



“Storming the Castle.” Examining the Motivations of the Veterans Who Participated in the Capitol Riots

ERIC B. HODGES

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
PATRIOTISM

RESEARCH

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

Ten percent of the Americans arrested for storming the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, are military veterans. These veterans have been charged with federal crimes ranging from Obstruction of an Official Proceeding to Assaulting Capitol Police Officers. This paper seeks to answer three questions related to those veterans' participation in the Capitol Riots. Were their actions patriotic? What were their motivations? And was there anything about their military experience that made these veterans more likely to riot than non-veterans? A content analysis of 71 remarks made by 40 of the veterans arrested, both before and after the riots, was used to ascertain the motivations of those individuals. Analysis of the veterans' comments revealed that they believed they were acting patriotically; however, closer examination shows that their motivations were more consistent with nationalism than patriotism. Additionally, the military training and combat exposure of the veterans, along with the “Stop the Steal” rhetoric, particularly comments made by former President Donald Trump, also played an integral role in influencing the veterans. The analysis also indicated that the Capitol Riots should be classified as a form of proto-sectarian violence and should serve as a cautionary tale against the growing divisiveness that sparked this incident.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Eric B. Hodges

Longwood University, US

hodgeseb@longwood.edu

KEYWORDS:

Capitol Riots; military veterans;
patriotism; nationalism;
sectarian violence

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hodges, E. B. (2021). “Storming the Castle.” Examining the Motivations of the Veterans Who Participated in the Capitol Riots. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(3), pp. 46–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i3.274>

On January 6, 2021, approximately 500 Americans breached the perimeter of the US Capitol Building to obstruct the certification of the 2020 Presidential Election. The assault on the Capitol resulted in five deaths, including that of Air National Guard veteran, Brian Sicknick, and 140 injuries. As of June 2021, 458 individuals have been charged with a federal crime (US Department of Justice, n.d.). Of those 458, at least 45 (10%) are veterans of the US Armed Forces. That number is significant for several reasons. First, the percentage of veterans participating in the riots is disproportionately higher than the percentage of military veterans in American society (6.2%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This disparity raises the question of whether veterans were more likely to participate in the riots than non-veterans. Additionally, all military veterans took an oath of office to protect and defend the US Constitution. However, the procedures for certifying the results of the US Presidential Election, which they were obstructing, comes directly from the US Constitution (U.S. Const. amend. XII); thus, their actions on January 6th contravened that oath.

Perhaps even more puzzling is that many of these veterans claimed to be patriots who were acting in the best interest of the nation. The impetus for this paper came from trying to understand what those veterans meant by patriotism and what influenced them to carry out this seditious act.

The research questions considered in this paper are:

- Were the actions of the veterans patriotic? If so, in what senses?
- What motivated these veterans to assault the US Capitol Building?
- Were there factors in the military experience that made these veterans more likely to participate in the riots than non-veterans? If so, what are they?

To answer these questions, I conducted a content analysis of 71 comments made by 40 veterans before, during, and after the riots. Most of these comments were made on social media, with the remaining coming from traditional media sources. Most of these comments came from publicly accessible federal affidavits from the US Department of Justice. All other obtained information is available in open-source news reporting or in court documents.

My analysis of the comments suggests three things. First, the actions and words of the veterans were more consistent with the characteristics of nationalism rather than patriotism. However, some scholars (de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Worchel & Coutant, 1997) have suggested that rather than being two distinct concepts, patriotism and nationalism should be regarded as opposite ends of a spectrum regarding national pride. Second, there were

three fundamental motivations for the veteran participants: militarism, patriotism, and a belief in election fraud. Finally, while coding the comments, it became clear that the military training and combat exposure of the veterans played a key role in their motivations and actions during the riots. The paper begins with an introduction to the literature focused on patriotism, then proceeds to research methods and findings, and concludes with a discussion of those findings and future research questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining patriotism has been a challenge for scholars dating back to at least the French Revolution (Bell, 2001; Mole, 2021; Smith, 2005) and continues to be a topic of debate in the current literature. In this paper, I use the definition of patriotism offered by Theiss-Morse (2009), “Patriotism is love of country (which includes some mix of culture, values, the regime, the land, the national history and myths, the government and its policies, and on rare occasions, the people” (p. 23).

Within the patriotism literature, there is a growing body of research that suggests identification with a nation is not fundamentally different than other types of group identities (Citrin et al., 2001; Schildkraut, 2014). This observation is grounded in social identity theory (Spears, 2011; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which argues that an understanding of what it takes to be a part of a group influences an individual’s attitudes and behaviors. Social identity theory also maintains that perceiving that the group’s status or value is threatened can condition the behaviors of that social identity (Branscombe et al. 1999; Flippen et al., 1996).

The need to join groups is fundamental to human nature. It has been argued from the perspective of evolutionary psychology that cooperative behavior promotes individual survival (Caporeael et al., 1989), and that groups composed of members who are cooperative are more effective than those with members who are less cooperative (Brewer & Kramer, 1986). Such behavior also contributes to a person’s sense of identity by distinguishing them from those who are like them and those who are not; between friends and foes (Volkan, 1988). The cooperative behavior displayed between members of one’s own group, strengthened by pressures of conformity to group norms, is rarely seen in relations between members of different groups.

Theories of cognitive development such as that of Piaget (1965) suggest that children typically move from a focus on themselves to identifying with those who are important to them in their surroundings. Thus, building attachments to groups is part of the normal socialization process as

individuals move toward adulthood. It is the way we learn to understand and function in the world around us.

Similarly, the bases for national loyalty are widely assumed to be lodged in human needs. At the level of the nation, the group fulfills economic, sociocultural, and political needs, giving individuals a sense of security, a feeling of belonging and prestige. The underlying needs for national attachment take several forms, which arise out of both the affective and instrumental functions served by the nation. As Terhune (1964) observed, the nation achieves personal relevance for individuals when they become sentimentally attached to the homeland (affectively involved), motivated to help their country (goal oriented), and gain a sense of identity and self-esteem through their national identification (ego involved). DeLamater et al. (1969) added a normative involvement to this triad, which occurs when individuals internalize the norms and role expectations of the nation. People see the nation as providing them and their progeny with security and safety as well as status and prestige in return for their loyalty and commitment.

In the literature focused on military veterans, much is made of the strong sense of group loyalty that is forged during military service (Caddick et al., 2015; McCormick, 2019; Senecal, 2019). According to the research, the bonds of military group loyalty come from serving a higher cause that can transcend individual differences and from shared hardships. However, the loss of this camaraderie when one departs the military is often cited as a fundamental obstacle to the transition to civilian life (Church, 2010).

Within the patriotism literature, several variations of the concept are discussed. There are two sets of opposing perspectives of patriotism to consider. The first set has to do with how national identity is defined. Brewer et al. (2004) proposed that there are two different rationales for considering a group to be a coherent entity. On one hand, a group may be seen as a unit by virtue of shared attributes and the common heritage of its members. These conceptions of group coherence rest on intragroup similarity and distinctiveness from others and is known as essentialism. This understanding of group unity leads to an *intergroup* focus of attention (Yuki, 2003), with an emphasis on maintaining homogeneity within groups and differentiation between groups. When this essentialist perspective of a group is applied to a national identity it becomes what Sidanius and Petrocik (2001) referred to as “exclusionary patriotism.” A high level of patriotism in this representation is associated with derogatory attitudes toward other nations and with intolerance for variation from a common cultural standard within the nation.

On the other hand, a group may become a coherent entity by virtue of facing a common problem, having a

common purpose, and acting in a coordinated way to achieve shared goals (Hamilton et al., 1998). Brewer and Li (2004) referred to this as goal-based patriotism. If group unity is defined in terms of shared purpose in the face of threat, then national identification should be directed toward effective internal cooperation to achieve common goals. Awareness of interdependence and common fate promotes an intragroup focus of attention (Yuki, 2003), with an emphasis on maintaining intragroup relationships and shared concern for group welfare.

The second set of patriotism variants has to do with what patriotism requires of its citizens. The first of these variations is known as blind patriotism (Schatz et al., 1999). Blind patriotism does not allow room for criticism and is characterized by an unquestioning loyalty to the nation. When someone tells a critic to “love it or leave it,” they are exhibiting this kind of patriotism. Constructive patriotism, on the other hand, is motivated by a desire to improve the nation and therefore permits criticism (Schatz, 1999). Protestors of domestic and/or foreign policy who see their actions as trying to help the country live up to its ideals embody this type of patriotism.

A final distinction often mentioned in the literature has to do with the distinction between patriotism and nationalism. One interpretation is that the two are analytically distinct concepts. Patriotism refers to the noncompetitive love of and commitment to one’s country. As such, patriotism is primarily focused on promoting the welfare of one’s nation but is neutral regarding the evaluation of others (Bar-Tal, 1993). Nationalism, on the other hand, is related to an ideology of superiority of the ingroup over outgroups and implies the exclusion or even domination of others (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Feshbach, 1994; Sidanius et al., 1997; Viroli, 1995). Consistent with these definitions, nationalism has been associated with higher levels of chauvinism, prejudice, militarism, hawkish attitudes, social dominance orientation, and lower levels of internationalism (Brewer, 1999; de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Federico et al., 2005; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Sidanius et al., 1997). Patriotism, on the other hand, has been shown to be unrelated to any form of outgroup derogation or aggression (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989).

Another interpretation is that nationalism and patriotism (de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Druckman, 1994; Worchel & Coutant, 1997) exist on an ideological spectrum of national pride. One way to define this spectrum would be to use the two distinctions of patriotism mentioned above to determine where an individual would fall on the spectrum. As a reminder those distinctions are, how national identity is defined and what patriotism requires. On the nationalistic end of the spectrum, national identity

is defined by shared ethnicity and requires hostility towards outsiders. On the patriotic end of the spectrum, national identity is characterized by shared values and goals and does not necessitate hostility towards outsiders. A potential rendering of the spectrum, which includes the four variations of patriotism, can be seen below in **Figure 1**.

Both patriotism and nationalism seem to increase in response to a threat; for example, the 9/11 attacks resulted in immediate, visibly evident increases in expressions of national identification and unity throughout the United States. The critical factor determining the nature and consequences of enhanced national identification is how individuals understand the meaning of national unity in these circumstances. As two different sides of the same coin (de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Worchel & Coutant, 1997), it is possible that “love of nation” can be associated with benign patriotic attitudes under some circumstances or with more malign nationalistic attitudes in other circumstances, within the same individual. There are several factors that can influence which disposition is activated. First, the patriotic orientation tends to occur more frequently in non-competitive situations while the nationalistic attitudes are expressed more strongly in competitive intergroup situations. Additionally, the perceived intergroup context, the salience of different national symbols, or the behavior of national leaders can all impact whether patriotism becomes nationalism.

There are at least two ways in which national leaders can influence the tenor of national pride. First, during times of distress, leaders sway the patriotic attitudes of their citizens by issuing calls for national unity. For example, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, then President Bush remarked, “This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace” (para. 12). However, the way in which those calls are framed has a significant impact on whether unity takes the form of patriotism or nationalism. Brewer and Li (2004) found that when the call for unity is predicated on preserving cultural homogeneity rather than shared goals or values, it is likely to create a more nationalistic disposition. They also cautioned that leaders who see a political advantage in mobilizing nationalistic sentiments in the name of patriotism could exploit this tendency (p. 737).

Secondly, when there are pre-existing sentiments of nationalism among the people, a national leader can weaponize their rhetoric to exacerbate those insecurities. Appeals to existential threats, along with vilifying and dehumanizing the opposition are common tactics used by nationalistic leaders. Additionally, if these leaders hold political power, they can enact government policies and programs that channel feelings of hostility towards outsiders (Druckman, 1994). Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, whose actions launched the movement towards ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian War, serves as an illustration of how a leader can stoke nationalistic tendencies.

Despite generally high levels of patriotism among the American population, there are noteworthy differences. For example, conservatives, Republicans, and Americans with lower levels of education tend to score higher on various measures of patriotism than liberals, Democrats, and Americans with higher levels of education. Whites and Latinos also tend to report higher levels of patriotism relative to Black and Asian American respondents (Huddy & Khatib, 2007; Parker, 2010; Schatz, 1999; Theiss-Morse, 2009). When both patriotism and attachment to being American are included in examinations of political attitudes, they exhibit distinct effects. Huddy and Khatib (2007), for example, find that national attachment leads people to be more politically engaged, whereas several measures of patriotism do not, and blind patriotism discourages political engagement.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The first step in the research process was to identify the veterans who participated in the January 6 Capitol Riots. As of June 2021, these individuals made up 10% of those charged in the riot. They include veterans from all branches of the military except for the Coast Guard and Space Force: 22 Marines, 19 Army, three Navy, one Air Force, and one unknown. These veterans served an average of 9 years and the majority held leadership roles while serving, with 25% serving as commissioned officers and 55% as noncommissioned officers. With the exceptions of Jessica Watkins and Ashli Babbit, the veteran rioters were all men. Forty-four percent of the rioters had deployed at least once

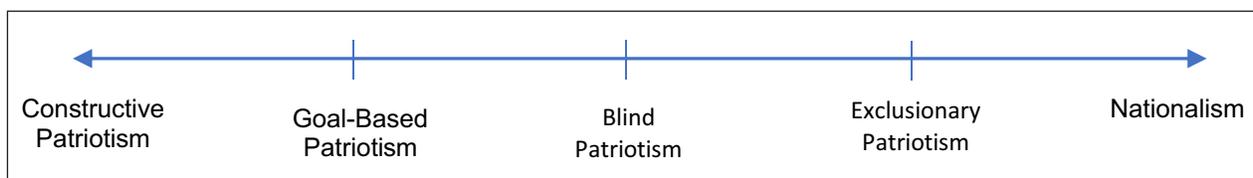


Figure 1 National Pride Spectrum.

to a combat zone and two-thirds joined after the year 2000. Thirty seven percent of the veteran rioters had affiliations to domestic violent extremist (DVE) organizations like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys. To identify these individuals, I utilized the publicly available database provided by George Washington University's Program on Extremism (POE). I supplemented the POE information with military service data provided by Milton and Mines' (2021) report "This is War."

DATA COLLECTION

After identifying the veterans, I began to gather information on their comments before, during, and after the riots. All obtained information is available in open-source news reporting or in federal court documents. I primarily relied upon federal affidavits or statements of fact that can be found on the US Department of Justice website titled *Capitol Breach Cases*. It is important to note that the charges brought against all individuals in this report are still allegations and remain to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

ANALYSIS

I used an inductive coding technique called open coding to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The basic idea of the approach is to read a textual database multiple times to discover and label variables and their inter-relationships. There are three steps in the process: open coding, axial coding, and systematic coding. Open coding is the first part of the analysis and is concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena found in the text. The purpose of breaking up data and labeling them with codes is to enable the researcher to continuously compare similar occurrences in the data. Essentially, each line, sentence, paragraph, etc. is read in search of the answer to the repeated questions, "What is this about? What is being referenced here?"

Open coding also involves identifying the properties of these categories. For example, if the open code is civil war, one might look for the type of war, the combatants, etc. Whether these properties or dimensions come from the data itself, from respondents, or from the mind of the researcher depends on the goals of the research. During the coding process, I maintained an inventory of codes with their descriptions, known as a codebook, along with references to where they could be found.

The next step in the process is known as axial coding. Axial coding is the process of relating the open codes (categories and properties) to each other, via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking. In contrast to open coding where data is broken the into discrete parts, with axial coding the researcher begins to draw connections between codes. With axial coding, one organizes the

codes they developed in open coding. With axial coding in qualitative research, one reads over their codes and the underlying data to find how their codes can be grouped into categories. A category could be created based on an existing code, or a new more abstract category can be developed that encompasses several different codes.

To simplify this process, rather than look for all kinds of relations, the methodology focuses on causal relationships that fit into a basic frame of relationships including phenomenon, causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action strategies, and consequences. Once the relationships have been mapped for the relevant comments, the axial codes are created by finding common properties. For example, one participant wrote,

I swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. I did the former, I have done the latter peacefully but they have morphed into pure evil even blatantly rigging an election and paying off the political caste. We must smite them now and drive them down. (Hsu, 2021)

A breakdown of the causal properties that relate to this comment would be:

- Phenomenon – Defending the US Constitution
- Properties – All enemies, foreign and domestic
- Implication – The fight against the enemies will no longer be peaceful
- Context – Rigging an election, paying off the political caste, swearing an oath to defend the Constitution
- Intervening Conditions – The enemy has morphed into pure evil
- Action – Smite the enemy
- Expected Consequence – Restoring Donald Trump to the presidency

The final stage in the coding process is known as selective coding. Selective coding is the process of choosing one category to be the core category and relating all other categories to that category. The essential idea is to develop a single storyline around which everything else is draped. Selective coding is the culmination of the open coding process, and its purpose is to either define a new theory or modify an existing theory based on your research.

FINDINGS

The findings were taken from 71 comments made from the 40 veterans who participated in the Capitol Riots and are

divided into three categories: open codes, axial codes, and the selective code.

OPEN CODES

During open coding, six themes emerged from the data. Those six codes were: military tactics, the enemy, civil war, patriotism, President Trump, and rectifying an injustice. The codes along with representative comments are provided below:

Military Tactics

The code with the most comments (14) was the use of military tactics during the Capitol Riot. Military tactics involve organizing and employing fighting force on the battlefield and are comprised of four components: firepower, mobility, security, and shock action. Participant comments that fell into one of those four functions were placed in this code. The rioters likened the assault on the Capitol to a combat zone by referring to the use of small arms fire, flash bang grenades, tear gas, breaching the doors, hunting the enemy, and a willingness to commit violence against members of Congress. Some of the comments that fell under this code were:

It's like, you're literally planning to go into a combat zone. It's not just like, "Hey man, we're going to DC, we're going to Portland." It's like, "Alright, we're going to Portland. I need satellite imagery. I need to talk to people on the ground." (Owen, 2021)

Men with guns need to shoot there [sic] way in and We did it, hahaha, it was fucking amazing. Flash bangs going off, CS gas, rubber bullets flying by. Felt so good to be back in the shit. (Callihan, 2021)

Tom, all the legislators are down in the Tunnels 3 floors down; Do like we had to do when I was in the Corps, start clearing the floors¹; go from top to bottom. (Hsu, 2021)

The Enemy

The code with the second most comments (11) was the presence of an enemy or opposing force. According to the US Naval Handbook, an enemy is defined as, "A person engaged in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners during an armed conflict" (Department of the Navy, p. 5–4, 2007. Comments that directly referenced the term enemy, opposition, or hostile force were included in this category. In most cases, the enemy referred to the political left, but also included members of the Republican Party, such as former Vice President, Mike Pence. The notion of being a traitor, in addition to an enemy was a common

thread in this category. Representative comments included in this code are:

I see no distinction between a group of Americans seizing power and governing with complete disregard to the Constitution and an invading force ... Against all enemies foreign and domestic. (Dreisbach, 2021)

I swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. I did the former, I have done the latter peacefully but they have morphed into pure evil even blatantly rigging an election and paying off the political caste. (Hsu, 2021)

We are now under occupation by a hostile governing force and every single [expletive beeped in original] in there is a traitor. Every single one! (Dreisbach, 2021)

Civil War

The notion of civil war was the next most frequent code with 10 comments. Civil War is defined as "A violent conflict between a state and one or more organized non-state actors in the state's territory" (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d., entry on Civil War). Participant comments that directly used the terms civil war, revolution, or armed conflict were included in this code. Under the civil war category, participants spoke of a growing division in our country, being on the precipice of war, and their willingness to fight the other side. Some representative comments include:

I do know that our country is severely divided, and I felt that if people don't stand up and be loud at some point in time, there's going to be armed conflict. (Correll, 2021)

If [Trump is] pushed out of office fraudulently, then we'll see how things go from there. But I'm absolutely not above going to war. (Correll, 2021)

By Bullet or Ballot, Restoration of the Republic is Coming. (Brewster, 2021)

Patriotism

The subsequent code, which also contained 10 comments, was patriotism. Patriotism, as defined above, is simply a love of country. However, that love of country can be based on different factors, which influence an individual's orientation towards outsiders. Participant comments were placed in this category if they directly mentioned the

word patriot or love of country. Representative comments include:

We need all the patriots of this country to rally the fuck up and fight for our freedom or it's gone forever. Give us liberty or give us death. (United States of America v. Ryan Taylor Nichols and Nicholas Harkrider, 2021, para. 25)

We are very skilled patriots ready for a fight. (Correll, 2021)

We can't loose [sic] our America. (United States of America v. Joshua Lollar, 2021)

2020 Election Fraud

The following code, which contained five comments, was the belief that the 2020 US Presidential Election was fraudulent. Any participant comments that referenced election fraud were included in this code. The veterans who participated in the riots clearly believed that the 2020 Presidential election was fraudulent, and they were planning to fight to overturn those results. Some representative comments include:

They can steal an election, but we can't sit in their chairs? (United States of America v. Bruno Cua, 2021)

America has spoken. The people have a voice. The people give the power and we are here to take it back (United States of America v. Nicholes Lentz, 2021, para. 11)

If you believe there was nothing wrong with this election ... don't buy our coffee. It's not for you. (Correll, 2021)

Donald Trump

The final open code, which contained four comments had to do with former President Donald Trump and his role in inciting the Capitol Riots. Participant comments that directly referenced the former President were included in this section. Those comments are:

The President asked for his supporters to be there to attend. (Dreisbach, 2021)

President Trump told the Proud Boys to stand by because someone needs to deal with antifa ... well sir! we're ready!! (Read, 2021)

President Trump is calling us to FIGHT. (United States of America v. Bruno Cua, 2021)

AXIAL CODES

The next stage in the coding process was determining the axial codes. To determine the axial codes, I further examined the causal relationships between the open codes and their properties using the method described in the preceding section. Using this method, I grouped the six open codes into three axial codes. The three axial codes were: militarism, patriotism, and election fraud. Within the category of militarism, I placed the open codes of military tactics, civil war, and enemies. In the category of nationalism, I placed the open codes of patriotism, civil war, and enemies. The final category was election fraud, and I placed the open codes of President Trump and rectifying an injustice.

SELECTIVE CODE

The final stage in the open coding process is selective coding and seeks to identify a common theme running through the data. The data suggested a selective code of sectarian violence, consisting of two parts: political sectarianism and violence. More information will be provided regarding sectarian violence and how I arrived at that theme in the following section. **Table 1** provides a breakdown of the codes used in this project.

DISCUSSION

This section considers each of the three axial codes (i.e., militarism, election fraud, patriotism) with emphasis to the axis of patriotism. The section also investigates the selective code (i.e., sectarian violence), including how it

OPEN CODES (AND PROPERTIES)	AXIAL CODES	SELECTIVE CODE
Military tactics (shooting, assault a building, flash bangs, rubber bullets, CS Gas, combat, fighting, physical force), enemies (pure evil, treason, the left, Mike Pence), civil war (war, division, armed conflict, revolution, disregard of the Constitution)	Militarism	Sectarian Violence
Patriots (love of country, ready to fight, skilled, loyal, liberty)	Patriotism	
Trump, Election Fraud (calling us to fight, save our country, the Deep State, antifa, stop the steal, election fraud)	Election Fraud	

Table 1 Coding Scheme from Participant Comments.

relates to patriotism, and some potential implications of that finding.

The first set of themes (i.e., military tactics, identifying an enemy, civil war) relate to the military backgrounds of the participants. All veterans had been trained in the use of military force, with 44% having been deployed to a combat zone. The United States has been on a wartime footing for the past 18 years, so it is not surprising that many of these veterans, who had been conditioned to locate and engage with an enemy, used that language in their comments surrounding the Capitol Riot. Several participants indicated how their exposure to violent action in the past motivated their willingness to do so again. For example, one participant, a former Navy SEAL, stated,

If [Trump is] pushed out of office fraudulently, then we'll see how things go from there. But I'm absolutely not above going to war. Done it before. Reluctantly, I'll do it again. But I won't hesitate. (Correll, 2021)

There is also a possible explanation for the use of violence offered by the distinction between patriotism and nationalism. Druckman (1994) observed that nationalist feelings magnify the propensity for misperception. These feelings influence how others are defined and the nature of desirable action. They lead to "bad faith" images (Larson, 1988), "ethnocentric bias" (Druckman, 1968), or "partisan bias" (Fisher & Brown, 1988) in which others' actions are evaluated on whether they are a friend or an enemy.

G. H. Mead in his 1929 essay "International Mindedness," also spoke of the power that having a common enemy played in uniting a group. Mead provided a thought experiment to prove this point:

Gather ten or fifteen of your acquaintances and make the subject of your conversation the admirable qualities and services of someone known to all. Then change the subject of converse to someone for whom all have a common dislike and note how much warmer is the sense of at-oneness of those who are engaged in common disparagement than in encomium. (p. 393)

Another possible explanation for the enemies and civil war comments comes from a theory posited by Silverstein and Holt (1989) that focuses on the importance of identifying a clear enemy to justify waging war. According to their "folk theory of war," politics is a contest between good and evil and the world is composed of "dichotomous certainty without ambiguity." (p. 47) Thus, evil is the work of one's

enemies. When two groups both hold this polarized view of the other, such thinking reduces interest in interaction, increases perceptions of threat, leads to distrust, and creates a win-lose orientation in attempts at conflict resolution.

The next set of themes (i.e., rectifying an injustice, Donald Trump) center on the idea of election fraud in the 2020 US Presidential Election. One cannot ignore the role that former President Donald Trump played in stoking the nationalistic tendencies of these veterans. The literature surrounding patriotism and nationalism suggests that a national leader can play a pivotal role in activating individual patriotism and nationalism. For example, Sullivan et al. (1992) argued that patriotism can be primed or evoked by politicians.

It has also been argued that authoritarian leaders, along with their close advisors, can create conditions that lead to the phenomenon known as group think (Janis, 1989). This is especially prevalent in groups with strong loyalty and cohesion possibly found in groups that associate more essentialist or blind patriotism. In this case, members of the group become excessively protective of the entity, restricting membership to those also loyal to the group, isolating themselves from any information counter to their own image of the group. Moskos (1970), Lynn (1984), and Henderson (1985) have commented on how prevalent this phenomenon is in combat troops, particularly those in front-line positions.

Another possible explanation for the moral indignation of the veterans could come by considering the distinction posed by Brewer et al. (2004) regarding essentialist versus goal-based patriotism. If we consider the veterans who participated as essentialist or exclusionary patriots, the idea of fraud begins to make sense. According to Brewer et al., essentialist patriots tend to focus on intergroup competition and potentially saw the election of a president from a competing party as a threat to their faction within the society.

The final and most relevant theme of the project has to do with the veterans' uses of the word patriot and what that concept meant to them. Most of the veterans' comments regarding patriotism were used to describe themselves or others' participation. However, among those comments, there was a common theme, namely a willingness to fight. It is clear from these comments that an integral part of being a patriot involves fighting or a willingness to fight. Here again, we find Kosterman and Feshbach's (1987) research on the distinctions between nationalism and patriotism useful. As a reminder, nationalism and patriotism both share conceptual and empirical similarities, such as national pride. However, the difference between the two concepts has to do with their intergroup attitudes. Feshbach (1994) found that nationalism takes a more militaristic stance towards other groups, while patriotism is more cooperative.

Similarly, if we consider the alternative understanding of patriotism and nationalism existing on a spectrum, then it is possible to imagine how the competitive environment of the 2020 US Presidential Election, and the priming rhetoric of Trump, could have pushed the veterans towards nationalism. In **Figure 1** we considered five potential points on the spectrum: constructive patriotism, goal-based patriotism, blind patriotism, exclusionary patriotism, and nationalism. In **Table 2**, I have classified some of the participant comments to illustrate those perspectives.

Given that the participant comments fall into all five categories along the spectrum, it's possible that their reference to themselves as patriots could have been based on an accurate account at one point in time. However, most participant comments during the Capitol Riots were more consistent with either exclusionary patriotism and nationalism.

The selective, or unifying, code of this data set is sectarian violence. There are two elements to this code: political sectarianism and violence. Political sectarianism is the tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one

political group and against another (Finkel, 2020). There are three foundational aspects of political sectarianism: othering—the tendency to view those with opposing political views as essentially different to oneself; aversion—disliking and distrusting those with opposing political views; and moralization—viewing the opposition as evil. These three elements taken together makes sectarianism toxic in the public sphere and can make political losses by one's faction feel like existential threats. All these elements were clearly present in the comments made by the veteran participants in this study. For example, one participant remarked,

The Left has morphed into pure evil even blatantly rigging an election and paying off the political caste. (Hsu, 2021)

The second element of the unifying theme, violence, comes from combining the political sectarianism described in the preceding paragraph with the previously described nationalistic tendencies of the veteran participants. As the

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	PARTICIPANT COMMENTS
Constructive Patriotism	Love of country based on the goals and ideals of the nation. No inherent hostility towards outsiders. Constructive patriots are motivated by a desire to improve the nation and therefore criticize the nation when they see fit.	I don't know what we can do, but I'm trying my best to get it done peaceful [sic]. We can't loose [sic] our America .
Goal-Based Patriotism	Love of country is based on the virtue of facing a common problem, having a common purpose, and acting in a coordinated way to achieve shared goals. No inherent hostility towards outsiders.	This is our call to action, friends! See you on the 6th in Washington, DC, along with 2 million other like-minded patriots. I swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic.
Blind Patriotism	Love of country based on ideals of the nation. Blind patriotism does not allow room for criticism and is characterized by an unquestioning loyalty to the nation. Potential hostility towards those who are not loyal to the ideals of the nation.	America has spoken. You cannot stop millions of people. Can't stop it. It's impossible. We give them the power. We give them. The people give the power and we're here to take it back. The President asked for his supporters to be there to attend, and I felt like it was important, because of how much I love this country, to actually be there.
Exclusionary Patriotism	Love of country based on a shared ethnic and cultural heritage. There is an emphasis on maintaining homogeneity within groups and differentiation between groups. Exclusionary patriotism is associated with derogatory attitudes toward other nations and with intolerance for variation from a common cultural standard within the nation.	I see no distinction between a group of Americans seizing power and governing with complete disregard to the Constitution and an invading force ... Against all enemies foreign and domestic If you feel that America is on the right track and there's nothing wrong with gender neutral, don't know which bathroom to use, use whichever bathroom you feel like during the day ... don't buy our coffee 'cause it's not for you.
Nationalism	Nationalism is a love of country based on a shared cultural and ethnic heritage. It is an ideology of national superiority that implies the exclusion or even domination of others. Nationalism has been associated with higher levels of chauvinism, prejudice, militarism, hawkish attitudes, social dominance orientation, and lower levels of internationalism.	How does it feel being a traitor to the country? How does it feel? This is the second revolution right here folks! [...] This is not a peaceful protest. It's President Trump vs. the Deep State and the CCP. He knows this is the only way to save our great country. Every law makers [sic] who breaks their own stupid fucking laws should be dragged out of office and hung .

Table 2 National Pride Spectrum along with Participant Comments.

literature suggests (Brewer, 1999; de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Federico et al., 2005; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Sidanius et al., 1997), those with nationalistic tendencies incline to militarism towards their opposition. In this case, their opposition was the political sect represented by the American political left. Those militaristic tendencies were clearly expressed by the veterans who participated in the Capitol Riots. One such comment was,

We need all the patriots of this country to rally the fuck up and fight for our freedom or it's gone forever. Give us liberty, or give us death. We won't stand for it. (United States of America v. Ryan Taylor Nichols and Nicholas Harkrider, 2021, para. 25)

This intent to commit violence was carried out at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, resulting in five deaths and 140 injuries. Since that event, four Capitol Police Officers have died by suicide.

Finkel et. al (2020) have argued that political sectarianism is on the rise in the US based on three causes. First, the two major US political parties have sorted based on ideological identity and demographics. Self-identified liberals and conservatives used to be more evenly distributed between the two parties. However, in the current political environment, liberals are overwhelmingly Democrats and conservatives are overwhelmingly Republicans. Secondly, as Americans have grown increasingly receptive to consuming information with a partisan bias, the current media environment has exacerbated political sectarianism. Third, there has been an unambiguous polarization among politicians and the political elite based upon ideological grounds. While this has been true on both sides of the aisle, Republican politicians have moved farther to the right than Democratic politicians have moved to the left. This ideological polarization has been motivated in part by tremendous economic inequality in the US, especially in conjunction with candidates becoming increasingly reliant on ideologically extreme donors. As politicians chase campaign dollars, these extreme voices garner disproportionate influence.

There are ominous consequences associated with political sectarianism. One only need look at countless historical examples (e.g., Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, Rwanda) to see the often-deadly impacts. Some of the initial effects include the likelihood that politicians will not represent all of their constituents, but only those of the same political persuasion; utilizing anti-democratic tactics, such as voter suppression, to win elections; and undermining core democratic functions. The Capitol Riots on January 6, 2021, are a perfect example of how political sectarianism can undermine core democratic functions, such as certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Fortunately, there are possible interventions to prevent the US from falling into the types of sectarian violence that plague so many countries. One such intervention would be to rectify individuals' faulty representations of those of a different political persuasion. In the case of the veteran rioters, efforts at reducing the demonization of the political left could have lowered their animosity. Another possibility could be altering social media platforms to encourage more deliberation about the accuracy of individual posts. In this case, if there had been more deliberation regarding the accuracy of the election fraud claims, it could have lowered tensions. A third option would be to create incentives for politicians to reduce their sectarian behaviors, perhaps through campaign finance reform efforts. Research shows that people become less divided after observing politicians treating opposing partisans warmly, and nonpartisan statements from leaders can reduce violence. In the case of the Capitol Riots, imagine how things could have gone differently if former President Trump had congratulated President Biden and made nonpartisan statements regarding the results of the election.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to answer three questions. First, were the motivations and actions of the veterans who participated in the Capitol Riots patriotic? And, if so, in what regards? While it is true that many of the veterans referred to themselves as patriots, their comments were more consistent with the scholarly understanding of nationalism. Those comments indicated a preference for military force, vilifying the opposition, and groupthink. One possible explanation for why the veterans thought of themselves as patriots, but exhibited the behaviors of nationalists, is the notion that patriotism and nationalism exist on a spectrum and that external events can activate the nationalistic impulse.

Secondly, what motivated those veterans to assault the US Capitol? When analyzing the comments made by those individuals, three clear motivations emerged. The first motivation was a proclivity for militarism characterized by using military tactics, identifying and vilifying an enemy, and civil war. The second motivation was the sentiment of patriotism/nationalism marked with a willingness to fight to defend their political sect. The final motivation was the belief in election fraud based upon the rhetoric of former President Trump and groupthink.

And, finally, were there unique characteristics among the veterans that made them more likely to participate than non-veterans? The open code with the most comments was directly related to military experience. Within this category

were comments that reflected military training and combat exposure. As these experiences are largely limited to those who have served in the military, it can be surmised that the training and combat experiences of the veterans would be the key factors that would encourage their participation more than their civilian counterparts. This is particularly true for those who assaulted the building, which requires a level of tactical skill that can only be acquired through military or paramilitary training.

Perhaps the most significant finding of this paper is a danger presented by a combination of the political sectarianism that currently characterizes our society, with the military experience and training of veterans. A competitive environment, like the 2020 US Presidential Election, along with the heated rhetoric of a political leader like Donald Trump, activated the nationalist sentiments of the veteran rioters who were already on the patriotism scale. Tension spiked, combined with the military training and combat exposure of veterans, is a recipe for the type of event that happened on January 6, 2021. While the concept of groupthink was briefly mentioned in this article, it merits further research into its role in motivating the assault on the Capitol.

It should be noted that there are 19 million veterans in the United States. The overwhelming majority of veterans lead productive lives and continue to serve in their communities (National Conference on Citizenship, 2017). Of those 19 million, less than 50 participated in the Capitol Riots, and the analysis and conclusions of this paper relate only to those who participated in the attacks. To attempt to generalize these findings to the entire veteran population would be both methodologically unsound and irresponsible.

With that said, a better understanding of the veteran rioters' motivations suggests strategies to discourage future involvement. First, the research suggests that certain external factors (i.e., competitive intergroup environment, actions of national leaders) can push those veterans towards nationalism. While American politics is becoming increasingly divisive and competitive, national leaders must tread carefully in the way they frame their comments regarding the opposition. Their comments should focus on differences in policies and goals, rather than vilifying and othering the opposition. If the leader frames their comments in a negative light, other respected leaders within the veteran community need to step up and denounce such comments. A perfect illustration would be late Senator John McCain's comments when an individual at a town hall event questioned the ethnic background of his then rival, Barack Obama. The exchange went like this:

I can't trust Obama. I have read about him and he's not ... he's not ... he's an Arab.

No, ma'am. He's a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues. That's what this campaign is all about. (Segarra, 2018)

Secondly, those veterans who participated in the riots were motivated by a strong sense of injustice given the repeated claims that the 2020 Presidential election was stolen. While most of those claims can be directly traced to the 45th President, numerous media outlets also propagated the notion of a fraudulent election. The falsehoods regarding a stolen election have been refuted in dozens of courts at the state and federal level, including the US Supreme Court. Given the divided media ecosystem and the echo chamber of social media, those who serve veterans must find a way to penetrate the groupthink bubble that led to the wide dissemination of this untruth.

Finally, if an environment like the one surrounding the 2020 US Presidential Election should re-occur, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) should consider possible interventions to discourage veteran involvement. One step would be to survey veterans to ascertain their attitudes regarding the political environment. Depending upon the results of that survey, the VA could develop and implement a media campaign designed to de-escalate some of the hostilities. In addition to national mailings, they could work with local hospitals and veteran service providers to supply documents that contain the most factual representation of the situation and discourage the vilification of the political opposition. The VA should also clarify that engaging in illegal behavior could have negative consequences for those receiving veterans' benefits.

NOTE

¹ Clearing a room or space is a military tactic utilized to gain control of a building. It involves going room by room to either ensure that either no one is in the room or using military force to gain control of that space.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Eric B. Hodges
Longwood University, US

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hodges, E. B. (2021). “Storming the Castle.” Examining the Motivations of the Veterans Who Participated in the Capitol Riots. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(3), pp. 46–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i3.274>

Submitted: 04 June 2021 Accepted: 21 October 2021 Published: 02 November 2021

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