

## CHAPTER 3

### *Militia Masculinity: Protectors of Country, Family, and LGBT Populations?*

'This is more than a group of guys who get together and play GI Joe. This is about family, it's about community, it's about people.'

- 47 year old Adam

U.S. history is replete with male-only organizations including the Boy Scouts that support the explicit goal of "fostering manly strength [while countering] corrupting and debilitating effects of urbanization and social change" (MacLeod 1982:3). Organizations like this continue to foster self-conceptions that conform to traditional gender stereotypes (Denny 2011; Mechling 2001). At first glance, it would appear that citizens' militias, comprised largely of patriotic white men who want to return to an originalist interpretation of the Constitution, would be a successor to this lineage.

Militia men are accordingly often described as subscribing to a hegemonic masculinity that resists social change and equality for other groups, including women (e.g., Ferber 1999). As I discovered in fieldwork with the Michigan militia, however, masculinity is more complex than this portrayal would allow. Militia men do reference a hegemonic masculinity that values toughness and independence when asked to describe their reasons for joining the organization, but they *enact* a much more emotive and untraditional masculinity in the field. This masculinity expresses acceptance of affection between men and even acceptance of transgendered individuals.

## WHITE, AMERICAN MASCULINITY

There is a large body of scholarship on how masculinity, like femininity, is a fluid construct. It is time and context dependent (e.g., Gutmann 1996; Tomsen 1997), varies across socioeconomic classes (e.g., Messerschmidt 1993) and racial groups (e.g., Staples 1982), and, as R. W. Connell notes, "different masculinities are produced in the same cultural or institutional setting" (Connell 2005:36). Most scholars nonetheless agree that in each time and place there is some version of hegemonic masculinity toward which men feel pressured to aspire (see Connell 2005; Mosse 1998; Nagel 2004).

Some authors (e.g., Connell 2005) are critical of attempts to define masculinity in essentialist or positivistic terms. They rightly note that with such variation in masculinity, it is difficult to claim that men truly "are" a certain way, or that their particular behaviors in one context are really masculinity's defining features. What is sometimes overlooked in these critiques, however, is that men often conceptualize themselves in these terms. In this context, it becomes important to understand how men represent their masculinities, and to understand the foundational stories they reference in these representations.

The hegemonic masculinity that is prevalent in America's mythos is that of a physically and mentally tough, independent man who provides for his family. Early in this nation's history, the definition of "male" was rooted in property ownership—especially land ownership—and had substantial overlap with understandings of whiteness (Garner 2007). Ownership was a real as well as symbolic indicator of independence and responsibility in an era where slavery, indentured servitude, and share cropping were common (*ibid.*). The taming and conquering of the land, as well as the native peoples who possessed it, using innate toughness and hard-earned resources was indicative of

essential manhood (Cronon 2003). Firearms become important characters in these stories as they helped men fulfill the roles of conquering the frontier and providing for their families.

The Revolutionary War was a break from England's paternalistic monarchy and a clear indication of early colonists' desire to demonstrate independence and self-sufficiency. Tales from this time period take on a mythic status, glorifying the role of men-as-warriors at the nation's founding (Gibson 1994; Kohn 2004; Mulloy 2008). As Susan Faludi notes, war is "federal masculinity insurance" (2000:25), and provides men with a model of what nationalized manhood looks like. Women are rarely mentioned at all in these tales, and when they are, they are supporting cast members to the men who are doing the "real" work.

The key marker for manliness shifted to economic success following the Industrial Revolution when many people moved to cities to participate in the nation's changing markets. Reminiscent of Max Weber's (1905) writings on the Protestant Work Ethic, sociologist Michael Kimmel says economic success as a goal in itself led to the notion of "self-made" (2005:9) men, whose personal success or failure was judged by their ability to climb the economic hierarchy. In the post-Civil War era, large factories were still the prevailing industrial force, but few owned their own means of production and upward mobility was increasingly difficult.

As Kimmel notes "masculinity was experienced as increasingly difficult to prove" (2005:100) as other groups entered what was supposed to be the white, male proving ground. These men experienced nostalgia for past, supposedly simpler times (Coontz 2000), and there was a return to activities in the "rugged outdoors" as a way to not only

demonstrate, but relearn a traditional masculinity (Kimmel 2005:135). Private male-only clubs and other organizations including the Boy Scouts, founded in 1910, were started with the explicit goal of "fostering manly strength [while countering] corrupting and debilitating effects of urbanization and social change" (MacLeod 1982:3). American studies professor Jay Mechling's (2001) study of the modern Boy Scouts illustrates how these notions of instilling manliness are still central to this organization today.

Around the same time these male clubs were starting, enlistment in WWI provided a more conventional way to again enact a traditional masculinity, as did participation in new and enlarging job sectors that resulted from the war. WWII soon provided another chance for military participation, and in its wake came various GI Bills assisting men's economic reentry, which had a greater emphasis on higher education than had decades past. Women, who had entered the workforce in great numbers during the war, were strongly encouraged to return to the kitchen so that men could retake their "proper place" in those jobs.

Despite changing standards for masculinity after the war (Faludi 2000), white men's ability to participate in acceptable expressions of masculinity remained relatively unthreatened until the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. Increasing competition on the labor market and changing gendered expectations in the home meant that there were fewer outlets for expressing traditional masculinity. The early stages of heavy U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War probably appeared to be a way to normatively participate in this arena again. As James Gibson notes, "America has always had a war culture" (1994:16), and the nation's historical record of military involvement implicates not only a traditional masculinity, but a "moral" one (Morgan 2004). That is, a

masculinity that seeks to correct the world's injustices and reflects a certain deservingness to win war through "the country's fundamental goodness and power" (Gibson 1994:10).

Losing Vietnam reflected not only the military's failure, but the impotence of the ideal warrior version of American masculinity that so undergirds the national paradigm. As sociologist Joane Nagel succinctly says, "...These men are not only defending tradition but also defending a particular racial, gendered, and sexual conception of self—a white, male, heterosexual notion of masculine identity..." (2004:407). Though little work has been done on the more recent conflicts in the Middle East and their ambiguous outcomes, the same theme of unfulfilled warriorhood is certainly reflected there as well. It is at this social-historical junction that militia men must grapple with their masculinity.

### **WHY MEN JOIN THE MICHIGAN MILITIA**

I initially set out to understand why militia men professed to join the organization to understand their rationales for being part of this particular movement. However, I realized their expressed reasons could be better understood as a lesson on how they frame masculinity. All reasons fell within four complimentary categories: sense of duty, personal preparedness, comradery, and political expression. All four reasons reference the hegemonic vision of a tough, independent man.

#### **Reason 1: Sense of Duty to Country or to Family**

##### *Duty to Country*

About one-third of the membership and two-thirds of the leadership of the militia have military experience, so it is unsurprising that the most commonly expressed reason (from

17 interviewees) for joining was a sense of duty to country. Walter, a 59 year-old retail worker, states this duty very clearly:

"Part of it is a sense of duty. I was in the Navy for 10 years, and when I joined, I took an oath to protect and defend the Constitution. And there was no time limit on it. To me, this is just the next logical step."

Walter, as many other members, tells me he has "always" felt a duty to serve his country and the Constitution—the document he sees as protecting the country's values and Walter's way of life. Nearly all members had male relatives who served in the military in WWII. Family stories about this war and its global impact are frequent topics of conversation at militia events and help reinforce the image of the U.S. as a moral and technological superpower. Walter sees it not only as a duty to his country, but as part of his legacy, as a duty to his family, to help ensure the values that his forbearers fought for remain intact. For Walter, this is a life-long oath. Once he was honorably discharged, he continued to volunteer in his community in other ways before being drawn to militia membership.

Members like Walter think that militias help the country by providing a civilian supplement to the National Guard. Shortly after the 2010 election, a militia leader joked,

'I heard a rumor the other day that the new Governor intends to cut back on funding to the National Guard. People really shouldn't be upset by this when we're out there, willing to do the same task for free!'

Members do not truly believe they could or should replace the National Guard, but rather that the organizations have two shared goals. The first is assisting local communities in times of disaster. The second is being prepared to assist if the country is ever invaded by foreign forces. Both goals reference the protector archetype, embedded in America's mythic masculinity.

The first goal of assisting communities, which I introduced in Chapter Two, is a practical and achievable one. Militia units around Michigan have assisted local law enforcement in various search and rescue efforts, have participated in clothing drives for underprivileged schools, and have more individually assisted neighbors during snowstorms and blackouts. Forty-seven year old member Calvin, a city worker, told me that he joined the militia because he wanted to share tactical knowledge from his military training with civilians so that they could be better adept at helping their own communities. He believes that military knowledge would help people help themselves during emergencies and would allow first responders to save their resources for more serious situations. Calvin's belief references the mythic masculinity of the independent protector, and he says he wants to instill the importance of that role in others.

The second goal of defending the country's borders against foreign invasion is unrealistic and, at first glance, excessively paranoid. However, it is more accurately understood as a *symbolic* defense of the nation. Most militia members in Michigan recognize that invasion is a remote possibility, and understand that, if it happened, they would be ill-equipped to engage with a real military force. Instead, members see the U.S. as unique and nearly sacred, and they sometimes have difficulty articulating modern fears regarding globalization and the supposed erosion of a "unique," elite national identity. Members feel they have little ability to influence the political and technological developments that increase the U.S.'s involvement with other nations, and thus revert to something more familiar, to scripts that were effective in historical instances of national tribulation. They phrase their angst in terms of a traditional, masculine model of war with a concrete enemy who can be fended off through physical altercations.

The sense of duty to country is very similar for many members who did not have military experience. Jessie noted:

"I did go to college instead of joining the military, unlike most of my family. But I guess I always wanted to get involved in somethin' like this. So now, you know, now I'm 21, I can get all the equipment I need [to be involved in the militia], and so [it's the] best time to do it."

Jessie and two interviewees who could not join the military because of health issues seem to exhibit a sense of guilt about their lack of military involvement. Much of this guilt stems from their seeing military participation as a duty to country as well as family, but Jessie's guilt is apparently amplified by the fact that he was a first-generation college student. Just like many families in Michigan, most of Jessie's had always worked in the auto industry. Historically, most of the auto industry jobs were relatively high-paying with good security and benefits (Vinyard 2011). The industry has suffered in recent years because of increased competition from international car companies and because of the 2008 recession. When Jessie's parents finished high school, there was little need for higher education to obtain a steady job as part of this then-vast industry, and they may still struggle to understand how drastically Michigan's economy and job prospects have changed in recent years.

Anthropologist Kathryn Dudley's (1994) description of Wisconsin auto factory workers' valuation of manual labor over intellectual labor is applicable here; at least some working and lower-middle class workers seem to dismiss non-manual work as not being "real" or respectable labor (also see Goyette and Mullen 2006; Yingyi 2009). Jessie probably felt like he was not living up to his family's work ethic and prescribed masculinity by obtaining a degree and seeking a desk job, instead of one with a high degree of physical effort. During our interview, Jessie talked at length about his father's



and paternal grandfather's military experiences, and it is likely that he felt he was not living up to the hegemonic, masculine ideal that their military experiences embodied. In other words, he may have felt like he was somehow less of a man, and may have even been ridiculed by male family members, for trying to enter a more intellectual career; Jessie spoke wistfully of sitting on the sidelines, unable to participate and be accepted, during his male relatives' holiday bonding sessions over their respective military experiences.

Less than a year after my interview with Jessie, he was laid off as the newest employee in a company that was strained under the continuing recession. He spent two months looking for other jobs before enlisting with the Air Force, despite having severance and unemployment benefits that could have sustained him for several more months. Militia leaders talked about his enlistment with pride, saying, "He's going on to bigger and much cooler things." Jessie's militia involvement did not alone push him to join the military, but it certainly legitimated and reinforced his family's valuing the military as a respectable job option.

### *Duty to Family*

Duty to country is not the only sense of duty that draws members to the militia. Five interviewees said they joined the militia to learn how to better protect their families.

"I feel it's my position to be the protector, the defender. I've always been concerned about you know, my family, making sure that we have what we need when we need it, blah, blah, blah. After we moved out of the city, the power was unreliable because there was a lot of building going on, and I decided, you know, maybe I should get a list together of what we have on hand, what we need on hand should something happen and we're out for an extended period of time. I looked at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov), the American Red Cross site, I looked at a few other sites, and while everyone was real quick

to suggest supplies, nobody was suggesting a way of protecting yourself or your neighbor. So, I went to the one group that I remember from the media who probably knew about weapons [laughs]."

George, a lifelong Michigan resident, sought out the militia for their knowledge about firearms during a period when he was searching for information on how to protect his family from a variety of possible dangers. Extended power outages, natural disasters, accidents, terrorist attacks (in the wake of 9/11), and home invasion all were among his concerns in his new home. George's use of "blah, blah, blah" after explaining his desire to protect his family indicates his awareness of how deeply the protector role is embedded in the dominant masculine script; he did not need to elaborate the parameters of the script because he believed I was already familiar with.

Although a less common theme in interviews than duty to country, duty to family was a regular topic in the field. Militia leaders often discuss how the men who come to training need to think about whether they are prepared to take care of their wives and children—not just themselves—in the event of an emergency. In some ways, leaders are teaching, or at least reinforcing, how to be care-taking fathers and husbands. Members, in accordance with a mythic, American masculinity, feel part of their duty is to teach their family, and especially their kids, to think about preparedness for a variety of situations. Leaders often insist that advancing technology undermines peoples' self-sufficiency and ability to think for themselves, and much of their advice to other members regarding children's preparedness centers on this idea.

At first glance this attitude may seem to be reminiscent of the early literature on nostalgic groups, as regressive, and little more than a knee-jerk reaction to change and progress (for a discussion, see Bennett 1988:6). In actuality, the militia embraces various

forms of technology and simply believes, 'It shouldn't be a replacement for common sense,' as 41 year old Lloyd likes to say. There is friendly competition among members for who has the newest gizmo—a new laser sight, military-style sleeping hammock, or walkie-talkie set. Discussion of these tools and toys is strongly reminiscent of more accepted, masculine car shop discussions of who has the biggest rims or fastest engine. Trainings or meetings essentially stop while everyone gathers around so the new item can be demonstrated in every detail. There are always excited proclamations of, 'Oh man, that's sweet!' and more quiet consultations on where another member could purchase such an item, often followed by yet another's indicating where they saw similar, perhaps lower quality, but more affordable products.

Militia members also enjoy keeping up with computer and cell phone technology. Members who can afford them always have the newest models, much to the obvious envy of some who cannot. Many members around the state, including four of my interviewees, are employed as computer specialists, and SMVM was one of the first militias in the nation to have a presence on YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and other websites. None of this seems to be the behavior of a group who opposes technological advancement. Their warnings about technology and preparedness instead have a practical, and usually realistic, goal, as exemplified in this quote where Lloyd encourages members to avoid overreliance on technology and think about their children's safety:

'Most of my kids have cell phones. Most of your kids probably have cell phones. Make sure they still memorize important phone numbers. With the way you program in everything these days, half the people out there probably don't even know their *own* number! You don't have to remember anything anymore! Be sure the kids at least know your cell number, your work number, in case something happens. Write it down on a piece of paper and make them keep it in their backpack.'

## **Reason 2: Personal Preparedness**

The second reason interviewees said they joined the militia was for their own preparedness (from eight interviewees). This category is distinct from the first, most common reason for militia participation, where members feel a kind of altruistic or civic duty to be prepared on behalf of others. Members who say they were interested in their own preparedness do not invoke protecting the country or loved ones. Instead, they say they are motivated by their own safety, or by a desire to improve their own preparedness skill set.

Twenty-four year old Freddie, a cable TV technician, for example, remembers an armed robber breaking into his parents' home at Christmas when he was a toddler. He said this experience gave him a life-long desire to be prepared and study survival skills for a variety of scenarios.

"I mean, I'm not living in fear and worried, but...I have just enough fear to be aware that these things happen, to want to be prepared."

Another member prioritizing personal preparedness is a widower, whose wife died from unexpected complications during surgery, just a few months after giving birth to the couple's only child. Yet another stumbled upon his mother's gruesome murder scene—a case that is still unsolved ten years later. Regarding his militia participation, he said:

"Well, I've always been an independent, self-sufficient person, and I thought that maybe I could learn how to be better towards that end, you know, from these guys."

None of the above three members indicated that their traumatic experiences led to their militia involvement. However, it is interesting that all three traumatic events involve threats to hegemonic masculinity. Each event represents an instance where the man in question was powerless to protect his family and prevent victimization. It is probably

unreasonable to attribute their militia membership to these events alone, but militia involvement does give these men a sense of personal security and masculine affirmation that was denied in these traumas.

The remaining five interviewees who mentioned personal preparedness did not reveal any similarly traumatic events in their life that might contribute to their militia involvement, but notably, these members are among those most likely to espouse some of the traditional conspiracy theories prevalent in the militias of the 1990s. This, too, seems to indicate some individual insecurity that leaves these members searching for a source of personal support. Fifty-two year old Daryl provides an example of this. His concern is rooted in a sense of losing socioeconomic footing that seems, in his broader interview, to reflect both a worry about his ability to continue to be a traditional, male provider for his family, and a distrust of the government:

"I would say they're all just on the same agenda. I mean if you look at it, you had President Clinton who set up executive orders for George Bush to give him plenty of power if he needed to shut down the air waves— [freedom of] speech—if he needed to declare Martial Law. And then you had George Bush. He just set everything up, executive orders for Obama so he can carry on the agenda, which is, to me, is the New World Order, which is globalization. They want to turn everything into a big corporation. And I think they wanna get rid of the middle class. And I don't care if they're rich and wanna be rich. Leave us alone and let us have a chance to, to prosper the way we want to, you know? I mean they've got all the money they want. Why do they have to have the rule to make everybody slaves? You know, we don't want to be slaves."

Daryl sees himself as speaking on behalf of a threatened middle-class, though it is dubious whether he can claim that position in the class hierarchy with his low-level, dangerous, automotive industry job. As with many working-class men who do not know the intricacies of politics, only its stories of corruption (Halle 1984), he says he sees Democrat and Republican elites working toward the same "agenda" to engage in class

warfare. A more accurate description may be that Daryl, just as many other men in his position, feels threatened by governmental policy he cannot control or influence, which in turn threatens his to provide for his family and to choose the job he wants, and makes him into an economic "slave."

### **Reason 3: Comradery**

The third stated reason for joining the militia is rooted in the search for a different kind of support: a sense of belonging or comradery. Ten interviewees mentioned this reason. As 30 year old Mark very clearly said, "One day I realized that I always belonged here, I just didn't know it." Those members who have been involved for five years or more, like Lloyd, are especially likely to perceive substantial commonalities among other members.

"These are just some interesting things I have noticed over the years. The percentage of people involved in the Militia that are left-handed, or ambidextrous is disproportionately higher than the general population. The people involved in the militia that have had to work with their hands on things that require attention to detail like models, or painting little war game miniatures, or electronics is very much disproportionately higher than the general population. I have been at several meetings, more staff type meetings we had, you know, 9 or 10 people there. The number, of those people at those staff type meetings that have blue eyes is far, grossly disproportionate to the rest of the population. Not all of us, but there is a large percentage of science fiction fans. We tend to be gadgety—you'll find we have a greater interest in high tech stuff. We're very technically addicted. I think a Militia guy will read *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics* far much more than just about anything else. There of course is a big history interest but I mean, that's almost an automatic. You could get a paper out of that right there."

It is not uncommon that members of any social group feel connected to one another, but some of these characterizations have a near-mystical quality that seems unusual. It is true, however, that more than 10% (the estimated proportion of left-handed people in the general population) of the SMVM leadership are left-handed and that many have blue

eyes. Some militia members interpret these commonalities to mean there is something intangible yet meaningful that bonds them together.

Other markers such as a common interest in history are, as Lloyd says, easier to explain. Militia men are nearly uniformly invested in the mythologized story of the nation's inception and its founders, and enjoy watching and comparing notes on History Channel shows regarding these topics. Many men similarly enjoy the Military Channel and similar shows that detail large, risky, or cunning military maneuvers of past conflicts. Training leaders sometimes draws on these events for the elaborate back stories he creates to spark members' imaginations during training.



Figure 10: A militia member plays his harmonica as the group takes a break near the end of a long day of training. Photo by Amy Cooter.

Richard, who is 42 years old, married, and perhaps more circumspect than the average member about his participation laughingly noted, "I want to be part of the militia because it's fun. I like to dress up!" As seriously as members profess to take training, the first time I attended training exercises, I could not help but note how most members seemed to enjoy the process of gearing up as much as the exercises themselves. The head-to-toe camo and gear certainly serve a practical function within the context of militia activity; camo material is the most protective against bug bites, thorn scratches,

and poison ivy, all of which are found in the areas where militias train, and the gear vests keep compasses, rifle magazines, and first aid supplies close at hand.

However, no militia member I have encountered has only the minimum required equipment for their first level of certification<sup>1</sup>. All go to elaborate efforts to have the newest gear, and, as with their other gadgets, the enjoyment they receive from obtaining and using the gear goes beyond the practical. For example, most members have multiple sets of camouflage, usually one in Army green and tan for summer training in the woods and grassy areas, one in white and grey for winter exercises, and sometimes a desert brown pattern, to match sandy training spots, or certain fall training locations. Men who



Figure 11: A member practices a shooting drill as another waits his turn during a frigid February training. Photo by Amy Cooter.

show up in fatigues that do not match the seasonal environment receive a good deal of friendly ridicule, and generally return to next month's training more appropriately attired.

As another example, members qualified for

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<sup>1</sup> SMVM developed Level 1 certification shortly after their founding, and has changed little since that time. Most units in the state as well as militias in other states have adopted these requirements, often with no modifications. To attain Level 1 certification, members are required to have certain gear on their person while doing a two mile walk in less than 45 minutes, and to be able to hit eight out of ten shots on an eight inch paper plate from 100 yards with their rifle. Upon completion, members receive a laminated card with their picture and name (though no membership rosters are kept), and a uniform patch with their militia unit's name. These items are typically handed out during public meetings, and the members who have attained a new level of certification are very briefly recognized and applauded. Level 2 certification requires additional gear, a faster walk, and a tighter shot pattern. SMVM has recently developed a Level 3 for people who want to challenge themselves further, but the details of this level have not yet been officially established.



Level 2 are required to carry several high-calorie military rations called Meals Ready to Eat (MREs). These are sold on Ebay, at Army Supply, and GI Surplus stores, and are quite expensive, ranging from \$5 to \$10 each, depending on the desirability of the contents. Each approximately 20 ounce packet is conspicuously stamped with, "U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY, COMMERCIAL RESALE IS UNLAWFUL," although no law actually exists prohibiting their sale. A few members make their own MREs with home vacuum sealer units, but these expire much faster than the ones commissioned by the government.

The second level of militia certification requires carrying several MREs, ostensibly so the member will have access to food if there is a real emergency and they are stranded or are assisting with some disaster for a few days. Members often consume MREs for lunch during training, however, even though this is a terrible use of resources because of the cost and hassle of purchasing them. Additionally, as Calvin once explained to some members without military experience, MREs are designed to ensure that soldiers in the field do not need to use the bathroom frequently, to 'Plug you up,' as he gleefully proclaims.

Eating MREs in the field is thus not a pleasant experience and must therefore be another symbolic act of participation and bonding. Heating the plastic pouches in boiling water over an open fire and complaining about the taste of the macaroni and cheese meal or lime-flavored, powdered drink mix is part of the theater of militia training—part of "dressing up." It also allows men who ate MREs during military service to relive those days and to enact a certain authenticity necessary for bonding with each other, while extending the same sentimentality to younger members who were not enlisted.

Historian Evelyn Schlatter (2006) and sociologist Richard Mitchell (2002) are two authors who have discussed comradery among members of nostalgic groups—those who reminisce about an idealized past. But one thing that has not been discussed in the previous literature is how many of militia activities are motivated by and oriented toward enjoyment. Camping and target practice are activities at the center of militia activity that are also inherently fun for members. People who have never shot a rifle may underestimate the degree of physical and mental acumen required to do so accurately. Practicing accuracy while making adjustments to the rifle and scope, or while experimenting with different brands of ammunition is not dissimilar from honing one's skills at a sport; indeed, there are dozens of competitive shooting organizations in the U.S., and international competitions including some events at the Olympics include shooting because of the skill required for accuracy and efficiency.

All these forms of fun from firearm proficiency, to camping, to the categories of shared interest that Lloyd mentioned—gadgets, working with your hands, and *Popular Mechanics*—are forms of masculine enactment that reference a "tough" hegemonic masculinity. Firearms were necessary for fighting wars at the beginning of this nation, but also for wrangling the frontier and providing for your family, all of which were traditionally men's jobs. This is reflected in anthropologist Abigail Kohn's commentary on recreational shooters:

"Baby boomers can reengage through ritual what they feel is lost through the over-civilizing processes of obtaining white-collar jobs, Winnebagos, and houses in wealthy neighborhoods. Guns are an integral part of this ritual because guns are the quintessential symbol of "regeneration through violence"—the means to tame the wilderness and ensure a moral victory over decadence and over-civilization" (2004:99).

Camping includes the notion of "getting back to nature" or "roughing it, and proving that you can still survive and be content away from the comforts and conveniences of society. As one militia member regularly comments regarding camping in bad weather, 'Yeah, it was cold. And rainy. Yeah, it sucked. But you can look back and say, "I did that. I accomplished something.'" Another observes, 'The only time I feel like myself is out here.' Working with your hands and being interested in science and technology are also stereotypically male traits. Undoubtedly then, part of the reason these activities over which militia men bond are fun is because they again serve as mutual expressions of hegemonic masculinity.

#### **Reason 4: Political Expression**

This masculinity is rooted in an idealized, mythologized version of national identity. By participating in these fun, manly activities of a group whose stated goal is to defend the nation, some militia men are trying to express that they still uphold the values present at the founding of the country. Members (including eight interviewees) who say they join because they want to make a political statement are then, in effect, trying to remind the government that people remain invested in this particular conceptualization of national identity.

Two interviewees, including 36 year old Curtis, a truck driver, were persuaded to join after President Obama's inauguration:

"I mean I've always had some kind of, you know, wanting to know for myself what the militia is. But this administration just kind of added to my curiosity. This administration's Socialist stance on everything. Communist, whatever you want to call it."

Chapter Four further discusses members' response to Obama, but it is worth noting here that concerns of Socialism and Communism are replete in militia literature from President Clinton's era. This particular commentary is a reflection of militia members' displeasure with the Democratic Party, rather than a codeword (Mendelberg 2001) for Obama's race.

Most of those members citing political motivations for joining the militia had a general disdain for the government that was not directed toward any one political party, as 34 year old Shaun, who works in health care, explains:

"Well, my biggest thing was I felt the government was overstepping their bounds. When I lived in California...to put it bluntly, the *shit* I saw the government do pissed me the fuck off. And so when I moved here, Michigan wasn't as bad, but I saw them following California's lead, which a lot of states are doing. And that's just state governments, that doesn't even include the federal government. I don't think the government knows what the Constitution is anymore. If they followed the Constitution, I probably wouldn't be as active. But they don't, so."

Few of my interviewees identified with a major political party, as described in Chapter One, and most members feel these parties do not represent their nostalgia-driven interests. It is clear not only from interviews but also dialogue at militia functions that most members are concerned about the "direction" the country is going. They are worried that all politicians are increasingly pushing the U.S. farther away from that idealized, originalist vision. Some profess a strong dislike for both major parties, using the derogatory term "Republicrat" to reflect this sentiment. As 50 year old William said, "It's the one-party-divided-into-two-shades political system, okay?" Daryl's quote in the last section regarding losing middle class status exemplifies this notion as well. Interestingly, ideas like William's and Daryl's may reflect an over-simplified view of American politics, but nonetheless challenge statements from sociologist Michelle Fine and her colleagues,

who that say men like this "...refuse to look up and fetishistically only look "down" to discover who stole their edge" (1997:1). Militia men do "look up" and at least partially attribute their economic problems to political leaders and policies

Militia leaders say the very fact that the government knows people are out doing militia training on a regular basis reminds them that, "people are watching." Meaning, people are interested in new laws that impact them, and want to ensure that the government does not act beyond its authority. It is certainly true that law enforcement personnel are aware of the militia and its activities, and there is some evidence that the militia has just the impact here leaders claim it does. The 2009 Department of Homeland Security (Department of Homeland Security 2009) report details a rise in "rightwing extremism," and urges local law enforcement to educate themselves on issues of ideological importance to militia members so that they are better equipped to handle interactions with them, ranging from regular traffic stops to real confrontations.

Only one interviewee referred to the events of Ruby Ridge and Waco as relevant factors in their desire to join the militia, though five others mentioned these events in passing at some point during their interview. Literature that attributes great significance to these events, as described in Chapter Two, is still correct, however. As mentioned in that chapter, most members who are involved today were not involved in the 1990s. Different events of social importance have occurred in the intervening time are likely more salient to newcomers, yet have similar themes of lack of trust in the government and feeling like the government does not represent militia members' political interests.

## MILITIA MASCULINITY

### Hegemonic Masculinity

All four stated reasons for joining the militia are rooted in traditional constructions of masculinity. Men who evoke a sense of duty to country or family are resting on notions of men as warriors and protectors. Those who reference personal preparedness seem to experience some sort of insecurity in the form of a threat or devaluation to these identities. Militia men who say they join because they want to find comradery with like-minded individuals seem to want some affirmation of masculine identity. Men who see their militia involvement as a form of political expression are acting in symbolic defiance of a government they see as pushing the country away from its heritage, which is deeply embedded in the mythos of the traditional, white, U.S. male.

Most militia men would be offended at the notion that they are involved in the militia out of some search for masculine expression. Many nonetheless seem to be referring to this archetype when they take up arms and talk about their responsibility to protect their family and to learn about a variety of methods for doing so. This does not mean that masculinity is identical for all militia men, nor that it is one-dimensional for any of them. During my fieldwork, I certainly encountered a few male militia members who clearly subscribed to traditional gender norms. For example, 45 year old Kyle, a truck driver, said:

"I believe that a woman's got a right to choose, and then on the other hand I feel that, you know, takin' a baby's life isn't right either. And you're probably goin' to get mad—my wife gets mad—but I think if women were more responsible with themselves and their bodies, we wouldn't have the problems we have in this world. And that makes a lot of women mad. I don't know how you feel, but it's just you know, it's like the game is, like the fox and the hound, the way I look at it. You know, you know the guy saw the fox, the girl, and some girls are just so *stupid*. You know, and I

mean some girls are very respectable about themselves you know– I'm sorry but I do blame a lot of the problems in society on female behavior [laughs]."

Kyle took care to indicate that he thought I was "respectable," but his stance on women and their sexual behavior was by far the most extreme I encountered in the militia. Kyle's militia unit is the only one in the state with substantial membership and longevity that thinks women should not be militia members, though more units with this ideology existed in the 1990s. It is certainly possible that other men were more guarded and trying to give more socially acceptable answers during our interviews. However, I was often the only woman at a training event, and even within my first few months in the field, the men were not afraid of engaging in sexual humor in front of me (including one member's self-deprecating jokes about his own apparently small penis). Overall, sexualized comments were rarely directed at me, as most male members seemed to either accept me as "one of the guys," or to treat me more protectively and paternalistically.

Many more militia men, especially SMVM leaders and others with military experience, were much more protective, open and warm with each other than much of existing literature on working to lower-middle class, white men might suggest. Below, I include examples of this more emotive side of militia men that come from encounters at their trainings and other events. These selections demonstrate how masculinity in the Michigan militia is more complex than their reported motivations for membership would suggest.

## Hegemonic Masculinity Challenged

Men in the Michigan militia typically find one to three other members with whom they develop particularly close friendships. These are almost always connections that did not exist before these men joined the militia. One component of militia organizational structure facilitates these connections by requiring county leaders to check in each month with each member in their area. They ask a variety of questions about preparedness supplies (ranging from, "How many rounds of ammunition do you have?" to "Do you have an iPod?"), but also leave time and ledger space for personal and family issues. Smaller friendship networks regularly call and text each other for occasional recreational activities beyond militia exercises, and they often carpool to training. At trainings, any militia man who is experiencing financial problems, issues with coworkers, or especially disagreements with significant others, finds many sympathetic ears.

The men are also attentive to each other's physical safety and health. Part of this, such as when Walter, a retail worker with military experience, consistently encourages everyone to stay hydrated during long hikes, is to be expected given the militia's focus on preparedness and physical activity during training. Other instances, like when one member drove an extra three hours after training had started to retrieve another man's forgotten diabetes medication, indicates a more personal and genuine concern for each other's well-being.

Other contemporary men's organizations promote an interest in more traditionally "feminine"



Figure 12: A member shows his softer side as he holds the new family pet under his jacket for warmth during an April Field Day. Photo courtesy of [www.michiganmilitia.com](http://www.michiganmilitia.com).



care for one another. Gender studies professor Judith Newton (2004) and Jean Hardisty (2000), founder of Political Research Associates, both did field work with the Christian men's organization Promise Keepers. While these authors come to different conclusions about the social value of this organization, both observe that it provides a space for white, conservative men to embrace more traditionally feminine characteristics like vocalizing affection for each other and their families. Promise Keepers carefully frame their emotional expressions in ways that preserve their heterosexuality and their dominant place in the household even as they include an explicit appeal for men to express their feelings to one another and to their wives (Heath 2003).

The militia does not include emotional expressivity as an overt goal, and complete openness among members is rarer and less self-aware in the militia, perhaps as a result. A summer 2010 training day at a state park was one occasion, however, when such openness was evident, and it provides interesting insight into militia men's gendered and emotional lives. This day, around 30 people were in attendance, including representatives from three different militia units, five people from two different international news crews, the wife of an SMVM leader, and a few of their kids. It had been one of the hotter days of the summer, and everyone was resting in a semi-shaded picnic area after most in attendance had completed a two to six mile walk (depending on their gear, health, and what qualification level they were trying to attain). This area was adjacent to and in full view and hearing of a parking lot where two dozen non-militia campers, mountain bikers and hikers were preparing to use the nearby trails and other facilities.

Lloyd had been talking casually with Sam, a 42 year old married father of three, about the training as Sam stood at a table with his back turned to Lloyd. Sam was

reorganizing his gear vest and Lloyd was making an adjustment to his rifle sling under a nearby tree. Without a change in cadence or inflection, Lloyd called to one of his young daughters, 'Could you bring me that multi-tool, baby?' Sam instantly responded, 'of course!' and took the tool to Lloyd before returning to his task at the table while Lloyd's daughter looked on and laughed.

Sam certainly knew that the affectionate label was not directed at him and intended to be amusing as he helped his friend. However, Sam's inflection did not change, as men sometimes do when they are mocking gay men. An hour or so later after I thought the exchange had been forgotten, I approached Sam as he was in the midst of explaining to Lloyd, Lloyd's wife, and six other male members that, 'Men in our society have a lot of trouble expressing their love for one another!'

Two of the nearby men looked slightly uncomfortable, or perhaps just unsure of Sam's meaning, but everyone else seemed to be completely unperturbed by Sam's statement. I chuckled a bit at this exchange because Sam's comment and the majority response to it were so unexpected and defied what most of the literature would predict regarding men's introspection about masculinity in a public space. Sam, misinterpreting my laugh as making light of his claim, turned to me and exclaimed, 'I'm serious!' I quickly assured him that I knew he was serious, and that I completely agreed with him. I planned to elaborate, but at that point Lloyd interjected.

Lloyd said that he agreed, too, that the militia should serve to bring people closer together, and he mentioned SMVM's mission statement that proclaimed to accept everyone. Much to the surprise of those who had not been involved in the militia since its inception as Lloyd had, he added, 'We even used to have a transsexual! Bob is now

Barbara.' At this point, another member, Adam, loudly called for Sam's attention from about five yards away. When Sam turned, Adam blew him a kiss. Everyone laughed about this and soon returned to more familiar topics of conversation.

Later that day when no one else was near, I asked Sam about when he first started to think that society unfairly constrained men's mutual expressions of affection. He told me that he had spent time in South Korea when he was younger, and it was part of the culture there for males who were really good friends to hold hands as they walked. Sam never thought much of it until a male friend grabbed his hand as they were strolling through town. Sam indicated his first reaction was to recoil, but the friend reminded him of the area's different cultural standards. Sam relaxed, and by the end of their walk, he said he realized it had been an enjoyable experience. He was able to have human contact in a foreign country without having 'to worry about being called gay.' He later reinforced this message in an email to me, after I emailed him to thank him for his insights and invited him to share more of his perspective. He noted that a lack of experience with other cultures led to many American men's having a relatively limited repertoire for expressing affection:

"I feel that our society has no outlet for 'brotherly love,' without being touted as being homosexual. I cry at my friends' funerals, because I loved them and will miss them. Most people can't understand that, they find it as a weakness. I feel it's one of my strengths, to feel so strongly about another person, that I show it emotionally. I guess what I learned in Korea when I was still very young has molded my beliefs. 99.9% of Americans don't get to, or try to understand other cultures and why they do the things they do."

While Sam is somewhat unique in his willingness to openly discuss masculinity and affection to such a great extent, he is not alone in complicating what white, American masculinity looks like in the Michigan militia. Tad, for example, a happily married, 45

year old who works with computers, makes no effort to hide his love for the color pink—a stereotypically feminine color. He proudly showed off his new, bright pink iPhone case one night at a meeting and showed the rest of his table how it matched his Hello Kitty computer background. He later ordered a militia t-shirt, normally seen in black or Army green, in bright pink and wore it regularly to trainings.

A few of the members who attend infrequently, or who attend meetings but not trainings seemed unsure if Tad's behavior was sincere, or if he was trying to joke and evoke a reaction from them. Tad's wife confirmed his genuine interest in the color at the only meeting she attended when someone commented on his "bold fashion choices," and she indicated the color was plentiful in their home. The regular members accepted Tad's pink accoutrements with a shrug, with one commenting, 'That's awesome.'

Even so, it was very difficult for me to imagine what the reception must have been like for an openly LGBT person. With Lloyd's help, I contacted Barbara, who transitioned *after* becoming involved in the militia. She indicated that her reasons for eventually leaving the militia had nothing to do with her transsexual status or the militia's reaction to it. I asked how the militia responded when she first attended an event as a woman. Her emailed reply ostensibly indicates that she was at-ease with the encounter, but her vivid recall two and a half years later implies it was at least memorable, if not uncomfortable for her.

"Being transgender was not an issue. I showed up with my wife to help out just before their Tax Blast a couple years ago, and I had longer hair and they asked about it. So I showed them my driver's license (which I had gone down to the Secretary of State looking my female best to take my Driver License renewal picture for). I was also wearing my green MichiganMilitia.com T-shirt and you could make out my (at that time) size A breasts underneath, and I explained that I had been taking female hormones under a doctor's prescription for the past couple of years, and as

a result I was wearing a sports bra under my t-shirt. Then, as I recall, they asked if I was still going to be married to my wife, and I said yes, and they asked if I could still shoot a gun, and I said yes, and they said they didn't care about the transgender stuff and would rather not hear any more about it. Typical guy's reaction..."

Militia members first questioned how Barbara's transition would impact her marital status (a marker of adherence to traditional gender norms) before asking whether it would impact her militia participation. The order here is important since the militia mission statement welcomes any citizen as long as they are "capable of bearing arms," and members typically prioritize firearms familiarity above all else. Members may have interpreted Barbara's maintaining her marriage as a signal that she was still "really" a man, or at least fulfilling a masculine role. As long as she did not draw attention to her transgender status in the field by continuing to talk about it, they were still accepting of her presence. Had Barbara been single or in the midst of divorce, it is unclear what her reception would have been.

Regardless, it is still not convincing that this was a "typical guy's reaction." Friends and family of transgendered individuals may, of course, ask similar questions (or questions with similar implications) and at least superficially accept their transition. However, numerous studies have shown that transgendered individuals are subject to a high rate of violence, and that their assailants are most often men (see Stotzer 2009 for an excellent review of this literature). It is not clear that "typical" men who are only loosely connected to transgendered individuals would have this relatively accepting attitude, and it is unlikely that Promise Keepers, for instance, even with their explicit premises of "male romance" (Newton 2004:38) would have tolerated Barbara's presence (Heath 2003). Even minimal acceptance is not the expected behavior from a group like the

militia that is often portrayed as hypermasculine and resistant to evolving social norms regarding equality.

Most militia members genuinely attempt to adhere to values of equality and freedom of choice, defined by the national mythos they so admire. Members' reactions to Barbara, Sam and Tad are not isolated incidents, but instead are salient examples that demonstrate how militia members try to follow their stated Libertarian principles even on issues that may call into question central parts of their own identities. Although Michigan militia men express a strong adherence to a tough masculinity of yesteryear, their experimentation and openness with each other reveals a more complicated relationship to masculinity and masculine expression.

### **FLUID MASCULINITY**

The militia superficially reflects a familiar story of traditional masculinity. It would appear be yet another organization in a long lineage that includes the Boy Scouts and Promise Keepers that seeks to reaffirm a white, heterosexual masculinity with a focus on physical and mental toughness and traditional gender roles. It would appear to be an organization where men seek out informal social connections that are less common than they were in an earlier era they idealize (e.g., Putnam 2000), and where men subscribe to masculine ideals "because they want to be positively evaluated by other men" (Kimmel 2009:47).

The militia nonetheless has two important differences from its predecessors. First, it is not exclusively a men's organization. Women and children are welcome, even encouraged, to attend the vast majority of militia units' events, though few regularly do

so. Second, the militia provides a safe space for those men who want to innovate—to test or expand what it means to be a man in modernity. Militia men believe they have enough in common with each other to express their feelings in surprising ways without fear of ridicule or reprisal, and they may not have this kind of bond with many male coworkers or family members. It is difficult to estimate what proportion of members these innovating men comprise. However, men who are not innovators observe and accept men who are during trainings and other militia functions across the state, as evidence by their continued participation in these events.

There is also evidence that innovators challenge traditional gender relationships at home as well as in the field, and may be genuinely challenging the hegemonic masculinity presumed to pervade their lives. Lloyd, for instance, publicly expresses his affection and respect for his wife at militia events, and she, in turn, proudly talks about how much he helps her with cooking and cleaning at home. All innovators in the field serve as models to other militia men who are not. As men see each other challenging hegemony, they may eventually become more comfortable doing so themselves. Several members, for example, have become more involved in child care as a result of their militia participation. Before joining the organization, some men report that they rarely spent time with their children on weekends; now, they see militia activities as a family recreational space and bring both male and female children with them to the events.

This is not to say that militia men should be considered activists for the rights of women and other groups; few of them seem to have a full understanding of structural barriers to full equality for women and other groups (also see Heath 2003). Members like Kyle, who blamed women's sexual behavior for the world's problems, undoubtedly resist

change in traditional gender roles and hegemony. Nonetheless, the militia is not merely a backlash against the women's movement, as seemed to be the case with Ferber's (1999) study. Their acceptance of female members, of transgendered Barbara, and their emotive, feminized expressions of masculinity alongside some members' increasing involvement in child and home care defy this categorization.

This case also shows us that masculinity as a construct may be more contentious and fluid in contemporary American, even among nostalgic, male-dominated groups, than we typically acknowledge. Connell (2005) rightly notes that masculinity is collective practice and that what constitutes hegemonic masculinity changes over time and space. There is not one agreed upon version of masculinity even within the limited context of the Michigan militia—a group of men who see themselves as having the same interests and motivations. Many are, instead, willingly engaging in Connell's version of masculinity politics and actively and consciously negotiating what constitutes masculinity for them. Men who are often stereotyped as unwilling to violate a traditional, American masculinity and as unwilling to offer full acceptance to women and others are doing those things in the context of the militia and sometimes beyond.

This case shows how some lower-middle class, white, American men are grappling with concepts and social issues they are often accused of ignoring or exacerbating. This case also shows how masculinity and masculine expression cannot be fully studied through interview methods alone; members' verbal accounts of masculinity and the masculinity they enacted at trainings were often at odds with each other. Only careful observation can reveal such nuance. Chapter Four analyzes members' responses to their two most salient racial outgroups—Michigan's black and Muslim populations—to



further examine whether militia members are consistently adhere to principles of inclusion and fluidity in an evolving society.