"There is no way I will deploy to Afghanistan. The occupation is immoral and unjust. It does not make the American people any safer. It has the opposite effect." With this, Fort Hood, Texas-based Army Specialist Victor Agosto went to his 2009 trial, where he received 30 days in jail and a dishonorable discharge. Sergeant Travis Bishop, also based at Fort Hood, refused orders to Afghanistan at the same time and is still imprisoned at the Fort Lewis, WA stockade serving a one year sentence. “I don’t want to be killing innocent people,” Cliff Cornell wrote as he refused orders to Iraq in 2005. He was deported from Canada last year to face charges in the US and was imprisoned for almost a year at the Fort Stewart, Georgia stockade. Matt Lowell, a soldier in the US Army who refused deployment to Iraq and is currently living in Canada, explains his desertion: “I can still look myself in the mirror. I didn’t have to shoot who’s doing exactly what I joined the military to do, to defend their country.” These are just a few of the voices of war resisters, some of the thousands who have silently or publicly broken rank in opposition to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite the many ways that members of the Armed Forces speak and act in opposition to war, we find ourselves surprised and somewhat confused by their actions. Soldiers refusing to fight? Isn’t that an oxymoron? Aren’t soldiers supposed to fight? Doesn’t that go against the whole culture of the military?

These responses are not accidental: they are the result of the history we have learned and the way that history has been written. History shapes both identity and culture, and thus those who control and define history have a strong hand in controlling and defining cultural values. This is especially true of military history and military culture.

The study of war is one of the most popular fields of history, producing countless books, movies, plays, and pieces of art. Conventional military history is full of decisive battles, stoic Generals, dead heroes, and great victory celebrations. These versions of history, tell us where the guns were fired, who fired them, and which army “won” the battles. Rarely, however, do we dig beneath the surface and find out anything more: Who were the soldiers? Why were they serving? What issues did they face? How did they feel about the war? What became of them afterward?

Wars are not just battles and flashes, they are the stories of millions of lives cut short. And they
are full of soldiers who found themselves in a hell they didn't wish to see, of young people who were forced to fight for something they often didn't believe in, of people facing an enemy they didn't believe was guilty of anything. When we open this hidden history, we find a whole complex world of politics.

Dating back to the Ancient Roman draft resistance movement, we find draftees and soldiers in every war who stood up to illegal and immoral policies, who refused to serve in wars that violated their basic principles, who resisted from within the ranks or deserted from an unjust government's army. We also find some, like the 30,000 deserters from the Nazi army who joined the French resistance, who switched sides and fought alongside their supposed enemies. Not only have soldiers always resisted wars, but from the radical democratic debates of the “Leveller” soldiers in the English Civil War of the 1640s to the Serbian soldiers who refused to fire on the crowds overthrowing Milošević in 1999, they have also played pivotal roles in social movements around the world. When the great railroad strike of 1877 broke out in the streets of Baltimore, half of the National Guardsmen deployed to repress the strikers deserted and joined the crowds. This trend continued as the strike spread across the country, with major acts of military resistance occurring across Pennsylvania and Ohio. In some instances, Guardsmen turned their weapons over to strikers. Many had families and friends in the crowds, others just sympathized with their demands for better wages and living conditions. It was largely poor Irish soldiers who led these rebellious National Guardsmen, perhaps in part because they had a history to live up to. Their grandfathers had led a group of hundreds of mostly-Irish soldiers drafted into the US Army who deserted during the Mexican-American War and fought with the Mexicans against American aggression. Those who fought with the San Patricios, or St. Patrick's Battalion, are still celebrated as heroes all over Mexico.

Not long after the war with Mexico, Indian soldiers serving under British rule in the Bengal Army set off a rebellion that grew to involve nearly 45 million people. What began as a dispute over the use of rifle cartridges that were greased with pig fat turned into a full-scale rebellion against British rule, with soldiers killing their officers, opening prisons, and seizing the arsenal at Delhi. “The Great Rebellion” soon spread across the country. Although it was one of the largest uprisings of the 19th century, brutal repression on the part of the British and disorganization among the rebels made it short-lived.

As the Great Rebellion's leaders were being hung, the US was beginning a countdown to civil war. We learn today that this war was a fight between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces. While most African American soldiers fought with the sole motivation of ending slavery, as did many while allies—like my ancestor Elwood Harvey, an Underground Railroad organizer and soldier—this is only a part of the story.

In conventional military history, we usually explain why wars are fought from the perspective of the heads of state on either side, or what we perceive to be the general sentiment in society. This
leads to a very simplified understanding of conflict and the phenomenon of war. But when we take a real close look at the personal, political, and economic motivations of the actual soldiers involved, we often find a third history, full of paradoxes and complexities. These are the important stories to look at if we want to seriously understand the factors involved in preventing or stopping wars.

For example, the story of abolitionists enlisting to eradicate slavery is taught in most schools as the general story of the Civil War: anti-slavery northerners against pro-slavery southerners. But what is seldom taught is how little of the white South was comprised of slave owners. Only one third of Southern families (not individuals) owned slaves, and class tensions ran high in the Southern armies against this slave-owning class. Northern soldiers were often poor draftees who saw the war not as a pro-slavery/anti-slavery fight, but as a fight between two groups of elite men using poor soldiers to protect their property and investments. Thus soldiers from the North and South found far more in common with each other than with their respective leaders. James Dinkins, a Confederate soldier from Northern Virginia, wrote that “the war could have been over in ten days if the question had been left to the soldiers.” Similarly, a Union soldier from Wisconsin wrote “If the settlement of this war was left to the Enlisted men on both sides we would soon go home.” It was very common for soldiers from the opposing army to visit each other’s camps in delegations to play cards, trade alcohol, or even go swimming on hot days in a creek or river, or for one line to yell to the other side to get down when they were about to fire on them. They didn’t want to kill friends. The befriending of the “enemy” is always dangerous for generals and politicians, as it has the potential to turn soldiers against their often oppressive and demoralizing command structures. For instance, when the US invaded the Philippines in 1898, many black soldiers, like the San Patricios before them, deserted to join ranks with the indigenous guerrilla army of Emilio Aguinaldo.

Similarly during the early days of World War One, hundreds of soldiers from the French, Scottish, and German armies laid down their weapons to drink, play games, and celebrate Christmas together. The 1914 “Christmas Truce” lasted for days before the units were broken up and dispersed to other parts of the front. Similar truces happened up and down the front and are said to have been repeated on a smaller scale in 1915 and 1916. In 1917, the war would change drastically, and it was not the generals but their mutinous soldiers who would force the change. Mass resistance to World War One by the sailors and soldiers of Russia drove the 1917 revolution, pushing the Czar out of power and the Russians out of the war. French sailors refusing to fight prevented the French from invading the new Socialist Russia. Mass resistance within the British military, including incidents of combat refusal, armed mutiny, and fraternization with the ‘enemy,’ helped stop the British from further escalating conflict with Russia. In 1919, sailors and soldiers in the German military led a revolution that overthrew the monarchy and ended Germany’s participation in the ‘Great War.' Thousands of miles away, British soldiers under April Lord Allenby were refusing to fight during a large rebellion in occupied Egypt challenging British rule.

In the summer of 1921, Indian soldiers drafted into the British Imperial Army were deserting and joining the ranks of the Non-Cooperation movement, led in part by Gandhi, who was calling for
soldiers to refuse to fight. That same year, thousands of American World War One veterans, organized under the United Mine Workers, faced off with the coal barons at Blair Mountain in Mingo County, West Virginia, in perhaps the most militant and bloody labor conflict in US history. In 1932, thousands of angry “Great War” veterans erected a tent city in Washington D.C. to demand back pay that the federal government had failed to give them. The “Bonus Army,” as the movement was called, was addressed by a new hero of military-resistance, the highest-ranking Marine in US history at the time, General Smedley Butler. His War is a Racket, published in 1935, stands as one of the most critical and authoritative documents against war and aggression written from within the ranks of a military.

World War Two, “The Good War,” has often been couched in historical narratives that confuse the motives for fighting the war with the effects of fighting the war. These narratives lead us to assume that a war with good motives is a “good war.” Not only are the bodies usually hidden from view, but often the daily lives of the soldiers are as well. We don’t hear that when the Nazis were pushed from Paris, black soldiers in the Tirailleurs Senegalais, the West African soldiers who made up 65 percent of the French forces, were not allowed to march in the “liberation” parade. Instead, Spanish soldiers and light-skinned soldiers from Morocco and Syria were picked to march to give an “all-white” appearance at the behest of the Americans and their French counterparts. Black soldiers from the United States fought fascism from within a segregated, Jim Crow, army, and drove a movement for racial and economic justice that was very prevalent in the military culture during World War Two, often articulating itself through desertion, fights, and riots. The movement led to the largest single mutiny in US history at Port Chicago, California. After hundreds of sailors refused to go back to work; many were court-martialed for their act of refusal. The black experience in World War Two was a major cultural factor in the explosion of the Civil Rights movement right as the war came to an end.

We don’t usually hear about the movement that erupted across the South Pacific, Hawaii, and in the United States at the end of the war, when tens of thousands of US soldiers demanded to be taken home immediately, contrary to their government’s plan to leave them deployed across the globe to flex America’s new geopolitical strength. Major unions threatened to strike until the troops came home: “the Akron Industrial Union Council…gives support to the millions of workers in uniform who long for peace, for home, and for a return to a normal life…are in full accord with the demonstrating soldiers who protest against being used to protect the wealth and foreign properties of such antilabor corporations as Standard Oil and General Motors.” In late 1945 and early 1946, 4,000 troops marched on-base in the Philippines, 1,000 booed down officers at Andrews Field (now Andrews Air Force Base) in Maryland, 5,000 marched on Frankfurt Germany, 15,000 at Hickman Field in Honolulu, and 5,000 in Calcutta, India. This successful movement led to the speedy return of much of the US military from the South Pacific and Europe.

As the US soldiers were marching through Calcutta demanding demobilization, Indian soldiers were joining the civilian movement organizing for independence from Britain. And although there are many volumes written on Gandhi’s pacifism and the movement he helped lead, few give credit to the large-scale and somewhat violent mutiny by Indian sailors serving in the Royal Navy that
consumed 22 ships in Bombay harbor in 1947 before spilling onto the land. It was this rebellion that would set off the chain of events that finally pushed the British out of India. The sailors organized under a Naval Central Strike Command, demanding among other things, a withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia, where Britain’s invasion was being hampered by Indian soldiers switching sides and fighting alongside the Indonesian guerrillas.

As the imperial power of Britain, Portugal, and France was swept aside by the guerrilla armies of Southeast Asia and Africa, these colonial powers called on the US for support. It was in this context that the US military entered Vietnam in the early 1950s, following the French defeat by the guerilla armies of Ho Chi Minh. By 1965, the US was engulfed in one its worst nightmares. Throughout the course of the Vietnam War (or the American War as the Vietnamese call it), military resistance grew steadily, with 10 percent of the US military deserting or going AWOL and mass incidents of combat refusal, draft-resistance, refusals to deploy and on-base protests and sit-ins occurring. Troops marched on bases throughout the US and joined mass demonstrations in major cities. They printed over 300 anti-war newspapers on or near bases, wrote petitions, and opened coffeehouses outside of bases to mobilize anti-war sentiment among the troops. Organizations like the American Servicemen's Union swelled to 20,000 members. Imprisoned war-resisters and rebellious GIs rioted and burned military-prions in Vietnam at Fort Díx, NJ, and at the Presidio Stockade in San Francisco.

On the ground in Vietnam, nearly 300 incidents of “fragging”—the killing of commanding officers—were reported over the course of the war; in all likelihood many more occurred and went unreported. In later years of the war, the US could no longer rely on ground troops, leading to an increased reliance on aerial bombings. In response, sailors demobilized three aircraft carriers through small acts of sabotage, and soldiers in intelligence units purposely sent incorrect data to pilots to save lives on the ground.

When the soldiers returned home from Vietnam, they organized under Vietnam Veterans Against the War—which had a membership of over 25,000—to continue their anti-war efforts. But they didn’t just organize for a withdrawal from Vietnam, they joined movements at home fighting for social and economic justice. Many leaders of the Black Panther Party, including former Sergeant Jeronimo Pratt, John Huggins, and Ed Poindexter, fought in Vietnam. Many of their allies in the American Indian Movement (AIM), such as Buddy LaMont, Roger Iron Cloud, and Marty Firerider, did as well. When AIM’s movement for Indian rights and justice culminated in the occupation of Wounded Knee, Vietnam veterans played a key role in defending and bringing them supplies.

In his 1971 red alert, “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr. wrote: “By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous.” By the mid-70s, this GI movement defeated the draft and was a major force in bringing the Vietnam War to an end. It
also radically altered the domestic and international reputation of the United States military.

While the US was trying to power-wash the stains of Vietnam away, the imperial powers were violently confronting resistance to apartheid and colonialism in the southern tip of Africa. The Portuguese were losing the liberation war waged by the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, and were facing a similar defeat in Angola by the guerilla armies of The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

But what would trouble Portugal more than their enemies turned out to be their own soldiers. By 1974, resistance to the Portuguese colonial wars and the fascist government in Lisbon was boiling within the Portuguese military. That year soldiers had held open meetings, handed out leaflets, published their own newspapers, held work-stoppages, refused to break civilian strikes, publicly refused to deploy to the African colonies, and sabotaged their own vehicles. In January 1975, the entire infantry battalion 4911 refused to go to Angola and called for support of the MPLA. A month later, soldiers from the Fifth Infantry Division sent their own agitators to the countryside to talk to people about overthrowing fascism. Soldiers also joined the ranks of underground urban guerrilla groups like the League of Union and Revolutionary Action and the Revolutionary Brigades, who carried out attacks on military bases and bombed ships.

When one of the most rebellious units, the RAL-1, was bombed by Right-wing elements of the army during an attempted coup on March 11th, 1975, civil-society rushed to their defense, and the paratroopers sent in to repress them mutinied. By the end of the day their “Carnation Revolution” brought down the fascist regime. By November, continued activity led to the withdrawal of all Portuguese soldiers from Southern Africa.

Before Portugal’s defeat, the British had been forced out of Angola by the MPLA but still fought against a powerful guerrilla army and an enormous and determined mass social-movement in South Africa. While this movement was mostly fought by and paid-for by black South Africans, white Afrikaner soldiers and allies had launched the Committee on South African War Resistance after the 1975 invasion of Angola to help soldiers who refused to enforce the policies of apartheid. In 1983, Afrikaner conscientious objectors, deserters, military family members, and allies founded the End Conscription Campaign. Their organizing efforts, including mass marches and their newspaper Combat, helped mobilize soldiers and white civil society against the policies of apartheid.

Meanwhile, miles across the Indian Ocean from the west coast of South Africa, Afghan guerilla fighters were up against hundreds of thousands of invading Soviet soldiers in a 10 year occupation. The Afghan War (or "Russia’s Vietnam" as it was called by US officilas) cost Afghanistan the lives of millions of people, and the Russians 15,000 soldiers. This war destroyed much of Afghanistan, and destroyed the minds of many Russian soldiers who fought there. So
effective were the Mujahedin units at guerrilla war that the Russians called them "Dukhi," ghosts. They simply disappeared into the mountains after firing.

One of the major factors that led to the defeat of the Soviet-backed government in Kabul and, by extension, the Soviet Union, was the fact that 80 percent of the Afghan military deserted to the guerrilla Mujahedin fighters. Soviet soldiers also deserted to the Mujahedin; many who were unaccounted for turned up later serving in guerrilla units, fighting in the war against the invaders. In February of 1988, Taras Derevlianty, a Soviet deserter living in the US, publicized an "Address to the Soviet Occupation Troops in Afghanistan," calling on soldiers to refuse to serve. Though other like Derevlianty sought refuge in the United States after the war, many deserters settled in quietly across Afghanistan. One of Kabul's more infamous cab drivers today is a Russian deserter.

Those soldiers who survived the war returned home to a collapsing Soviet Union. Andrei Sakharov was attached to a paratrooper brigade in Afghanistan; “We had no right to be there. We should have known what war meant from losing twenty-seven million people during World War Two. I realized that war only means killing and never makes things better, whether it’s in Vietnam or Korea, Afghanistan or Grenada.”

Competing concepts of “socialism” often fueled the actions of Soviet soldiers, who saw themselves as standing for the ideals of liberation and justice but were being ordered to commit atrocities for an imperial army. Those who took seriously the political teachings of their government ended up standing against it. Soviet soldiers had taken a similar stance years earlier during the 1956 invasion of Hungary, when deserting Soviet soldiers helped lead the street movement against the Soviet troops, joined by deserters from the Hungarian army and armed demonstrators. This was not a new phenomenon but an age-old story. In 1781, members of the Pennsylvania Militia, in a battle to define “democracy,” kidnapped wealthy Philadelphians who were profiting from the Revolutionary War while poor soldiers were starving and freezing to death. Their demands for a minimum and maximum wage were written out of the final state constitution, but their actions serve as a timeless reminder about the dangers of teaching your population one set of ideals while demanding that they enact another.

This theme played out during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as well. Many soldiers thought a military invasion in the name of “securing” and “defending” Israel would have the opposite effect of inciting revenge, or they just outright opposed any military action on Lebanon in general. 3,000 Israeli reservists organized under Soldiers Against Silence and refused to serve. Many veterans of this war went on to become outspoken advocates for peace, participating in the movement against the occupation of Palestine. Yesh Gvul, founded during the war with Lebanon, still organizes to support hundreds of soldiers in the Israeli Defense Forces who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories. These “Refusniks” often spend time in jail and face other legal and social penalties for their courage.
After the 2009 invasion of Gaza, 25 mostly anonymous Israeli soldiers released a document called "Breaking the Silence," exposing war crimes committed by the IDF in Gaza. These soldiers are still speaking out about the atrocities they witnessed, and Israeli soldiers are still standing up against the occupation of Palestine the same way Afrikaner soldiers stood up against apartheid in South Africa. Breaking the Silence, among other things, gives tours led by former soldiers through areas they had previously occupied.

While Israeli soldiers were pouring into Lebanon, and Refuseniks and anti-war demonstrators were pouring into the streets of Israel, soldiers in Saddam Hussein’s military, angry and broken from the war with Iran, began pushing for mass change. Failed mutinies throughout the 1980s laid the seeds for the mass refusal to fight during the US invasion in 1990. As the war with Iran finally wound down, Saddam invaded Kuwait. When the US military intervened, his soldiers refused to fight, and US troops faced no real opposition in their final push over the southern border into Iraq. Saddam’s non-existent army had deserted, but they were gathering forces in towns like Sulaimania, Najaf, Karbala, Kut and Basra, storming government offices and seizing weapons in preparation for a march on Baghdad to topple the dictator. At the same time, deserting soldiers and Kurdish radicals in the North were rallying around a similar plan. And all were expecting American support.

Instead of supporting these popular and largely secular movements, the US backed down from a push on Baghdad and allowed Saddam to violate the established “no-fly zones” to massacre deserters and their families on the highway between Basra and Baghdad. It was more convenient to leave Saddam in power than risk Iraq falling into the hands of powers that might not fit into the US government’s global strategy. In the north, the US had turned a blind-eye as Saddam’s forces dropped poison gas on Kurdish civilians and mutinous Iraqi troops in 1988, and did so again in 1991, as soldiers loyal to Saddam massacred military resisters. US officials had no problems with these horrific war-crimes until it became a convenient excuse to invade and occupy Iraq in 2003, to overthrow a dictator they had left in power 12 years earlier. This occupation, along with the occupation of Afghanistan, will soon be the longest war in US history.

Today, many members of the US military see through the facades of US foreign policy. Hundreds of deserters from the United States military have fled to Canada, and many more live “underground” within the US, working under-the-table jobs or not working at all. Some live amongst activists and anti-war veterans, others live in and out of homeless shelters. As well as deserters, there are thousands of conscientious objectors who were able to legally break rank and resist deployments. Alongside them are dozens of troops who have publicly refused to fight, some serving a year in prison for their actions.

And then there are the thousands of active-duty troops and veterans who speak out and organize
daily against these occupations. These brave people are part of organizations like the nearly 2,000 strong Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), a national organization that includes anyone who has served in any branch of the US military since 9/11. IVAW has chapters all over the US, including on several military bases. Their 2007 Winter Soldier hearings in Washington, D.C. brought hundreds of veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq together for a week of testimonies about the realities on the ground in these occupations, and strengthened their capacity as a viable anti-war force. Their work helped turn the tide on public support for the occupations, and has helped catalyze a growing demand from within the Armed Forces for an immediate withdrawal from the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Many of those who publicly refuse to fight, most of whom are also IVAW members, work with Courage to Resist, an organization co-founded by Jeff Patterson, the first soldier to publicly refuse to deploy to Operation Desert Storm in 1990. Courage defends and supports troops who refuse to fight or those that raise their voices from within the ranks. Their defense campaign for Lt. Ehren Watada, the first US officer to publicly refuse to serve in Iraq, made headlines in mid-2006. Since then, they have helped defend dozens of service members who have refused to fight.

The work these organizations do is part of a long and vibrant history of military resistance that has sought peace and justice during times of war. It is important for us to understand and relay this history because it affects the culture of the military and influences the actions of its members, and because making this history visible does justice to all those who have broken rank against injustice.

The history of soldiers speaking and acting out against war shows another side of militarism: the side of individual conscience and collective transformation amongst those being forced to carry out wars. Looking at this history reveals that soldiers in resistance are strategically positioned to transform society: by withholding their labor or redefining who their enemies are, they can literally bring wars and governments to a grinding halt, as well as directly supporting social movements for positive change.

It also reveals that there is more to human history than violence and war: resistance and personal transformation for peace and justice are also built into the human fabric. This capacity is vitally important for how we understand social movements, as well as ourselves.

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