Marginalized Masculinities and the American Nation:
African American and Native American Military Heroism, 1941-1978

The research project examines black and Indian military heroism to shed light on the dynamic interrelationship of racially marginalized masculinities and American nationalism between 1941 and 1978. The masculinity of war and the masculinity of national belonging have been inextricably intertwined in Western cultures. This interrelationship is epitomized in the heroic citizen soldier. However, this ideal frequently served exclusionary functions. Particularly in the United States, the white warrior hero became a central exemplar of national manhood that marginalized African Americans and Native Americans. Consequently, the acknowledgment of black and Indian military heroism took on tremendous social, cultural, and political importance.

To better understand this dynamic interrelationship, the project focuses on the question of how African American and Native American veterans, activists, and journalists utilized military heroism to challenge their marginalization as men and citizens during the civil rights era. It poses the hypothesis that heroic military service during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War as well as the memory of heroism in previous military conflicts afforded these men a crucial opportunity to affirm their manhood and to challenge their marginalization. The focus is on these two minorities and the period 1941-1978 because World War II marked the beginning of a period of sustained activism for African American and Native American civil rights as well as increasing visibility and acknowledgment of black and Indian valor on the battlefield. Comparing these two groups also helps explain similarities and differences between white, black, and indigenous interpretations of masculinity, nation, and heroism.

The project follows a new cultural history approach and is comprised of two subprojects that utilize the concept of hegemonic masculinity and rely on multidisciplinary methodologies from oral history and memory studies. By concentrating on the largely unexamined agency of racially marginalized masculinities in processes of cultural nation building, it makes important contributions to the historical study of the gender dimensions of U.S. nationalism. In addition, its analysis of how interpretations of black and Indian heroic soldiers changed over time provides new insights into the history and the memory of military heroism in the United States. Finally, the project helps us better understand how heroism structured social, cultural, and political hierarchies in American society.

Subproject 1 (Simon Wendt)

Military Heroism, Masculine Nationalism, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1941-1975

This subproject analyzes how black veterans, activists, and journalists used military heroism to challenge their social and political marginalization between 1941 and 1975. During this period, African Americans were able to mobilize a nonviolent mass movement that ultimately led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In addition, more and more African Americans were allowed to take on combat roles in the armed forces, confronted less discrimination after the desegregation of the U.S. military in 1948, and gained more visibility when fighting bravely on the battlefield.

The subproject is divided into three chronological parts: The first part (1941-1953) concentrates on the impact of World War II and the Korean War on debates about the interrelationship between manhood, nation, and military heroism among African Americans, esp. black veterans, who frequently became actively involved in civil rights organizing as a consequence of their military experience.

Part two (1954-1965) explores how these debates were affected by the victories of the nonviolent civil rights movement. While civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. advocated a pacifist philosophy that challenged traditions of the masculine warrior hero, black nationalist Malcolm X and other detractors denounced nonviolence and called upon blacks to defend themselves "like men." The project examines the role of the memory of military heroism in these debates and explores how it influenced understandings of manhood and nation among black activists and journalists.

The final part (1966-1975) focuses on the Black Power phase of the black freedom struggle and black participation in the Vietnam War, the first war that saw a fully integrated fighting force and which led to increasing official acknowledgments of black heroism on the battlefield. During that period, many black nationalists opposed black participation in the war because they viewed it as an imperialist fight against non-white people. Some, such as the Black Panther Party (BPP), created an alternative "black warrior hero" that would fight a manly war to found a new black "nation within a nation." Only a few activists continued to take pride in black soldiers' heroic achievements on the battlefield. The last part will analyze the tensions between these various interpretations of the meaning of military heroism for black manhood and African Americans' membership in America's national community.

Subproject 2 (Matthias Voigt)

Native American Warrior Heroes during the Red Power Era:
Between Indigenous Tradition and American Nationalism

This subproject asks how Native American veterans and activists used the memory of indigenous warrior heroes during the Red Power era (1969-1978) as a means of cultural empowerment that revolved around masculinity and Indian national sovereignty. Red Power activists demanded recognition of treaty rights, protection of religious freedoms, and tribal self-determination. Their activism also led to a renewed cultural pride and political consciousness among Native Americans. The subproject concentrates on the tensions between indigenous and white Euro-American definitions of masculinity, nation, and heroism by examining how Native American activists used indigenous warrior traditions and Indians' heroic military service in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War to create new notions of indigenous manhood and nationhood.

Focusing on the hitherto neglected interrelationship between Indian warrior traditions, military service, and Red Power activism, the project provides insights into the complexities of gendered nationalism and the ways in which the culture of the more homogeneous nomadic Indian tribes that inhabited the Great Plains region (e.g. North and South Dakota, Wyoming, Minnesota, and Texas) contributed to the emergence of a Pan-Indian identity in the 1960s and 1970s. In Plains Indian culture, proving one's courage in battle and performing other feats of daring became part of a warrior tradition that helped men gain individual status within indigenous societies, maintain tribal identity, and prove their manhood. In the second half of the 20th century, Native Americans in urban areas across the nation increasingly adopted this regional form of cultural memory.

The subproject is comprised of two parts: The first part concentrates on Indian veterans who served in World War II and the Korean War. During these conflicts, the enlistment of Indians highly exceeded their proportion in the U.S. population (1 percent in the 1940s and 1950s). It asks whether these veterans interpreted their military service as a patriotic service for the American nation, as an extension of masculine warrior traditions, or as a combination of both.

The second part is comprised of three case studies that examine how Red Power activists challenged this veteran tradition of civic nationalism between 1969 and 1973 to replace it with a form of indigenous ethnic nationalism that revolved around the image of the manly "New Indian Warrior." All three case studies (e.g. Trail of Broken Treaties in 1972) will concentrate on the role of Indian Vietnam War veterans in this development, since many of these veterans joined Red Power protests upon their return to the United States.