



# Reclaiming American Patriotism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Important Mission for Veterans Studies

SPECIAL COLLECTION:  
PATRIOTISM

**RESEARCH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Guest Editor, Bryon L. Garner, introduces his special issue “Patriotism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Beginning with a personal introduction and followed by the impetus beyond the issue’s theme, he then discusses each of the six articles and identifies key themes.

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My earliest memories are seeing my father in his Air Force uniform coming home from Vandenburg Air Force base where he worked as a medic. From the time I was a child, I knew I wanted to serve in the military. While in high school—Lew Wallace High School in Gary, Indiana—my freshman year physical-education teacher was a man named Clarence Day, a World War II veteran whose ship was sunk in battle causing him to become a prisoner of war. On my paper route when I was young, I used to stop and talk with William Robinson, an older Black man who was a steward on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific during World War II. Later, I joined the Navy, just after high school and camped in Jubail, Saudi Arabia, during the Gulf War before returning to Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado, CA. Patriotism wasn't something that was at the front of my mind; I wanted to follow in the footsteps of those before me and took pride in my experiences in the Navy.

The tumult that occurred at the US Capitol building last January 6<sup>th</sup> created an opening for a public discussion about American patriotism. Although so much surrounding that event is admittedly politicized, I have chosen to open the discussion about patriotism in America through the lens of the emerging interdisciplinary discipline of Veterans Studies because, like many of you, I am a veteran. The space we occupy—being both veterans and academic scholars—shapes not only our personal perspectives regarding our research, but also shapes scholarly and public discourse about topics like patriotism that have not, until recently, significantly included the voices of American veterans or their families. Research that analyzed what it means to be patriotic in America has primarily been performed within the social psychology and political science academic disciplines; but, because researchers have often faced challenges engaging with the veteran community, or simply posed their research questions with a particular focus that excluded centering veteran perspectives, existing research lacks the nuance to fully describe what patriotism means in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

America conceptually emerged as an outgrowth of Western European philosophical thinking, which gave rise to a new vision of nationhood. The centering American perspective regarding a community—a nation or country—formed by individuals not sharing a common racial or ethnic ancestry is based on values; a unique conceptualization at the time it was introduced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but one that is also problematic because race, ethnicity, and gender remain critical elements within the conceptualization of nationhood. While our status as veterans lends an added perspective to the discussion of American patriotism, we each have more complex identities than that of just our status as veterans. We each occupy racial, ethnic, and gender identities that also shape our perspectives of life

in America. Existing research illustrates, and the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> make clear, what it means to be a patriot in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century affects: (a) one's perceptions of race, class, and gender as it relates to power and authority, in particular; (b) one's political identity and social perspectives; and (c) one's support of or resistance to existing patriotic narratives.

What does it mean to be patriotic in America, particularly, in an age of extremes? I believe the journey to that answer requires asking for more voices to be included, especially within academic discourse such as Veterans Studies. In the studies that follow in this special issue, key themes such as identity and agency, social change, and commercialism as well as positing individual self in relation to one's compatriots are analyzed as nuanced challenges to existing definitions of American patriotism. The discussion begins with an analysis, "Latinx veterans, outsider patriotism, and the motives behind minoritized military service" by Anita Casavantes Bradford, who conducted a study including Latinx veterans illustrating the how patriotism, citizenship, and inclusiveness are centered within their experiences. She describes the concept of "outsider patriotism," which reflects her participants' experiences resolving their love for America with their racialized experiences as both Latinx individuals and military veterans. Resolving aspirational hopes for equality with the reality of a racialized experience in America is also discussed in "Patriotism: The price paid by the African American soldier" by Tina Craddock. Craddock provides a case studies analysis of seven Black veterans who described their personal experiences and whether their experiences shaped their perceptions of patriotism.

Another important perspective regarding identity, agency, and social change is Vanessa Meade's analysis of LGBTQ+ military experiences in "Patriotism as a construction for understanding military service among LGBTQ+ veterans: A call for research grounded in institutional oppression." The importance of each of these studies is revealed in the fact that each challenge hegemonic definitions of patriotism with the intention of broadening the existing patriotic frame of reference.

American public perceptions of veterans shapes how patriotism operates politically and commercially. Eric Hodges examines culturally hegemonic language and practices in "Storming the castle. Examining the motivations of the veterans who participated in the Capitol Riots." He highlights the challenges distinguishing between patriotism and nationalism in America based upon a framework of personal motivations. Brandy Fox in "What Can reactions to veteran suicide tell us about patriotism in the United States," conducted a study that examined the personal cost on veterans dealing with negative or misinformed public perceptions about veterans and the

psychological toll of war experiences. In “Patriotism as a lifestyle (brand),” John Armenta examines military veterans commercializing their status. These studies are intended to open the scholarly discussion about American patriotism because to date, little research has centered veteran voices and, particularly, the nuances of the veteran experience by racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identity.

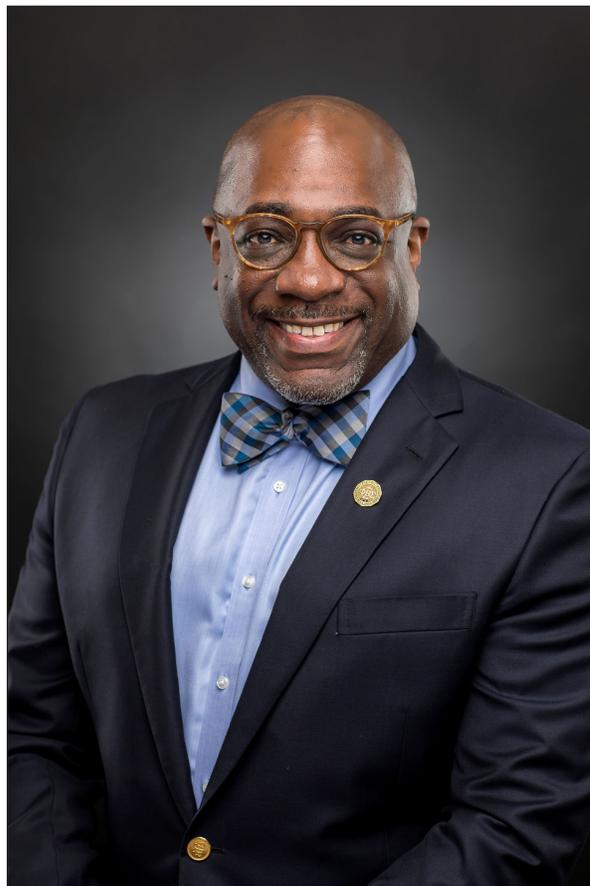
The relationship between patriotism and identity has seemingly been assumed to be monolithic by researchers to date. In the discussions that follow, we find that the relationship is, at times, paradoxical but certainly complex, as veterans grapple with their individual experiences within the context of a culturally normative phenomenon. I invite you to continue this conversation both here at the *Journal of Veteran Studies* and, especially, on my blog, [www.heritagephenomenon.com](http://www.heritagephenomenon.com).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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