

The Importance of Identity



I'm writing this on the eve of Veterans Day, an annual observance in America that becomes both less and more important to me with each passing year. It's important to view days or periods of time as special; I'm not sure when that began, and I assume there was originally a religious or superstitious connotation to "special days," but now the special days with which one identifies form an important part of one's identity.

In thinking about Veterans Day, and what it means to me, I have to admit that *many* days feel like "Veterans Day" in America. Part of that is my friend circle—as someone who is interested in affairs that affect veterans, I'm constantly encountering them on social media, as well as in the news. It helps that identifying as a veteran is seen, now, as a largely apolitical gesture, and one that is fairly unbiased when it comes to race, religion, sex, or gender (individual experiences will vary on this point, but I'm speaking broadly). In general, veterans tend to feel appreciated in US society. And when they don't, they let people know.

Being a "veteran" is different from being a part of any other special

interest group, especially ones involving birth. Nevertheless, being a veteran is similar in that few civilians know or understand what they're getting into when they join the military. One goes through basic training and advanced training, and the point of it all is to strip you of your identity as a citizen—to make you simultaneously less and more. Once you join the military, you have become something that you never were as a civilian—part of a unified collective—and once you leave, you are stripped of that collective. Even the people who misbehave, the anti-authoritarians (as I was), the renegades, the individualists—even they are not unaffected by the curious taking off of identity, of returning to what one was before the military changed you—this is a large part of what it means to be a veteran—to know *loss*, to understand what it means to have been part of a special team.

Not every group in America does feel appreciated, or even safe, necessarily, within the identity that has been assigned to them. I'm currently lecturing a course at Yale called "Memoir and the War on Terror, which has been in the news recently because certain minority groups do not feel safe on campus—intellectually, culturally. The source of the problem some students have with Yale clearly has roots in the Black Lives Matter movement, and it is eliciting the usual spectrum of responses. The left, broadly, supports what appears to be a valid concern on the part of students who do not want to be confronted by crude caricatures of their cultures. Yet all over the right, there exists much handwringing over liberal fascism and the thought-police, moderately described by [Conor Friedersdorf of *The Atlantic*](#) and less moderately by people writing for Breitbart and other right-wing sites.

Academia is not crumbling; it's not under attack; our freedom is secure. What's happening, near Veterans Day (conveniently for my meditation on that which makes **me** special and unique in terms of social identity beyond my being special and unique by virtue of my chemical and physical composition), on the Yale campus and at the University of Missouri, is that people are engaged in dialogue. There have been threats, [intimidation](#), and strong language, but unlike in many areas on earth, there haven't been gunfights or brawls. There's

been language.

When my father was graduating from Yale in the Spring of 1970, there were protests on New Haven Green tied to [a murder trial of the Black Panthers](#). Someone called out the Connecticut National Guard. My father remembers smelling tear gas on campus—the Green is beside Old Campus, where most freshmen live at Yale. Tanks and uniformed soldiers were on the streets. Kent State loomed at the forefront of people’s memories, where students had been shot. *That* was a protest.

Today, some students don’t feel safe and are congregating, are meeting with professors, and—sometimes—are shouting. There are no tanks, no soldiers, no riot police. No tear gas. The Silliman Master, whose wife provoked this firestorm with a (as Friedersdorf points out) fairly rational, defensible, *unintentionally* incendiary email, stands (in a [prominent YouTube video](#)) in the middle of a group of students—despite being yelled at, he remains calm; his life and safety are not in danger.

We’ve come a long way, collectively, since the days of Vietnam. Veterans of Vietnam came home to an almost-non-functional VA, and were alienated by veterans of WWII and Korea, as well as by segments of the US population. Society itself was in turmoil, everywhere. Today, Veterans of the War on Terror are accepted despite their participation in a war that makes even less sense than Vietnam. Veterans come home to parades, a less-broken VA, and an appreciative (or, at least not a *hostile*) population. Veterans have it good.

And society has it good. Things aren’t perfect, but they’re far better than they were forty, fifty years ago. The events unfolding at Yale and on other college campuses today are products of integration and products of a democratic society wherein people can speak up and speak out. That’s a good thing.

I’m pleased with what is happening on college campuses and proud that being a veteran of the United States of America’s armed forces is part of my identity. Life isn’t perfect—it never was, and it never will be—but so far, we’re doing it better than just about anyone else in

the world.