and honor, and a day for sending thanks to the ones who died in service of the nation; the ones who gave the ultimate sacrifice. The historical dimension of Memorial Day was pointed out through mentioning that Memorial Day had the name ‘Decorations Day’ at first, and that this has been a celebrated day since the Civil War. From here his letter shifted to a look at the situation in Iraq at the time of writing. 4000 Americans had given their life for freedom, the letter stated, pointing to service members who had died in Iraq between 2003 and the time of writing. The letter continued by stating that these were courageous individuals, and that they were «the shields of America to hinder war on the USA’s foot shelves; they put themselves in harm’s way so Americans may live in peace». The letter furthermore said that the number of American deaths has passed the number of deaths on 9/11, and that the troops also protect and help the Iraqi people. A woman sitting next to me, draped in a jacket with the pattern of the Star Spangled Banner, cried during the FRG leader’s speech.

The next and last official ceremony this day was held at the cemetery. In addition to the firing party and Taps being performed once more, flowers were put down in front of a flagpole surrounded by veterans’ graves. A speech was held, which message was that nothing can bring dead service members back – they can only be remembered with pride, and a pledge on behalf of those who remember their patriotic service.

### **COMMEMORATION VERSUS DEBATE**

The Memorial Day celebration observed much the same totem worship as was presented in the Memorial Day preparations done by Tony and the 5<sup>th</sup> graders. The participants paid tribute to the flag through the collective singing of the National Anthem, and by saying the Pledge of Allegiance together; at all times facing the flag. The message of the group taboo was honored and reconstructed through the constant focus on the ones who have been willing to make a sacrifice for the nation. The first verse of the National Anthem treats the issue of American citizens’ obligation to sacrifice for the totem quite literally, for example when connecting the picture of “bombs bursting in air” as a proof that the “flag was still there”.

Historian Edward T. Linenthal (2001) claims that memorials and commemorative ceremonies try to transform the events they commemorate. Geoffrey M. White (2004) poses similar ideas, when in his article “National subjects: September 11 and Pearl Harbor”, he follows the development and discussions in the building of and/or planning of museums on Pearl Harbor and Ground Zero. Throughout the text he shows the existence of (but also intermingling of) the binaries “memorial-museum, commemoration-education, emotion-

reason, sacred-profane” (White 2004:305). Memorial and commemoration are not *supposed* to evoke discussion or be open for alternative interpretations (but as his text shows, this sometimes happens anyway). According to Linenthal (2001), commemorative ceremony or memorial seeks to create a narrative that offers redemption and consolation, and by consequence, makes the deaths appear meaningful. The danger of this, however, is that stories of for example mass murder (his example: Holocaust) are softened and transformed into acts of heroic sacrifice. This can shed light on the Memorial Day celebration in Lumber City. The Mexican-American doctor and US military veteran said you join the military out of love for country and family. The reverend said that US veterans are those who stood in the place of protector and defender of this nation. The FRG leader’s husband wrote in his letter that US troops are courageous individuals who act as shields of the American nation, prevent war within US borders, *and* protect Iraqis. Neither of them said, for example, that US military servicemen- and women have fought, killed and died in wars that many Americans have trouble formulating the reasons for, believing in or defending. Such a statement would place the deaths of US troops in a meaningless light. If that was the statement offered, meaningless mass murder (on the part of both Americans and those they have fought), not heroic sacrifice, would be what came to mind among the people listening. Such a statement was however not offered on Memorial Day in Lumber City, in accordance with White’s (2004) suggestion that commemoration is the anti-thesis to debate, and Linenthal’s (2001) suggestion about the transformative goal of commemoration.

#### **RITUAL’S FIXITY**

The official Lumber City Memorial Day celebration very much took the form of ritual. This conclusion is central for a further understanding of the mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of the binaries where memorial and commemoration belong to one side, and discussion and resistance belong to another. What signifies ritual, according to Bloch (1986), is the combination of statements and action. Such “statement-actions” (1986:183) have the consequence of fixity in ritual, and can explain the compelling nature of ritual. Examples of statement-actions are symbolism, dancing and singing. Statement-actions have the consequence of a specific ritual language which expresses different propositions than language used in non-ritual situations (Bloch 1986) (examples of the latter being what was presented in chapter three). These two kinds of communication have the consequence of, and organizes, two different cognitive systems, occurring at different times in what can be seen as

a long conversation (between people, but also just as much one person arguing with him-/herself on how to perceive reality) where different points of view on the world are discussed (Bloch 1977). Rituals, in contrast to the other form of communication, cannot “form a true argument, because they imply no alternative.” (Bloch 1986:182). Said differently, in ritual, there is no alternative view of the issues treated, but the view the ritual poses, because the notion of true or false is eliminated. Nothing but the ritual’s perspective *exists* (Bloch 1974, 1977, 1986).

It is in the statement-actions one can find the explanation for the convincing power of ritual, in spite of the absence of argument. Inspired by Bloch, Connerton (1989) writes that what protects commemorative ceremonies from “the process of cumulative questioning entailed in all discursive practices” (1989:102), is the habituated memory hidden in the formalized performance. The bodily practices learned throughout life are what make larger rituals, as Memorial Day ceremonies, convincing. Because Angela and the woman draped in the Star Spangled Banner-decorated jacket, throughout their childhood, started every day at school with saying the Pledge of Allegiance while standing up, holding their hand on their heart and facing the flag, the performance of the National Anthem and the FRG leader’s speech could affect them so deeply they cried. The National Anthem was not performed in an especially beautiful way that day, but, as Angela underlined to me many times; she cries every time she witnesses the National Anthem being played.

Rituals work because they are habitual, and they often imply doing more than saying, or, more correctly, even the ‘saying’ is formalized. Thus, the manner in which you say the words in ritual matters just as much as the explanatory or convincing power of the words (as if the case was that they were to constitute a consistent argument). Bloch (1974) focuses on this when treating the centrality of repetition in ritual. When one is not dealing with an argument, but a “frozen statement” (Bloch 1974:76), repetition is the only possibility for emphasis<sup>15</sup>. The speeches, in spite of being written by different persons, and of course entailing some diversity, all repeated the story of the necessity of sacrifice without ever going into a real discussion of it, not trying to convince the audience by ever mentioning an alternative view. Bloch (1974) places the act of holding a speech within the space of ritual language. There is an appropriate way for any speech event in a ritual, and “as soon as you have accepted a form of speaking in an appropriate way you have begun to give up at a bewildering rapid rate the very potential for communication.” (Bloch 1974:61). Just as much

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<sup>15</sup> It is also in this light one can understand the repetition of the firing party on Memorial Day, and the repetitive focus on flag.

as it was apparent that everybody performing in the ceremony had agreed upon the form of communication, it was apparent that they had agreed upon what was going to be communicated. The speeches, which couldn't be seen as political speeches in a narrow sense, were still speeches that sought conformity to an established ideal for what was supposed to happen that day, centered on the same message: honoring the memory of fallen American troops, and the ones willing to make that same sacrifice. The already agreed upon themes of death, sacrifice, pride, honor, patriotism and nation limited what was possible to say – in speeches as well as prayers. No questions were posed regarding the necessity of the deaths of US soldiers (and their declared enemies). Originating in the Civil War, the holiday's original meaning was kept intact: commemorating fallen American servicemen- and women, with no regard for circumstances outside the fact that they were exactly that. Linguistics and meaning are thus trapped in a mutual enhancing relationship. Speech and prayer as a form of communication limits potential for communication. People listening to a speech answers it by applauding (or refusing to applaud if they should disagree, something which would be a strong statement, and completely outruled as alternative in the commemorative setting of Memorial Day, explained below). People observing a prayer answer by saying "Amen". None of these are settings for debate. Response in ritual is coerced, and "rebellion is impossible and only revolution could be feasible" (Bloch 1974:64), thus, ruining the ritual . Either way, debate destroys commemoration. The transformation of the picture of war as brutal murder into a story of heroic sacrifice is effectively halted or ruined completely the moment the participants in the commemorative setting are allowed to pose alternative interpretations.

### **TIMELESSNESS**

If fixity means preventing creativeness in what to communicate and how, it also means a general lack of adaptability with regard to "matching the particular ritual expression to a particular event." (Bloch 1986:184). The nature of ritual is repetitive and non-adaptive. Memorial Day has kept its original message ever since the Civil War (with mentioned minor adjustments, as extending it to cover all service members and veterans, alive and dead), and there are traditional ways of celebrating it, shared among small towns all over the USA. The original message functions as a wrapping which the ever-changing world outside ritual can be swept in. Memorial Day is celebrated every year, and its rituals have been performed no matter which wars America has been involved in. Having to adapt a non-adaptive practice is done by "representing events as though they were general occurrences." (Bloch 1986:184).

The message in the FRG leader's husband's letter which honored American troops serving in Iraq for protecting the USA from war at home *today* was, in the setting of a Memorial Day celebration, transformed to be the honoring of *any* soldier serving in *any* war during the history of the USA. The unique occurrence 'the Iraq war' is reduced by the ritual so that it becomes part of what Bloch calls "a greater fixed and ordered unchanging whole" (1986:184); a whole that in our case is the USA and its history presented as if time did not move, as if all wars are the same war (fought for freedom, nation and security), and by consequence as if all troops have participated in this same war. If the specific is irrelevant, it is also impossible to argue about it, to pose any alternative perspectives on it; because, in the ritual setting it doesn't exist, or at least, it is irrelevant.

### **Veterans Tribute Ride – an alternative observance of Memorial Day**

One more ritual deserves presentation before ending this chapter. The Veterans Tribute Ride was carried out by the motorcycle group Patriot Guard Riders (PGR), two days before Memorial Day, and was their way of observing this day<sup>16</sup>.

The PGR's overarching goal is to pay respect to American troops, and their many different activities, termed 'missions', reflect this goal. Before any mission of any substantial size the PGR performed a ceremony. Interestingly, this ceremony shared many traits with Lumber City's official Memorial Day ceremony presented earlier. Here follows a generalized account of such a PGR ceremony. One person holds the Star Spangled Banner up high, and the other PGR members gather around him or her. The crowd says the Pledge of Allegiance silently together while facing the flag. Then a prayer is said – usually by a PGR member, but a reverend does it if present. Everyone attending bow their heads in silence in respect and answer Amen at the end of the prayer. The times I observed this type of ceremony, the prayer centered on the issues of, on one hand, the safety of both troops in general and the specific troops honored in the specific mission, and, on the other hand, a wish that the PGR mission would be carried through without any accidents.

Two days before Memorial Day, the PGR did what they call the Veterans Tribute Ride. This ride, or mission, which is the PGR's term for their rides and other activities, is the PGR's

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<sup>16</sup> The PGR is one of the main themes in chapter five. For now I choose to only describe parts of their ceremonial behavior relevant for this chapter's focus, that is, the message 'sacrifice' and its medium 'ritual'.

way of observing Memorial Day. This mission's ceremony resembled the other ceremonies, except for its length and elaborateness, and one special episode:

Quite a few people who were not going to participate in the actual ride had shown up at the Blessing of the Bikes ceremony, taking place outside the VA. Among them, there were several old military veterans, currently hospitalized and living at the VA. Towards the end of the ceremony, the local PGR leader told the people present that a song he thought would be familiar to many was going to be played. He also asked that while the song was playing, for the people present to shake hands with, and thank, the old veterans for their service to the nation. While the song was playing almost all people present, including me, lined up to do what the PGR leader had suggested. Everybody gave each of the old veterans a handshake, at a minimum added by a 'Thank you', but some also started longer conversations. Anna, a PGR-friend of mine, spoke rather thoroughly with each of them. She asked them to tell her their story – where they had been, which branch of the military they had served in, and much more. She also told many of them, with pride, that she has a son in Iraq. The song that accompanied us while thanking the veterans was Chuck White's *That's Just What You Do*. Anna told me that she and her husband often have that song playing in their car. The lyrics go like this:

*THEY COME FROM IDAHO  
AND MICHIGAN AND TEXAS  
THEY DON'T SIGN UP AS HEROES  
BUT TO SERVE THE BEST THEY CAN  
THEY TAKE A SOLEMN VOW  
TO FIGHT FOR GOD AND COUNTRY  
THEN THEY TAKE A LONG RIDE  
TO SOME DUSTY FOREIGN LAND*

*CHORUS:*

*'CAUSE THAT'S JUST WHAT YOU DO  
WHEN YOU'RE HONOR BOUND  
AND EACH DAY WHEN YOU'RE  
THROUGH  
THERE'S A BUGLE SOUND  
YOU LAY YOUR LIFE ON THE LINE  
AND YOU PRAY YOU'LL GET BOLDER  
'CAUSE WHEN YOU'RE A SOLDIER  
YOU'RE SWORN TO SEE IT THROUGH  
THAT'S JUST WHAT YOU DO*

*THEY MISS THEIR BROTHERS  
THEIR LOVERS  
AN' MAMA'S COOKIN'  
THEY LIE AWAKE AND WONDER  
IF THEY'LL SEE THEM ANYMORE  
THEIR MOTHERS CRY SOMETIMES  
THEIR FATHERS PRAY IN SECRET  
HOPIN' THEY DON'T EVER  
GET THAT KNOCK ON THEIR DOOR*

*CHORUS*

*SO WHEN YOU SEE THAT UNIFORM  
WON'T YOU LOOK 'EM IN THE EYE  
'CAUSE THEY'VE LOST FRIENDS  
AND THEY'VE LOST BLOOD  
SOME WILL GIVE THEIR LIVES*

*CHORUS*

### **YOU CANNOT ARGUE WITH A SONG**

Song is, according to Bloch (1974), simply an extreme version of formalized speech. In song, the usual situation is that every word is agreed upon, and individual creativity is practically ruled out. Partaking in singing a song is often as passive a linguistic action “as though the singer was experiencing language from outside himself” (Bloch 1974:70). “You cannot argue with a song” (Bloch 1974:74). In the singing of the National Anthem, the hundreds of people showed up outside the Court House on Memorial Day song in unison that the USA is the *land of the free and home of the brave*. When the participants at the PGR’s celebration of Memorial Day thanked the older veterans living at the VA for their service to the nation while listening to Chuck White’s song, there was no alternative but the words White sung. His voice told the public that as a soldier, you are honor bound, and you have no choice but to lay your life on the line. That is, you offer your life as sacrifice to the nation, and “see it through” – you don’t look back or reconsider. The interesting thing in the last case is that the participants in this ceremony didn’t sing together with Chuck White, but were encouraged to step up in line and shake hands with the waiting old veterans, as well as speak with them. While stepping up in line with the riders I heard them speak with the veterans. Nobody questioned their act of becoming a soldier, or whether they ever considered it right or wrong to participate in this or that war. The situation did not allow it; Chuck White’s words did not allow it. By staying in the situation the people present agreed with the terms of the situation. As already stated, the only possible break would be a full revolution, a complete destroying of the ritual. Imagine if a substantial amount of people refused to sing the National Anthem on Memorial Day, or sung different words, or if somebody turned off the music player outside the VA, or accused one of the many Vietnam Veterans present of being a babykiller. As commemoration is the anti-thesis to discussion, any of these scenarios would imply a destruction of the original intent of the situation, and thus the commemorative element of it, turning it instead into, perhaps, a demonstration.

### **A move towards the other side of the cognitive continuum**

Bloch mentions the existence of two different cognitive systems, or, at least a cognitive system that exist as a continuum between two poles, where ritual activity communicates knowledge that belongs more to one side of the continuum than informal activity. The

acknowledgement of this continuum, or of these very different ways of perceiving the world, suggests that it is not enough to only present one form of communication/knowledge in ones presentation of a group of people. Certain conceptualizations of the world are denied in ritual. This does not mean that all non-ritual activity presents completely different viewpoints than ritual. Comparing the information presented in chapter three and four one sees that there is much agreement. The next, and last, chapter will move our focus step by step towards the opposite side of the cognitive continuum this chapter has presented, and take a look at what the research subjects communicated when they allowed themselves to pose questions and perspectives denied in the situations presented so far.



# 5:

## *Supporting the troops and resisting the war?*

The perspective presented so far, about there being only one perspective plausible in ritual, will in this chapter, through a focus on the multivocality of symbols. Taking a closer look at the PGR, it will be shown how one and the same activity, much because of the use of symbols, can communicate opposing perspectives on the same matter, in this case: war. This chapter will also show how both support for- and resistance against wars in the USA today must be communicated within a patriotic language. It will be argued that the outer limits of patriotism goes with the idea ‘Support Our Troops’, and that breaking this ‘one rule’ places you outside the community the USA, and thus also prevents you from taking part in a discussion on war.

### **PUBLIC MEMORY – VERNACULAR AND OFFICIAL INTERESTS IN CONTINUOUS DISCUSSION**

When exploring the issue of resistance, it can be fruitful to move back to the exploration of the connection between perceptions of past and present. John Bodnar uses the term public memory, and defines it as “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past and its present, and, by implication, its future.” (1994:76). Within this view, public memory is not something fixed, but a cognitive process, and it is continuously fashioned through communication between different parts of society, representing various perspectives. This does not mean all perspectives are allowed equal representation. Bodnar (1994) acknowledges present matters as the major focus of public memory, and furthermore that public memory reflects society’s present power structures. Bodnar divides the different perspectives competing in the process of fashioning public memory into vernacular and official interests and/or cultures. He describes official interests/cultural expressions as the concern of cultural authorities whose interest is “social unity, the continuity of existing institutions, and loyalty to the status quo” (1992:13). Past and present are presented in a way that serve the goals of the authorities and in a disadvantageous way to competing interests. The justification of the present wars shown in chapter three, and the messages communicated in the Memorial Day ceremonies in chapter four, belong within

the category of official cultural expressions. I will argue that signs of resistance, on the other hand, definitely took the shape of vernacular interests. A summary of Bodnar's characterization of vernacular interests is: in clear contrast to the interest in unity, continuity and loyalty, vernacular interests are an array of specialized interests, they are diverse and changing, they can clash together, and the world views giving rise to these interests are derived from first-hand experience in small-scale communities rather than the imagined community of the nation. (Bodnar 1992:14). One individual can at once support aspects of both official and vernacular culture (Bodnar 1992,1994).

## **The PGR – where vernacular and official interests meet**

### **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PATRIOT GUARD RIDERS**

The PGR was created in 2005 as a reaction to the Westboro Baptist Church's (WBC) protest at a serviceman's funeral in Kansas. The WBC is characterized by its extreme viewpoints and conspiracy theories on issues ranging from homosexuality to the US military. They believe that each dead service member is a signal from God that the USA has become a nation of sinners, and use, among other strategies, funerals to communicate their viewpoint (Lavandera, 2006.03.07. [URL], Westboro Baptist Church, 2009.12.02. [URL]). A group of men from the already existing American Legion Riders decided in 2005 to gather other riders to form a battle plan to combat WBC. The same year they were able to effectively protect the funeral of Sgt. John Doles in Chelsea, Oklahoma (Patriot Guard Riders, 2009.12.02.a [URL]. The PGR protects funerals by their members showing up with motorcycles and American flags, standing in line in an appropriate distance from the funeral ceremony, stopping the WBC protestors from approaching and disturbing the funeral. The Patriot Guard Riders attend funerals as invited guests by the family.

In the PGR's Mission Statement (Patriot Guard Riders, 2009.12.02.b [URL]) it is declared that

*We don't care what you ride or if you ride, what your political views are, or whether you're a hawk or a dove. It is not a requirement that you be a veteran. It doesn't matter where you're from or what your income is; you don't even have to ride. The only prerequisite is Respect.*

The PGR's range of activities is no longer limited to funerals. During my stay in the Northern Belt the PGR attended no funerals, but showed up when a young Marine was shipped off to boot camp, when a soldier was sent to Iraq, and escorted a young Marine on his homecoming, as well as a whole neighboring NG unit the last miles to their home base on their homecoming from Iraq.

#### **PGR: A WILD MIXTURE OF PATRIOTIC MISSIONS AND HARLEY DAVIDSON BIKER CULTURE**

Most of the bikers on the missions I attended drove Harley Davidsons and their dress reflected their choice of bike. Black leather jackets, blue jeans covered by the traditional black leather motorcycle chaps, leather boots and leather gloves, the half shell helmets so typical for Harley Davidson bikers, as well as bandannas and other types of Harley-accessories. Anna and Matt, who became my biker companions, lent me a leather jacket, leather gloves, sunglasses and a half shell helmet. Patriotic decoration of bikes and clothes dominated, ranging from small pins attached to jackets (a small flag, a bald eagle, PGR-, OIF-, and OEF-A symbols), stickers on helmets (often in the form of slogans), decorations on the back of the leather jackets (a huge bald eagle, as was the case with the jacket I used, or Star Spangled Banners, Vietnam Veteran-symbols and Prisoner of War (POW)- and Killed In Action (KIA) symbols), to decorations directly on the bike (stickers with slogans or Blue Star flags<sup>17</sup>). It was also usual to have flags attached to the rear end of the bike, which waved in the wind while driving. Three flags dominated: the Star Spangled Banner, the yellow PGR flag and the black and white POW-/KIA flag. Anna and her husband always brought one huge Star Spangled Banner each. Regarding the slogans on helmets (also appearing elsewhere, especially on the back of jackets), among the patriotic ones these were some of the most usual ones:

*Freedom isn't free*

*Freedom isn't free. Thank a vet.*

*POW. You are not forgotten.*

*Friends come and go, but enemies accumulate*

*Vietnam Vets don't forget*

*Land of the free, because of the brave*

*Support Our Troops*

*Support Freedom*

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<sup>17</sup> Blue Star flags symbolizes that somebody in your family is a service member.

*Freedom picks its own heroes*

*Standing for those who stood for US*

*The price of freedom is written on the wall*

*Operation Iraqi Freedom. Fighting the war on terrorism.*

#### **REASONS FOR JOINING THE PGR**

Anna and Matt joined the PGR when their son, Christopher, deployed to Iraq. Anna explained it like this: «A Patriot Guard Rider is not afraid to hug you. They are all in it because they got loved ones that have been in war. All know what we are coming from, and that is nice to know». Many in the PGR know that Anna and Matt's son is in Iraq, and those who don't know still assume that Anna and Matt, like many others in the PGR, have a very specific and personal reason for joining. Anna told me, and I overheard her telling it to other PGR members several times, that the PGR helped her and Matt in dealing with Christopher being 'over there'. «I learned when to ask, and when not to ask. I learned not to push him», she said to me. From the military veterans in the PGR she learned how hard it might be for a serviceman to speak about his experiences. This knowledge made it easier for her to come to terms with her son not telling her as much as she wanted. «In the PGR we are all in it together», Anna said. «We share a special experience, we are in there for a reason.» Anna did not have any contact with the Family Readiness Group connected to Christopher's NG unit, but felt the PGR gave her the support she needed to deal with her son's deployment. During Christopher's deployment Anna had a sticker on her motorcycle saying *Half of my Heart is in IRAQ with Our Son.*

When preparing to escort a Marine home, Anna and I spoke with another lady in the PGR, Mary, whose husband, Carl, is a PGR member and Vietnam Veteran. Anna asked Mary whether Carl feels upset when he sees today's young soldiers getting so much positive attention and welcome, when he got none coming home from Vietnam. Mary said, that on the contrary, he feels it is a healing process to do these PGR rides, that it makes him feel good.

When heading home after this same mission several PGR members stopped by a restaurant to eat dinner. Anna, Matt, Mary, Carl and I were joined by two other PGR members, Larry and Mick. During dinner it appeared that the two men were Vietnam veterans, like Carl, and throughout dinner they shared some of their experiences from Vietnam and some of what happened when they came home.

Larry told us he had lost some good friends in the Vietnam War, and when he returned home, only his close family welcomed him. He was also dumped by his girlfriend during deployment. Mick had a similar story of heartbreak, and a welcome consisting of only two people. Carl shared that he had brought his brother in law home in a coffin from Vietnam. His rather sad welcome consisted among other things of being denied beer by the bartender because he was too young. Anna answered quite shocked: «You are old enough to bring your brother in law home in a coffin, old enough to go to war and shoot people, but you are not old enough to drink beer!?» When Carl had arrived in Chicago, he had to put the coffin on a train, because that was the only way to bring it to the Northern Belt. On the train he ended up sitting next to a girl he had known since high school. She ignored his presence the whole way up to the Northern Belt, and didn't speak to him once. «That hurt», he said. This story encouraged Larry to admit he was spit on when he returned home. In contrast to the two other men, Larry had volunteered to go to Vietnam. This made neither the stay in Vietnam, nor the return home any easier.

#### **PGR: A PERSONAL ENTERPRISE**

Without arguing that the PGR is a forum where one directly communicates or displays ones resistance to present or former wars, I will argue that, due to the often very personal reasons for participating and the very personalized and rather dark stories that is accepted to be told within the PGR community, it certainly is a forum where official interests are not allowed to dominate completely. The symbols the PGR display on motorcycles and clothing can express positively sanctioned official interests; from the very explicit slogan *Operation Iraqi Freedom. Fighting the war on terrorism* to the more general *Freedom isn't free*, both suggesting that some wars are necessary. Combining this with escorting troops returning from Iraq, they state, more in action than words, that the Iraq war is necessary to prevent terrorism, and preserve and provide freedom. This is in accordance with the interpretations made in chapter four.

However, the PGR's mission statement says that your political views don't matter. All you need is to show respect for military service members. In neither of the PGR speeches nor prayers I heard, was justification of specific wars a topic; only the more general and recurring themes of freedom and sacrifice, and that Americans should honor and respect the troops. Not because they fight or have fought in this and that specific war, but because they are Americans

who have shown willingness to risk their lives for a greater cause (be it for the nation, for Iraqis' liberty and development, world safety or anti-communism).

The conversations I overheard among PGR members during missions did not center on justifications for war either, but on how they best could support troops on deployment and those returning. One of the first things Anna told me was the story about a serviceman who had received big injuries during his deployment in Iraq. He used to be a motorcycle enthusiast, but because he could not use his legs anymore he was prevented from riding. The PGR decided to gather money so they could give the injured veteran a special made motorcycle so he could enjoy his favorite activity again.

Furthermore, the homecoming missions I participated in were celebrations of the fact that the troops had made it home alive, rather than a tribute to the Iraq war as any specifically good or just war in itself. The focus was always on the troops' and their families' welfare. The riders want to be there to show that somebody cares for the individual service members, not to make a political statement regarding the righteousness of, for example, the Iraq war. What constituted the climax in the two homecoming missions I participated in supports this conclusion: the moment when a service member could hug his mother and father for the first time. A short description of a few moments from the time the PGR had escorted a whole NG unit returning from Iraq illustrates this point.

The PGR had escorted the NG unit from the time the unit's buses drove through Lumber City until they arrived in the town the unit belonged to. After the arrival the PGR members paid tribute to the troops through participating in the ceremony the NG had prepared for the returning unit. It took place in a huge high school gym hall. The hall was packed with hundreds of people, mostly family and friends of the returning soldiers. While the soldiers marched into the hall everybody clapped and shouted cheerfully, many crying, some waving flags and others holding up banners with welcome home messages. The soldiers lined up in three long rows. A couple of speeches were given, focusing on the soldiers' efforts throughout the deployment, and on those in the unit who had not made it home. A young girl sang the National Anthem, and as always, all faced the flag while putting their hand on their heart. All this, from the PGR escorting the troops all the way from Lumber City up to National Anthem, was however only a warm up to the final climax: the higher ranking officers lined up in front of the soldiers and shouted in unison «DISMISSED!», followed by a massive cry of joy from a couple of hundred soldiers throwing their hats in the air, as well as an ear deafening roar from a fully packed high school gym. Like a stream, everybody ran into the middle of the hall and through themselves upon 'their' soldier. One of the soldiers returning home this day was

Anna's and Matt's son Christopher, and I soon found him with a happy and confused smile on his face, carrying his kids in his arms, kissing his wife and giving his parents hugs at the same time.

Although joining the PGR and doing missions was a personal enterprise for Anna and Matt from the very beginning, their son's return made this specific mission extra special. Because of my increasingly close friendship with Christopher's parents, wife and kids, I too was very excited and relieved that he had made it through his deployment unhurt. This specific mission was thus especially informing for me to participate in, as I for the first time felt a personal commitment and involvement, and in many ways felt that I saw past (or perhaps forgot) what to me, up to that specific day, appeared as an alien form of patriotism, nationalism and war celebration. Instead I saw three good friends, as well as two kids I had become very fond of, almost falling apart in excitement and happiness because their loved son, husband and father was returning from what could very well have been his final destination. To experience at least parts of this excitement and happiness with them made it clear once and for all that the most central part on not only that day's PGR mission, but on all PGR missions, was a personal experience of either loss of a loved one, the fear when seeing a loved one leave on deployment, and happiness when one is reunited.

#### **PGR: AN OPEN POLITICAL SPACE**

The PGR constitute and act within a patriotic paradigm. Notwithstanding their original and overarching mission of showing and promoting respect for service members, both the symbols they use, their slogans, their use of music and prayers, and their massive display of, and rituals centering on the flag, make this clear. According to Bodnar (1994), patriotism, as a symbolic language, has the capacity to mediate both vernacular and official loyalties. In the case of the PGR this ambivalence, or rather openness, of the language of patriotism became increasingly evident when I learned about people's reasons for participating in missions. Their reasons for joining spurred mostly out of vernacular interests. The Vietnam veterans felt mistreated and misunderstood and saw the PGR as a way to tell the world how a service member not only *should* be treated (out of a nationalistic idea about how a soldier has earned respect out of his sacrifice for the nation), but *needs* to be treated (for example to not end up with lifelong mental wounds). Anna and Matt joined the PGR when their son deployed and they needed a social safety net to help them deal with their worries.

Not only can patriotism mediate both vernacular and official loyalties, but these different fields of interest, communicated through personal and official narratives, communicate and mutually influence each other (White 2004). Personal narratives can on one side help people relate to abstract and imagined things as nation and nationalism. A personal narrative, as Anna worrying for her son when he is deployed in Iraq, can be intensified and formed by the official narrative saying he is fighting for nation and freedom. Another example, presented in chapter four, is the FRG leader's Memorial Day speech, being a reading of her husband's private letter sent during his deployment in Iraq. Personal narratives that in an immediate way communicate and serve vernacular interests, are thus integrated into the official narrative, and serve official interests. The PGR very much manifests this mechanism through its very existence, and through any of the organization's activities. It is a motorcycle group, something that usually gives association of rebellion and subculture. Through being an outlet for personal issues and merging these into official narratives of nationalism the organization still serves official interests. The PGR does this when the motorcyclists justify not only present wars, but American wars in general, through their display of slogans as, for example, *Land of the free, because of the brave*, and *Friends come and go, but enemies accumulate*, both suggesting the necessity of military efforts in the sustainment of the American society, certainly offering both veterans and worried parents a scheme within which they can place and deal with their very personal troubles.

Personal narratives can also open up for alternative visions, and serve as 'countermemories' (White 2004) that challenge the official narratives. Countermemories are often attempted silenced in memorial or commemorative ceremonies, as on Memorial Day. Where personal accounts are let through however, the potential is there, depending on the narrative, for adding a "dimension to memorialization not otherwise evident in the more disciplined spaces of state-regulated national history." (White 2004:306). Because the PGR creates, or perhaps *is*, a space where official memories and personal countermemories meet, it allows for the creation of new and alternative interpretations of war, troops and nation. The slogan *Support Our Troops* is potentially isolated from the question of the justification of war. This conclusion lends support from the fact that one can find this slogan displayed not only among PGRs, but as bumper stickers on cars and posters everywhere in Lumber City. It doesn't necessarily serve official interests, but is still definitely patriotic. A parallel example is anti-war activists in the USA claiming they support the troops when they demand an end to the war in Iraq – the perhaps most famous activist being Cindy Sheehan who herself lost her son in the Iraq war. Returning to the PGR, the slogan *Vietnam Vets don't forget* does not



suggest any positioning on the question of the righteousness on the war, but on the contrary suggests an anger towards the society who let the Vietnam Veterans down. The slogan is by definition patriotic, as it demands respect towards veterans, no matter ones opinion on the war. To refer back to chapter four, the slogan simply suggests that Vietnam Veterans' blood sacrifice wasn't recognized by the American public during the Vietnam War itself, and demands that this should now be done. It can also suggest other things Vietnam Veterans don't forget: being drafted to a war they didn't feel was sufficiently justified; the slogan thus being a demand towards the government that American troops shouldn't be sacrificed unnecessary once more.

Examples of other symbols that make up the PGR's 'language', are the bald eagle, the flag, POW and KIA symbols, all serving neither official nor vernacular interests exclusively. When Bodnar (1994) says that patriotism is a *symbolic* language, he pinpoints the very reason for this specific language's openness to both official narratives and counter-memories. It communicates through the display of material symbols, rather than through ordinary conversation. In chapter one it was suggested that certain symbols can be agreed upon means of communicating a group's unity, but that this doesn't imply that everybody agrees on how to interpret the symbols (Cohen 1985). The symbolic language of patriotism, according to Bodnar (1994), is built up of such unity preserving symbols. People with different interpretations of them can use these same symbols, act together, and reconstruct their unity as a group. Returning to the example of Cindy Sheehan: both she and former President George W. Bush would claim they support the troops, and one can easily portrait a scenario where both put the slogan *Support Our Troops* on their car, yet having very different ideas on what such support should imply. This disagreement would, however, not make them question each other's patriotism and identity as Americans. Likewise, with its thousands of members, the PGR must be built up of people with very different views (as is opened for in its Mission Statement). This does not hinder them in displaying the same patriotic symbols. On the contrary, it is the very use of symbols which enables PGR members to communicate contradictory messages through one and the same symbol. Bloch (1974, 1986) helps explaining this when suggesting that, much because of symbols' multivocality (basing his analysis on Victor Turner's symbol analysis), symbolism is a specific form of communication, leading to a different form of knowledge. Symbols' multivocality allows one and the same symbol to "condense a whole host of notions, some of them contradictory, and join them together." (Bloch 1986:183). This potential for ambiguity in symbolic communication underlines the importance of this kind of communication in reconstructing a group's unity on

a general level. More specifically, the multivocality helps explain symbols' workings within the PGR, and how the PGR cannot be written on the account of neither official, nor vernacular interests exclusively, but constitutes a space wherein different interests are allowed coexistence. This adds an extra level to the ceremonies on Memorial Day. Ritual's nature hinders debate within the ritual, but this does not mean that among the hundreds of people observing the Memorial Day ceremonies in Lumber City, they all agree completely on what, for example, the flag stands for. They probably agree on it representing the USA, but they might have differing viewpoints on what the USA is, or should be. They might agree that the flag stands for freedom, but they might disagree on what freedom really means. When stating in the Pledge of Allegiance that they are one nation under God, they might very well disagree on whom that God is, and what that God demands from them. They might agree on the group taboo saying that blood sacrifice is necessary for the continuation of the nation, but they might disagree on whether the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are successful blood sacrifice rituals; that is, on whether the 'sacrificable' troops should be sacrificed there or elsewhere.

### **Resistance within borders**

Having shown that within the language of patriotism vernacular interests are allowed expression, it must also be said that as the language of American patriotism itself is limited to certain ways of expression, the potential for alternative visions within it is equally limited. To be a member in the PGR the only prerequisite is 'Respect' for the troops. The next section will show that this is not a coincident, but that paying respect to the troops – supporting the troops – constitutes the limit of patriotism, or, perhaps one should say, the one rule one cannot break if one wants to keep within patriotism's limits. This point will appear quite explicitly as this section treats resistance to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. When discussing the matter of resistance with a young Iraq veteran, the anthropologist herself challenges the borders of patriotism. Through the veteran's reactions we learn that not only *can* resistance to the wars be communicated through/within the idea 'Support Our Troops', but it *must* be communicated within the limits of this idea. That is, resistance cannot transcend patriotism.

In chapter four we were presented with one type of explanation for why Americans support the troops: the group taboo and reproduction of the nation, ideas communicated and reconstructed through ritual. However, as already mentioned, Bloch (1974,1977,1986) suggests that human's cognitive system is organized on a line between two poles; each side of

the continuum using different forms of communication, and thus also allowing different kinds of knowledge. To settle with the answers gained from only being presented with the side of the continuum dominated by ritual activity would result in an incomplete understanding of the research subjects' outlook on the world. The following will therefore concentrate on the research subjects' own reasoning for why one should support the troops even if one resists the wars. Mechanisms and implications of their reasoning will be explored and discussed as we delve into the question of how one can support somebody who conducts a mission one resists; a question I believe it is crucial to answer, if one wants to access one (of many possible) American cognitive outlooks.

### **AMERICAN TROOPS, AMERICAN PEOPLE, AMERICAN GOVERNMENT - A TENSE TRIANGLE**

In 2008 Robert Armstrong was 25 years old, and had spent six years in the US military. He had been deployed to Iraq two times with the Army, and despite struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder he was going on a third deployment with the NG at the end of summer. He is a combat medic, and his education and experience as a medic in the military helped him get his current job at the VA. I use Robert as an example of someone critically questioning today's wars, but I also see his case as representing a prime example of what Bodnar (1992,1994) had in mind when stating that one individual can support aspects of both official and vernacular culture. Robert was one of the soldiers marching at the rear end of the Memorial Day parade. At the PGR's Veterans Tribute Ride he showed up with another group of soldiers. They were there to help organize the mission and also simply to show gratitude towards the PGR for their supporting mission. Robert's appreciation of the PGR's efforts was made clear to me after his departure to his third deployment in Iraq. His wife told me that the PGR had showed up at the airport, and before entering the plane he told her to go thank them. She had hesitated and felt embarrassed, but he had insisted and told her he really appreciated them showing up. Sometimes Robert provided me with explanations of his views on war and military that concurred with the views put forth by the research subjects presented in chapter three. I will not present these parts of his perspectives, but a representative collection of his more critical statements making up what I perceive as a 'reasoning of resistance'.

Robert was in the Army when the USA invaded Iraq in 2003. He was not convinced about the idea of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) at the time, and admitted that at the time of the invasion he and his fellow soldiers used to ask each other jokingly «Who's gonna find the big bomb?». The question of Iraq's possession of WMD

matters for Robert regarding whether the invasion<sup>18</sup> of Iraq was just or not. He put it like this: «Is it a just cause to go in because we *think* they have WMD? No. If we know for sure and where they are? Yes. What can you do about it? Nothing.» The last part of his reasoning expresses the same powerlessness and passivity he gave expression to on other occasions. I wanted to know whether it made him angry that he had to deploy in a war he didn't fully believe in in terms of its original justifications. He didn't become angry, he said, because «I signed the papers and agreed to do whatever they ask of me».

This passivity seemed to have connection with Robert's strong divide between the US government and the American people. His mistrust in the original justifications for the Iraq war also extended to include mistrust in the US government in general. «If there were WMD over there I could have said "Ok, good government". Anybody can have WMD nowadays. Iraq could have had something, but I never thought they really did have it.» Anyhow, he did not see himself or any other 'everyday American' as having any opportunity of influencing the government in decisions on these matters. «The Presidents are going to do what they want to do. I don't think you can influence your own state legislators, let alone your president. The war has been going on for five years now, and the past three years the majority of the American people have said they want to pull out. Would you not see that as the people speaking?» In spite of Robert's conviction that the original reasons for invading Iraq was at best insufficient, he was not sure whether the USA should pull out now. «It is just a big mess in Iraq anyhow, whether you stay or pull out. The majority of the people in the USA want troops out. So the presidential candidates say that they want that too, because they know the people want to hear that. It's a lose-lose situation anyway. But who am I?»

In addition to what he saw as decisions made upon insufficient knowledge with regard to the question of WMD, Robert at times claimed the Iraq war is a quest for oil. One of the times he claimed this, he continued his reasoning saying «but, that is not why *I* am going to Iraq. *I* am going for other reasons than oil. When I was in Iraq, I built schools, and handed out backpacks and paper to school children. I fixed dams so the people could have electricity. I spent two years totally committed to doing stuff like that.» Also, on one of the many occasions Robert tried to explain to me the paradox of fighting a war which official reasons one might not agree with, he also said that «*I* want to go over there for a good cause. That is not saying *the USA* being over there actually is for a good cause.» He also once told me that «It is a matter of pride and honor too. 'Cause no matter what, you have to do it. As long as

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<sup>18</sup> The question of invasion is treated separately from the question of whether it is necessary or justified to stay in Iraq or pull out now that the USA is already there.

you feel you are doing it for the right thing – that’s what matters.» I think that what Robert tried to tell me, was that in a situation where you as an everyday American are in no position to influence your government’s decisions, and additionally you find yourself in the role as soldier, you have to find a personal reason that sticks with you throughout the whole deployment; if necessary a reason separate from the government’s reasons, or ‘actual’ political reasons. You need a cause that provides you with the pride you need to accomplish the mission the US military and government has laid upon you. If you feel no honor while performing the tasks you anyhow have to do, it will be harder to do them. You are in no position to argue with the military. As Robert himself pointed out, you will be put in jail if you deny orders. To be able to accomplish your mission as well as being able to live with your actions, you find a reason that to *you* stands out as the right thing to do.

The separation of the American people from the American government which enables a separation of a soldier’s personal reasons for deploying from official, and unofficial, political reasons for the USA’s engagement in Iraq, is connected to what, to Robert, constitutes America, and to where a soldier’s loyalty really belongs. «There’s a lot of patriotism in America; for the country, not for the government. People for the most part despise the government», he insisted. Within this scheme of opposites, Robert placed the troops on the side of the people. «The troops fight for the people, the American people, not the government. The people support the troops, but not the government. Neither the troops nor the people like the government.» He confirmed his perspective on other occasions when he, encouraged by me to talk about his reasons for joining the military, said: «The government never even crossed my mind when I joined». He also insisted on this not being only his perspective, but a view shared by most people: «I work at the VA – that should qualify as a patriotic place – and I have never heard anybody there say anything positive about the government.»

Robert’s questioning of the actual reasons for the USA’s invasion and later presence in Iraq does not interfere with his patriotism and identity as an American. He does not see other people’s questioning or resistance to the war as unpatriotic acts or as deterring their American identity either. What matters to Robert, though, is *how* resistance is displayed. As mentioned in chapter four, Robert claimed he would go to jail for beating somebody if he ever saw anybody burn a flag in the streets. He claimed the same would happen if he saw anybody protest at a service member’s funeral. He came with these statements in a conversation where I had asked him what his reaction would be if I, or somebody else, had come up to him and said that «I am against the war in Iraq. Because you are a soldier fighting that war, I blame

you for the war. It's a volunteer military, and I do not support you.» Robert's first comment was that nobody had ever said anything like that to him. His first reaction to such a comment, he said, would be «you don't know what you are talking about». Then he would explain that if a soldier chooses not to go to war when called upon he would be a deserter, «and that's actually punishable by death. They have not punished it that hard for a long time though. But they *will* send you to prison». This is the rest of his explanation:

«You have to put yourself in a soldier's shoes: you are being shot at. The dead bodies of American soldiers are being hung from birches. And if *you*<sup>19</sup> do something wrong, like what we saw happened on Abu Ghraib<sup>20</sup>, and which I of course perceive as very wrong, they will push that on TV constantly. We never hear on the news that an American soldier got his head shot off. They shun away from what are being done *to* the soldiers, and show what is being done *by* the soldiers instead. Anyway, it is just wrong to say that to a soldier<sup>21</sup>. I never did anything wrong, I did my best at the time. In Fallujah I was 60 yards away from where the Iraqis hung American soldiers from a bridge. I worked at a traffic control post. I did my best to talk to the local people. One Iraqi guy, probably 70 years old, who had no money, gave me his *one* bill in his wallet. I don't know why he did it. He tried to tell me something, but it was a language barrier. He understood that I was genuine, though, and all I did was trying to explain to him what we were doing. I kept that bill in my dad's house. I think it is cool, it makes me feel good. Anyhow, if an American had said anything like that to me<sup>22</sup>, I would say: then why do you even live in America? If America did not have a military we would not be America. I know that for sure. If Russia did not have a military somebody would have taken them as well. It is just stupid to say anything like that. America is about being free. Who keeps you free? Lots of people support me and tell me that it is stupid that the USA is over there. That is ok. But the way you are saying it – then it's getting personal. It's about my buddies who died over there. However, if not an American, but a foreigner said it I would do the same with that person as I am doing with you: sit down and talk and try to explain».

Robert paused, as if he wanted to know whether I had understood his message, and he said to me: «you have been here in different houses. We are just normal people trying to be happy; no different than what you guys do in Norway. Besides, if you got a job, you would still do some things you don't like. We too don't wanna be criticised when we come back. I just want to go there, be a medic and treat Iraqis and Americans alike. I don't ask anybody for a special favour or attention for being a soldier. All I want is to be free».

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<sup>19</sup> The American soldier.

<sup>20</sup> Abu Ghraib: In 2004 it became known that American service members mistreated and tortured Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad (Asser, 2004.05.25 [URL], Ingjerd & Syse 2005.04.29 [URL]).

<sup>21</sup> The verbal attack I had sketched out as a fictive outset of his explanation.

<sup>22</sup> The verbal attack I had sketched out as a fictive outset of his explanation.

### **RESISTING THE WAR WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SUPPORTING THE TROOPS**

One of Robert's concerns was media's portrayal of American troops. I interpret his statements as an expression of feeling that American troops are depersonalized in the media's presentation of them. Instead of focusing on the hard time they go through on deployment and cover Iraqi insurgents' treatment of American troops, the media look for scandals and use a lot of energy covering a few soldiers' mistakes in Abu Ghraib. The impression is strengthened through Robert's remark which he directed to me personally, begging me to acknowledge my own experience of visiting and talking with troops all over Lumber City: every service member is an individual; a normal person «trying to be happy». It is critical to underline each service member's 'normalism' to keep the divide between service member and government. If we follow Robert's explanation one cannot blame the American troops for conducting the Iraq war (arguably transferrable to the War in Afghanistan), because the troops have not chosen to start this specific war, politicians have. The recruiter Hanks made a similar point (see chapter three) when he said that «As a soldier you pray for peace and train for war». A service member is not war mongering, he/she is just doing his/her job. As in every other job, if you refuse to do it, you get fired, and in the military you additionally get imprisoned. If you think the war is unjust you should direct your anger towards the government that decided to start the war.

As with the two recruiters presented in chapter three, Robert does not see oil as a just reason for war. Unlike the recruiters though, Robert says he does not trust the US government to not start a war on unjust premises. What is interesting here is that Robert places the US government outside the society other Americans make up. Furthermore, the motives Robert listed as his, and not necessarily the government's, was by the persons we got to know in chapter three listed as the actual reasons – the government's reasons – for both the Iraq war and the War in Afghanistan. It was shown in chapter three how what is conceived as just reasons for war is connected to the research subjects' ideas about America. Ways to justify war fit within, are in congruence with, their perception of American identity. Robert places American politicians outside, and certainly not representative of, what he terms the American people. He places himself, as a service member, on the side of and fighting for, the American people, not the government. He lists up what he sees as just and good reasons for his presence, as a soldier and representative of the American people, in Iraq. I will argue that here too we can assume a relationship between what is perceived as just reasons for American military presence in a foreign country, and ones ideas about American identity. Just reasons are *American* reasons. Combining this scheme with Robert's categorizations of government,

people and troops, the government and the people make up two societies that act according to two different value systems; the politicians according to a rather crooked one, initiating wars on unjust premises and ignoring the will of the American people; the American people according to what might perhaps be termed a more *American* one, expressed in Robert's account as focused on a wish to keep his own family and other Americans safe and free, and help Iraqis towards a better life. It is as if Robert does not grant (American) politicians a real American identity. Doing this makes it easier to ignore politics for a service member. A soldier in the US Army fights for eternal American values, not shifting political goals. No matter the politicians' motives for war, the soldier, as a representative of the American people, will go into war with his own, and intrinsically American, honorable motives.

Also looking at peoples' motives for joining the military underlines the irrelevance of government and politics. Robert claimed that the government never crossed his mind when he enlisted to the Army. He admitted that right after 9/11, he and his buddies in college talked about dropping out to join the military and fight the terrorists. They didn't do that, but at the end of the year Robert dropped out of college anyway, because of lack of motivation. He then enlisted into the Army, not out of economic issues, but because he wanted to see the world. And he added, «Obviously I wanted to help since I joined», and he meant that him choosing the medical field underlined that point. Different research subjects offered different reasons for joining the military. Quite a few resembled Robert's story in that they dropped out of college, for instance Hanks, the recruiter. After dropping out some joined the military because they needed money and a job, others out of lust for adventure, and yet others saw the military as a place with the structures they needed to get their life straight. During my many hours spent at Lumber City's recruitment office I observed everything from one young man who wanted to enlist to the Army because he saw no future in Lumber City, where the only job he could get was his current job at McDonalds, to the 40 year old man who had a steady well paid job at a nearby paper mill, but who felt he hadn't done much with his life, seeing the Army as a place where he could realize some of his dreams. Some enlisted during high school, like both Jennifer and Jane whom we met in chapter three. They were both open in their support for the Iraq and Afghanistan war, but Jennifer explained her enlistment more as a result of a general wish to help people, at home and in the rest of the world. Jane's story, not yet told, is a more dramatic one. She was a tomboy in high school, not fitting very well into the stereotype of American teenage girls as feminine prom queens and cheerleaders. Her resulting low self esteem made her end up hanging with the wrong crowd, abusing alcohol and drugs, not caring much for school. Her dad one day brought her to the Army recruiters'



office, thinking the Army could be a place to induce some positive motivation in her and straighten her up. Although Jane had a tough personal background, she did not come from a difficult home, but a rather successful middle class family. Two more of Jane's siblings joined the military as well. Her brother enlisted because he dropped out of college. He had always wanted to join the military any way, and the Air Force offered the discipline and challenge he needed. Jane's elder sister seemed to have joined out of adventurism and, maybe as a result of a long struggle against cancer in her teenage years, a wish to prove to the world that 'she can do it'. The siblings' parents had already paid for a college degree she had completed.

It is hard to pin down a 'typical enlistment-story'. The point of listing up these enlistment-stories is to show how Robert's statement that «the government never even crossed my mind when I joined», carries general relevance. Without being as explicit as Robert on the issue, the other service members I met expressed much the same message. Not one person claimed to have joined the military because he or she thinks that this or that exact war is especially just or necessary to help out in, collecting inspiration from politicians' promises and shifting attempts at explaining the necessity of for example the Iraq war explicitly. People in close relationships to service members seemed to share this perspective. A young army wife who was very skeptical to both the Iraq and Afghanistan war, whose husband was deployed to Iraq, said this when I asked her why it is that one should support the troops when resisting the war: «You may not believe in what the person is doing, but you must believe in him. The troops did not choose to go there. They just do what their boss tells them. They are doing their job. They don't join to go to war. They join the military because they don't want to go to college or because they don't want to settle with just a minimum wage job. The military is a lifestyle. They join to have something in their life. It is a step forward in their future.»

What the enlistment stories also tell us, and that I perceive as an important addition to Robert's account, is that there is a varying degree of choice, of agency, in the act of joining the military. The fact that the military for very many young men and women is a lifeline they just had to catch at a point in their lives when other possibilities seemed to have disappeared was also an idea acknowledged by their fellow citizens. The army wife quoted above confirmed this. So did others, referring to the often surprisingly high enlistment bonuses, the steady and relatively high salary you achieve, in addition to the security for you and your family in military provided health care insurances. This did not mean people perceived the military as cheating people into enlisting, though. Except for the honorability of military service (an honorability which possible explanations were discussed thoroughly in chapter four), it was recognized by many as being a good, and actually safe [sic] place for young

people to grow up. Jane's father, whose ideas on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could at best be described as ambivalent, perceived the military as the best place for all his three children at the moment, as they all needed both the discipline and to learn to put themselves second.

Again, the motives for military service seem depoliticized. The act of joining the military is acknowledged as detached from a person's ideas on politics and specific wars. The specifics of what one has to do as a soldier, or rather, the politics one suddenly is embedded within when one is acting on orders derived directly from politicians' decisions, are matters it is accepted that one deals with after already having become part of the military institution. Without claiming that all the service members I got to know in Lumber City made such a stark divide between people and government as Robert did, at least some amount of alienation must have played in for them to be able to ignore politics in their choice to 'lay their life on the line'. The troops' fellow citizens must to some extent share this alienation to be able to support the troops even though they don't support the troops' mission. They must to some extent be convinced about the idea that American troops, at least personally (as Robert argued), fight for the American people, not for the government. The particularities of the present are continuously shifting. The actual political motives behind the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are hard, if not impossible, to grasp for anybody outside the inner circles of Pentagon and the White House. Faced with a confusing political field there is consent to put politics aside in the question of military service, and let more immediate issues, as economy, education possibilities, and straightening up one's life, dominate.

#### **PATRIOTISM AS PREREQUISITE - THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPPORTING THE TROOPS AND BEING PART OF THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

So far, the mechanisms of how supporting the troops can be detached from the question of one's ideas on a specific war have been outlined. As a closing off of the chapter and the thesis, the implications of this almost forced detachment will be explored. If the idea 'Support Our Troops' takes the form of a rule, what happens if you break that rule?

In chapter four it was argued that the body of a dead American service member takes the form of an American totem god, thus standing for the American nation. In the speech held at the Memorial Day ceremony at Lumber City's cemetery, one central message was that the ones remembering dead service members, that is, Americans in general, should make a pledge to patriotic service. This message must be understood within a social memory where one idea

is the duty the members of the community 'the American nation' have to be willing to sacrifice, if necessary their life, for the nation. For the ones not actually paying the sacrifice to still earn their membership in the community 'the American nation', they must at least prove that they are aware of the necessity of somebody else making that sacrifice so that the American nation can prevail. Like Robert said: «America is about being free. Who keeps you free?» Denying the importance and necessity of sacrifice, of the inherent 'goodness' of becoming an American service member, is to deny the grounds for the American nation's existence.

In his outline of civil religion Rousseau (1968:186) suggests banishment from the State for anyone who does not believe in the dogmas of the civil religion, because if a person does not believe in its dogmas that person is also unable to sacrifice his/her life for the State. The dogmas of American civil religion, formulated by President Johnson as 'the covenant', are 1) to recognize the USA as "a place where a man could be his own man" (Bellah 1966:10), in other words, as a place of freedom; and 2) spread that freedom. If Americans keep the covenant's terms, "we shall flourish" (Bellah 1966:10). In other words, if breaking the dogmas terms, America(ns) will fall. Again, Robert's statements are worth quoting. When I posed the possibility of not supporting the troops, of actively communicating resistance to people who choose to fight in a war not found to be sufficiently justified, Robert answered that if an American said anything like that to him, he would answer: «Then why do you even live in America? If America did not have a military, we would not be America». The troops are the ones making sure the covenant's terms are kept, and thus, to not supporting the troops is to place oneself outside the American community.

The moment you deny patriotism's terms, you also renounce your American identity. This has consequences. As exemplified by Robert: you can criticize the government and the Iraq war, but if Robert sees you protesting at a service member's funeral or burning a flag in the street, he would knock you down. The PGR's creation is also an interesting case in point. Their mission is to pay respect to the troops. The reason the group came into existence was WBC's *disrespect*. The PGR is there to make sure the bodies sacrificed for the American nation are not disgraced. What both Robert and the PGR do, is to show that if you actively display your lack of patriotism – through breaking its main rule 'Support Our Troops' – you should not be allowed to have a voice in debates centering on the USA either; among them including the debate of which wars are just and which are not. Only if you support the troops can you resist the war.

Further implications of this are hard to pin down. Yet, I would like to round off this chapter by speculating whether supporting the troops as a pre-requisite for resistance can contribute to restraining war-resistance. It is worthwhile to mention the complete lack of official display of anti-war perspectives in Lumber City, in stark contrast to the rather common display of support for the troops: stickers on cars with ‘Support Our Troops’ slogans; the same slogan displayed on posters in the windows at many of the town’s shops; the visibility of the PGR; the obituaries in the local newspaper, always displaying a Star Spangled Banner if the deceased was a veteran; and the memorial site on the top of a hill on the outskirts of Lumber City, made up of black stones with inscriptions of wars American service members have fought in, as well as names of Northern Belt military veterans, all surrounding a tall flag pole with the Star Spangled Banner.

Heartbreaking stories from the Vietnam War of drafted service members being spat on upon returning from war warns of the negative effects of a situation where supporting the troops does not constitute the outer boundary of patriotism, or rather, a situation where patriotism and nationalism is being questioned as values. Still, it is tempting to speculate in whether the ‘de-sacralized’ status of the service member, at least for portions of the American society, in that time contributed to a political environment that allowed a more open debate on what terms a war should be waged. However, how much it was ‘that time’ which opened up the political climate, or whether the sacredness of troops simply varies with your geographical position within the USA, is a question posed through the statement of one lady, whose son was deployed to Iraq. «The 1970s was a cool time. But this is a small area. The hippies were something we saw on TV. The music was good, but the hippies and the thoughts about revolution did not affect us here». This might be true for today’s situation as well. As the recruiter Hanks pointed out, the Midwest is a patriotic area. On the West Coast people are not as eager to display their support for the troops. Whether this is because the troops are ‘less sacred’ there than in Lumber City, I cannot know, but several people in Lumber City, service members and people not in the military alike, pointed out that even though you absolutely can resist the war while supporting the troops, this support becomes questioned and hard to defend if you go out in the streets protesting the war; especially in a small town like Lumber City where so many of its citizens are veterans, and with a NG unit in the middle of town.

# 6:

## *Conclusion*

### **Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue**

I used Toby Keith's song title as the name of this thesis. My reason is that I find Keith's use of the term *courtesy* interesting and fitting regarding the points made in this thesis. *Courtesy*, as used in Keith's song, is meant ironically; what the USA is generously providing is war as revenge for 9/11. War as revenge, or as a way of preventing further attacks and acts of war on American soil, is an idea provided by some of the research subjects in this thesis as well. In chapter three the reader was introduced to the Army recruiter, Scott, who said «We would much rather fight terrorists in Iraq than on our own soil». Harry, the stepfather of newly enlisted 17 year old Jennifer, mentioned what he perceived as the potential threat of «all these other countries with nuclear weapons; it can't be like that. Many people there are terrorists and extremists with no value for human life. If we don't stop it, it will come to the USA sooner or later».

The idea about the *courtesy* of the Red, White and Blue, however, is also a non-ironical idea for the research subjects presented in this thesis. As underlined by Jennifer, Theresa and Harry in chapter three, Americans are a lucky people, and the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are described by the family as helping Iraqis and Afghanis towards a better life, backing them in their fight against their oppressors. In the same chapter, Jane claims that the USA «is so nice and kind and stays there and tries to help them». Also the two recruiters connect what they perceive as a positive development in Iraq – democratic elections, a free market, and a free press – directly with the American presence. In all cases, courtesy in its ironic sense, is only directed towards what I have termed 'the bad Other'; terrorists, insurgents, extremists, etc.

The research subjects' accounts displayed what I have termed a 'dichotomous othering'. There is both the mentioned 'bad Other', as well as the 'good Other'. The latter constituting deprived allies, whom Americans are bound to help. American nationalism, in the form of *civil* religion, brings with it certain dogmas – as according to Rousseau (1968), and Bellah (1966). Among those dogmas the idea that God has a special concern for America, putting Americans in the role of the chosen people, and America in the role of the promised

land. This is connected to the story of the American foundation, taking the form of myth, where today's American's ancestors came to this promised land and made a covenant with it, still binding today's Americans. The covenant has two aspects: to maintain the concept of promised land, basically to keep the USA free, as underlined by for example Robert, as well as to 'export by example' the American version of freedom.

The song title making up the thesis' name is also suggestive of one of the themes discussed in chapter four. Keith sings that the courtesy is brought by the Red, White and Blue, that is, the Star Spangled Banner. In chapter four the sacredness of the American flag is treated, and its status as a totem suggested. In the Pledge of Allegiance, performed every morning by students and teachers at Lumber City's public elementary school, they «pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands». Tony's students are taught flag etiquette, in other words, the taboos surrounding the sacred flag/the totem by habituation throughout their time with Tony as their teacher. He teaches them how to raise and lower the flag, how to fold it, and at the cemetery in their Memorial Day preparation, they learn about the danger of pollution; the flag must not touch the ground. Through the Pledge of Allegiance they have learnt that the flag stands for the nation. This point can be extended. As an effect of the many taboos surrounding it, the flag ceases to be 'simply a flag' or a symbol; it *is* the nation. That way, through showing one's concern about the state of the flag, one also displays one's concern about the state of the nation.

The thesis has moved between what Bloch (1974,1977,1986) termed a cognitive continuum where ritualized performance dominates one side, and more informal practices and informal speech dominates the other, the different forms of communication also implying different forms of knowledge. It has been shown that on both sides of this continuum the inherent importance of service members' sacrifice for the nation has been underlined. Communicated implicitly in the ritualized performance, and explicitly when the research subjects were asked to explain it to me in conversation, was how the question of support for the troops is disconnected from the question of how one perceives specific wars. For instance, on the ceremonies on Memorial Day, the Iraq war was tied up within a national historical framework. Service members who made the 'ultimate sacrifice' in Iraq were commemorated alongside service members sacrificed in all American wars, and the Iraq war was in a way reduced to being 'just another war' in the long American tradition of fighting for freedom at home and abroad. That way one can be against the Iraq war, but still commemorate Memorial Day, because through the ceremonies on that special day one is allowed (in a rather forced way) to let the Iraq war be disconnected from time, and thus make the specifics of it

irrelevant. Through the same move, one pays tribute to the ones making the necessary sacrifice, and displays one's patriotism.

It was, however, first through one special conversation with the Iraq veteran Robert, that it was made clear to me that it is not only the different ritualized performances that allow for disconnecting support for the troops from one's ideas about specific wars, but that support for the troops is the defining point for American patriotism; the idea 'Support Our Troops' is the one rule you cannot break if you want to be categorized as American. Breaking that rule and thus renouncing your American identity, you also accept being ruled out from having a say on issues concerning the American nation; like the matter of which wars are just and which are not. Supporting the troops is thus a prerequisite for resisting the war.

Chapter five ended with asking what could be the possible implications of this last conclusion, suggesting that one of its effects might be restraining war-resistance. My research is however insufficient in making any conclusions on that matter, and I would like to end this thesis with a call for further research specifically on the implications of the connection between the support for the troops and war-resistance.





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