

JOURNAL OF ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES

JAMS

Vol. 11, No. 1, 2026



More than Morale

Identity Fusion and the Psychology of the Will to Fight

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Abstract: Identity fusion theory—where personal and group identities merge to foster deep kinship—provides insight into the will to fight in military contexts. Examples from the American Revolution illustrate identity fusion through events like the retreat from New York and the Battle of Trenton and George Washington as the embodiment of “shared essence.” The U.S. Marine Corps exemplifies transgenerational identity fusion via rites of passage, collective rituals, and functional equivalence. Implications for military strategy emphasize enhancing allied resolve while eroding adversaries’ will.

Keywords: identity fusion theory, transgenerational fusion, shared essence, dysphoric events, euphoric events, collective rituals, military psychology, will to fight, *esprit de corps*

Introduction

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother.¹

Drawing from William Shakespeare, Stephen Ambrose, in his seminal work *Band of Brothers*, captured the essence of a group’s will to fight: its creation, combat effectiveness, and enduring nature. Many view the will to fight as an

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act 4, Scene 3.

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Journal of Advanced Military Studies vol. 17, no. 1

Spring 2026

www.usmcu.edu/mcupress

<https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.j.20261701007>

inherent aspect of human nature—at least a latent one that can be awakened when necessary. This motivation to fight and to persist in fighting, whether of an individual, a military unit, or an entire nation, has intrigued scholars for millennia. Its existence is evident, yet its definition remains imprecise and its origins elusive. Numerous combat leaders and average soldiers have drawn on forces native to the human condition to instill and sustain the will to fight. Modern social science has theorized and named these forces, providing insights into the factors relevant to the creation of the will to fight, and offering potential paths for reducing the will of an enemy force. *Identity fusion* theory provides a framework for a greater understanding of the will to fight.

Ambrose tells us, as a result of shared hardships and triumphs, that the soldiers in Easy Company, 2d Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, established what is described as:

a closeness unknown to all outsiders. . . . They were prepared to die for each other; more important, they were prepared to kill for each other. . . . Comradeship is by far the strongest motivator. . . . They . . . found in combat the closest brotherhood they ever knew.²

Ambrose illustrates how shared experiences merge individual and group identities, forging an unbreakable will to fight. He, like Shakespeare before him, expressed a phenomenon others have recognized as inherent to the human condition for thousands of years.

Pericles, the Athenian statesman and general, sought 2,400 years ago to sustain his people's will to fight amid a protracted war, drawing on a real, yet indeterminate mechanism. Invoking Athenian heroes, Pericles emphasized that “the prize for courage will surely be awarded most justly to those who . . . are never tempted to shrink from danger.”³ Those recently killed, having put Athens ahead of personal desires and gain, were hailed by Pericles as heroes who “[chose] to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, but met danger face to face, and . . . left behind them not their fear, but their glory.”⁴ Invoking such heroism exemplifies the theoretical notion of *shared essence* discussed below.

The will to fight can also be linked to what Carl von Clausewitz called “military virtues.” Clausewitz noted that these virtues “should not be confused

² Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 21, 62, 155, 289.

³ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2008), 114.

⁴ Thucydides, *Landmark Thucydides*, 115.

with simple bravery, and still less with enthusiasm for the cause.”⁵ Clausewitz goes on to posit that “military spirit”—or the will to fight—“is one of the most important moral elements in war” sourced from “a series of victorious wars . . . [and] frequent exertions of the army to the utmost limits of its strength . . . [and that] once it has grown . . . it will survive the wildest storms of misfortune and defeat.”⁶ Identity fusion, explored in this article, elucidates this phenomenon. Identity fusion builds on Clausewitz by emphasizing dysphoric events—such as defeat, peril, and trauma—that foster a heightened will to fight, creating what Clausewitz described as an “expanded and refined solidarity of a brotherhood.”⁷ Many will be familiar with the related concept of *esprit de corps*:

Esprit de corps describes the spirit of the unit, something intangible in nature but experienced in very tangible ways. It is the common spirit reflected by all members of a unit, providing group solidarity. It implies devotion and loyalty to the unit and all for which it stands, and a deep regard for the unit’s history, traditions, and honor. Esprit de corps is the unit’s personality; it expresses the unit’s will to fight and win despite seemingly insurmountable odds.⁸

Importantly, Clausewitz warns that “it would be a serious mistake to underrate” this *esprit de corps*.⁹ Identity fusion helps to explain the origin and promulgation of this *esprit* and related phenomena and the resultant will to fight.

As the country marked the 250th birthday of the United States Marine Corps in 2025 and now celebrates the nation’s semiquincentennial, it is appropriate to illustrate identity fusion with examples from the American Revolution and the Marine Corps. The United States has drawn on the forces noted by Thucydides, Clausewitz, and Ambrose during and since its founding to cultivate and sustain the will to fight. The American Revolution provides a rich and relatable case study for identity fusion theory with numerous examples of events that foster the will to fight for individuals, units, and a nation.

The U.S. Marine Corps exemplifies the concept of *transgenerational* identity fusion. Marine Corps history is replete with examples of the will to fight. Individual and unit triumphs and hardships create a deep bond and identification of the individual with the unit, the Marine Corps, and the country. The Marine

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 187.

⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 189.

⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, 189.

⁸ *Spiritual Fitness Leader’s Guide*, Marine Corps Reference Publication (MCRP) 6-10.1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023), 2-1.

⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 187.

Corps example indicates that it is not essential for an individual to experience events firsthand for fusion to occur. Transgenerational identity fusion helps to explain not only *esprit de corps*, but also the will to fight across generations of Marines.

This article is presented in four parts. First is an examination of identity fusion theory and factors that are theorized to create that fusion through dysphoric and euphoric events. The second section draws on the American Revolution for examples of dysphoric and euphoric events, and the effects of identity fusion on the will to fight. The third section draws from U.S. Marine Corps history to demonstrate how identity fusion is transgenerational. The fourth section offers implications for identity fusion theory and points to the necessity of leveraging the science behind the theory to build the will to fight for ourselves and our allies, and suggests pathways to reducing adversaries' will.

Identity Fusion Theory

Identity fusion has been used to explain extreme pro-group behaviors in diverse contexts from radical insurgents and soccer fans to Vikings.¹⁰ It is theorized as a process where personal and social identities merge.¹¹ The fusion yields “a visceral sense of ‘oneness’ with the group” in which “the personal self fades into the background, and people come to see themselves as exemplifying the qualities” of the group.¹² Counterintuitively, fused individuals retain their individual agency, channeling it into pro-group action, feeling that they strengthen the group.¹³ When the individual identity becomes fused with the group identity, the individual's membership in that group becomes “intensely personal,” and such fused individuals feel that group outcomes are as important as personal outcomes.¹⁴ The retention of individual agency, coupled with strong, familial bonds to other group members, prompts pro-group action.¹⁵

Identity fusion differs from social identification, where personal and group identities remain distinct. When a person identifies with a group, even strongly,

¹⁰ Ben Raffield et al., “Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion and the Formation of Viking War Bands,” *World Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (2016): 35–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2015.1100548>.

¹¹ William B. Swann et al., “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): 995, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013668>.

¹² William B. Swann Jr. and Michael D. Buhrmester, “Identity Fusion,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 1 (2015): 52–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414551363>.

¹³ Michael D. Buhrmester and William B. Swann Jr., “Identity Fusion,” in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*, ed. R. A. Scott et al. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0172>.

¹⁴ Swann et al., “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” 996.

¹⁵ Swann and Buhrmester, “Identity Fusion,” 52.

they maintain separate personal and group identities. Through a strong social identity with a group, an individual may at times become depersonalized. However, this depersonalization is not equivalent to identity fusion. Such “depersonalized individuals may be well suited for falling in line and obeying orders . . . but . . . lack the initiative to enact extraordinary actions for the group.”¹⁶ Theorists note that “group identification is relatively weak in producing the extreme pro-group behaviors we see in war. . . . Without the power of fusion . . . group identification produces committed citizens but not extreme self-sacrifice.”¹⁷ Consequently, identity fusion is likely tied to a heightened will to fight.

Fused individuals neither relinquish their personal identity nor view themselves as undifferentiated members. Rather, those who are fused to the group maintain a firm grip on their own identity. When the independent self becomes one with the collective, it creates an apparatus that fosters the will to take potentially extreme action in the service of the group.¹⁸ This is significant in terms of the will to fight. While strong social bonds may prompt *conditional* combat, identity fusion sustains the will to fight even against personal advantage and the odds of victory.

This identity fusion produces individuals who perceive their relationship with the group as less abstract and analogous to a familial bond or kinship that, according to theorists, brings about two individual responses. First, an individual may perceive that all group members are “functionally equivalent.” That is, there is little differentiation across members of the group. Second, identity fusion often leads to a perception of mutual commitment in which members are willing to do anything for the group, and they trust that the group will reciprocate. Together, these feelings provide the potential for an individual to take extreme actions on behalf of the group.¹⁹

It is thought that fused individuals see challenges to the group as challenges to themselves and vice versa.²⁰ Furthermore, experiments on identity fusion have found that highly fused individuals support extreme behaviors, including “fighting and dying for their country,” perceiving threats to the group as personal, having a high willingness for self-sacrifice, and perceptions of their own

¹⁶ Swann et al., “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” 996.

¹⁷ Harvey Whitehouse and Jonathan A. Lanman, “The Ties that Bind Us: Ritual, Fusion, and Identification,” *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 6 (2014): 678, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678698>.

¹⁸ Swann et al., “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” 996.

¹⁹ Ángel Gómez et al., “On the Nature of Identity Fusion: Insights into the Construct and a New Measure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 5 (2011): 919, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022642>.

²⁰ Swann et al., “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” 996.

invulnerability.²¹ Simple group identification does not yield such a sacrifice, whereas identity fusion does.²² Moreover, studies have shown that once a person is fused to a group, they remain so.²³ As noted below, this irrevocability is strong, but perhaps not permanent.

Identity fusion extends to larger communities. Theorists recognize that when people are randomly assigned to a group, they tend to show bias in favor of that group, even when the individual has not met any group members.²⁴ Extended fusion applies to vast groups where personal contact is absent, yet bonds form, enabling willingness to fight, kill, or die for unknown members or the collective.²⁵

Central to this is the “shared essence” of the group. Rather than basing feelings of kinship on genetic bonds or other physical characteristics, fusion may come about through “shared personally self-defining experiences, such as memories for group-defining events.”²⁶ Additionally, shared essence may be “symbolically represented by physical objects, people, places, and events,” including historical artifacts, flags, and locations of events significant to the group.²⁷ Such events and symbols create and maintain willingness to act on behalf of the group, sometimes in extreme ways, as previously noted. Shared essence is fundamental to the will to fight.

Identity fusion may be the product of either or both positive (euphoric) or negative (dysphoric) events. Echoing Clausewitz’s observation that victory fosters “fighting spirit,” modern research confirms euphoric events are a key ingredient of fusion and the will to fight. Modern theorists have found that dysphoric events may have as strong or a stronger effect on identity fusion.²⁸ Napoléon Bonaparte understood this sentiment, noting that “The first qualification of a soldier is fortitude under fatigue and privation. Courage is only the second; hardship, poverty and want, are the best school for a soldier.”²⁹ Dysphoric events include those that create memories associated with negative emotions. Such memories, deriving from traumatic events, foster feelings of

²¹ Gómez et al., “On the Nature of Identity Fusion,” 919.

²² Swann and Buhrmester, “Identity Fusion,” 54.

²³ Swann and Buhrmester, “Identity Fusion,” 55.

²⁴ Gómez et al., “On the Nature of Identity Fusion,” 919.

²⁵ Swann and Buhrmester, “Identity Fusion,” 55.

²⁶ Michael D. Buhrmester et al., “Winning at Any Cost: Identity Fusion, Group Essence, and Maximizing Ingroup Advantage,” *Self and Identity* 17, no. 5 (2018): 500–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2018.1452788>.

²⁷ Buhrmester et al., “Winning at Any Cost,” 502.

²⁸ Martha Newson, Michael Buhrmester, and Harvey Whitehouse, “Explaining Lifelong Loyalty: The Role of Identity Fusion and Self-Shaping Group Events,” *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 8 (2016): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0160427>.

²⁹ Emperor of the French Napoléon I, “Maxim LVIII,” in *The Officer’s Manual: Napoleon’s Maxims of War*, trans. Sir G. C. D. D’Aguilar (Richmond, VA: West & Johnston, 1862).

deep sadness or even anguish, which become etched in an individual's memory.³⁰ Such "particularly intense life events," either euphoric or dysphoric, increase identity fusion as well as enduring loyalty to the group.³¹ Additionally, theorists have noted that dysphoric events may include those surrounding joining a group in the first place. Such include threats, rites of passage, "rites of terror," activities akin to torture, humiliation, and other "ordeals inflicted on participants."³² Having paid a severe price to join, these experiences increase an individual's affinity for the group and foster high levels of trust.³³ These "life-shaping episodes" create fusion through shared experiences that outsiders cannot understand. These powerful shared experiences bind individuals to one another through vivid and memorable imagery, creating a profound and lasting sense of kinship among those who lived through them.³⁴

Studies indicate "that physiological arousal and self-reported feelings of group-directed agency (e.g., I am responsible for my group's actions) mediate links between fusion and pro-group behavior." This helps to explain cross-cultural ritualistic behaviors such as "ritual chanting, dancing, marching" that "may serve to prime the pro-group pump amongst fused persons."³⁵ Such findings suggest that identity fusion is not accidental, but can be fostered outside of combat. This pump-priming may be useful in fostering fidelity to the group and, thereafter, the will to fight.

Ritual and routinization of tradition also contribute to and reinforce identity fusion, suggesting that identity fusion can be transgenerational.³⁶ Having experienced euphoric or dysphoric events, either through becoming a member of the group or through combat, "regular participation in collective rituals" may produce and reinforce the individual's identity fusion with the group. Repetition of ritual maintains the memory of the occasion on which identity fusion is based, leading "to identification with large, centralized, hierarchical traditions."³⁷ Repetition of group rituals enhances group building and fuses individual participants to the group, even those personally unknown to the individual.³⁸ The individual does not need to have personally experienced the euphoric or dysphoric events, as "traits that distinguish an ingroup can be . . .

³⁰ Rahaf Aldoughli, "Fighting Together: Emotionality, Fusion, and Psychological Kinship in the Syrian Civil War," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35, no. 7 (2024): 1181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2374036>.

³¹ Newson et al., "Explaining Lifelong Loyalty," 2, 7.

³² Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 679.

³³ Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 679.

³⁴ Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 680.

³⁵ Buhrmester and Swann Jr., "Identity Fusion," 6.

³⁶ Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 680.

³⁷ Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 680.

³⁸ Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 683.

socially learned.”³⁹ This suggests that identity fusion can be transgenerational and passed on from those who have directly participated in euphoric or dysphoric events to others who join the group later.

In this manner, identity fusion increases individual will to fight, which translates to a collective will to fight. Such fusion and will to fight is also likely iterative in nature—the individual will and the group tend to reinforce one another. For fused individuals, combat has been shown to result in personally reported feelings stronger than familial ties. This enhances individual willingness to sacrifice personally for the group.⁴⁰

Identity Fusion and the Will to Fight in the American Revolution

Those who have fought side by side—who have mingled their blood together; as it were in one rich stream . . . must surely be more than brethren—It is a union cemented by blood.⁴¹

This sentiment captures the essence of identity fusion, a key driver in the colonists’ perseverance. The American Revolution stands as one of the most consequential conflicts in history, not only for its political outcomes but for the psychological dynamics produced before, during, and after the war. While many discussions of Revolutionary events focus on material factors and political ideology—important as they are—they fall short in explaining the colonists’ will to fight such a long and costly war. The ability of the colonists and the Continental Army to persevere against the most powerful empire in the world at the time demonstrates their will to fight, persist, and prevail in the face of formidable odds. The events surrounding the American Revolution demonstrate the powerful effects of identity fusion, where personal and group identities are intertwined. Identity fusion helps explain colonists’ steadfast commitment and extreme self-sacrifice, which illustrate the will to fight before and during the war for independence. While the focus of this article is on the will to fight after the decision to go to war has been made, the American Revolution provides insight into the will to fight when identity fusion precedes that decision.

The Revolutionaries’ extraordinary will to fight stemmed not only from ideological or material grievances. Rather, it emerged from a deeply personal identification with the American cause as part of a unified struggle against tyr-

³⁹ Raffield et al., “Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion and the Formation of Viking War Bands,” 37.

⁴⁰ Buhrmester and Swann Jr., “Identity Fusion,” 7–8.

⁴¹ Heidi Tarver, “The Creation of American National Identity: 1774–1796,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 37 (1992): 70.

anny, amplified by key euphoric and dysphoric events.⁴² The social, political, and economic factors that caused the American colonies to break with Great Britain have filled volumes during the last 250 years. For purposes of demonstrating identity fusion theory and the will to fight when faced with multiple failures and the longest odds, a selection of euphoric and dysphoric events will suffice. Additionally, examining the personification of the will to fight in General George Washington illuminates the impact of symbols on identity fusion. Suffice it to say that a distinct American identity—if only found among the estimated forty percent of the population who favored a break—was essential to the independence declared in 1776.⁴³

Before deciding to break with Great Britain, it was necessary to form and recognize a distinct American identity across social strata and across the various colonies, which viewed themselves as unique. Without the fusion of individual identities across strata of colonial society, the Revolution would have been short-lived. The fusion that occurred did not emerge suddenly in 1776, but it was brought about both unintentionally and intentionally by British policies and colonial leaders. The geographic separation, coupled with distinct experiences, also fostered a psychological divide.⁴⁴

Even before the war broke out, the ideological struggle was evident. During this struggle, the identity fusion of the individual colonist with the identity of America—and dissociation with the British—created the seams that would be exploited and increase the American will to fight. Robert Leckie notes that this ideological struggle resulted in a situation in which:

Ordinary subjects or citizens—“the people”—were no longer indifferent bystanders or unhappy victims . . . but actual participants. They fought for an ideal: in this case, freedom . . . they suffered prodigies of misery and hardship. . . . [T]hey had a *spiritual* purpose, they were *motivated*, they had *morale*, and, as Napoleon said, in war the moral or spiritual is to the material as three is to one. Untrained and slothful soldiers, they would surely run, but most of them would always come back.⁴⁵

This morale, rooted in identity fusion, transformed ordinary colonists into re-

⁴² Dean Caivano, “The Fear of Domination: Resistance Against Tyranny,” *Journal of the American Revolution* (January 2020).

⁴³ “Patriots, Loyalists and America’s First Civil War,” *Americana Corner* (blog), 27 May 2022.

⁴⁴ Jack P. Greene, “An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution,” in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 77.

⁴⁵ Robert Leckie, *George Washington’s War: The Saga of the American Revolution* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1993), 276, emphasis original.

silient fighters. Frontier life, harsh winters, conflicts with indigenous peoples, and other factors unique to colonial living created shared hardships—dysphoric experiences—that fostered a unique colonial identity.

British actions such as the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts (1767) were perceived by colonists as *collective* threats. Despite distinct socioeconomic strata in the colonies, the acts fostered a sense of community against an increasingly alien and often hostile British authority. The Sugar Act increased shared identity across the colonies. While few in New England were involved in the continental molasses trade, those opposed to “taxation without representation” called for other colonies to unite in response to the new tax.⁴⁶ Building on this unity, the colonial objection to the Stamp Act was even stronger and more widespread as the new tax applied to nearly every adult colonist.⁴⁷ Samuel Adams noted that the “inherent, inestimable, inalienable *American* rights had been invaded” by the British Parliament.⁴⁸ After its repeal, it was noted that “only by their mutual efforts had the colonies defeated an objectionable act. Only by their mutual efforts would they deter future encroachments.”⁴⁹ In response to the Townshend Acts, Samuel Adams wrote that “America would defend her liberties at any cost.”⁵⁰ A sense of kinship was created across disparate colonies and individuals who had never met. The colonists were initially united by common economic and political goals, and they then coalesced in their American identity. The successful efforts, resulting in the repeal of the acts, solidified that identity.

These economic grievances evolved into overt acts of defiance, such as the Boston Massacre in 1770 and the Boston Tea Party in 1773. These are notable for having a fusion effect, tying individuals to the nascent nation. The rallying effect and response of men and supplies from multiple colonies to events at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1775 further solidified the American identity and indicated the fusion of individuals with the revolutionary identity.⁵¹ The fusion intensified with the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, as the signers pledged their “Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”⁵²

The Declaration of Independence served not merely as a political rupture but as an “expression of the American mind,” as Thomas Jefferson described it

⁴⁶ Stacy Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2022), 72–73, 79.

⁴⁷ Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 43.

⁴⁸ Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams*, 87, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams*, 114.

⁵⁰ Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams*, 123.

⁵¹ Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams*, 20–24, 291, 294.

⁵² “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives, 1 November 2015.

in an 1825 letter to historian Henry Lee.⁵³ This document, alongside the Bill of Rights and the U.S. Constitution, later formed a powerful triad that crystallized American national identity from the Revolutionary era onward. Together, they articulated core principles of liberty, self-governance, and individual rights, providing an ideological foundation for what it means to be American. For fused individuals such as the Revolutionaries and those who followed, these texts fostered a shared ethos that extended beyond personal experiences, inspiring a collective will to fight for the nation's ideals.

The formation of national identity “[united] people at a level that [was] perceived to have primacy over formal social bonds . . . as the old paradigm for identity was torn away.”⁵⁴ Though most colonists did not experience these events first-hand, they created the shared essence expected by identity fusion theory. These prewar grievances laid the groundwork for the dysphoric and euphoric experiences that would further intensify identity fusion during the war and beyond.

The famous winter of 1777–78 at Washington's Valley Forge encampment is a well-known example of negative experiences that served to solidify identity fusion and intensify the will to fight, and develop that will in others. Yet, it was the earlier retreat of Washington's army from New York that tried the force in combat and provided the dysphoric experience on which the Continental Army built for the remainder of the war.

The Dysphoric Experience of the Retreat from New York

After a series of defeats across New York, General Washington was forced to retreat to New Jersey and then to Pennsylvania in 1776. However, in defeat, the soldiers displayed dedication to the cause, as several who fled the battle returned to fight.⁵⁵ Moreover, Washington was able to preserve the core of his army and continue the war. Present at this retreat, Thomas Paine, “sick at heart over the suffering and despair he saw, but inspired by the undaunted resolution” of the American forces, wrote:⁵⁶

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country. . . . [W]e have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. . . . Yet panics, in some cases, have their uses; they produce as much good as hurt. Their duration is always short; the mind

⁵³ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825,” Founders Online, National Archives, accessed 11 March 2026.

⁵⁴ Tarver, “The Creation of American National Identity: 1774–1796,” 59, 66.

⁵⁵ Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 276.

⁵⁶ David G. McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 251.

soon grows through them, and acquires a firmer habit than before. . . . Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it. . . . I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection.⁵⁷

Paine thus drew on defeat and severe hardship—the “discomfort, distress, or sadness” identity fusion theory expects of dysphoric events—as a call for an enduring will to fight. This served to steel the will of the army and as a unifying call to the cause for those not yet engaged in the fight. Newspapers of the day recognized the retreat as a great success, noting “the manner in which our retreat was performed” and that the preservation of the army “reflect[ed] the highest credit upon our commander-in-chief.”⁵⁸ These experiences and the sentiments they inspired fused personal identity with group identity and increased the will to fight. Such defeat certainly led to despair and may have led to surrender. Yet, the dynamics of identity fusion help to explain why the Revolutionary cause persisted despite military disasters. As the theory predicts, for highly fused individuals, surrender would represent not merely military and political defeat, but self-betrayal. Fused individuals would rather suffer and possibly die than see their group or other members of the group be harmed or killed.⁵⁹ During normal circumstances, setbacks and defeats would demoralize an army and erode popular support. The defeated army was disheartened and exhausted. Identity fusion explains why many Revolutionaries maintained the will to fight.

The Euphoric Experience of Trenton

Any success can be viewed as a euphoric event, all of which boosted morale, continued to fuse identities, and bolstered the will to fight. Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, though the British held the field in the latter case, had shown that the “rabble” would actually fight.⁶⁰ Other euphoric events include the early American triumph at Fort Ticonderoga in 1775, the Siege of Boston in 1775–76, and successes later at Monmouth in 1778 and Yorktown in 1781. The Battle of Trenton in 1776 stands out as a euphoric event that built on prior dysphoric trials and stands as a testament to the American will to fight. The

⁵⁷ Thomas Paine, “The Crisis, December 23, 1776,” USHistory.org, accessed 19 March 2026.

⁵⁸ McCullough, *1776*, 196.

⁵⁹ William B. Swann et al., “When Group Membership Gets Personal: A Theory of Identity Fusion,” *Psychological Review* 119, no. 3 (July 2012): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028589>.

⁶⁰ John Shy, “The American Revolution: The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War,” in *Essays on the American Revolution*, 132.

battle points to the will to fight gained through previous failures and successes, which contributed to highly fused identities. Additionally, the success of the Battle of Trenton sparked the American will to continue fighting the war, which would last another seven years.

The Christmas night crossing of the Delaware River by Washington and his army is well-known from the famous 1851 painting by Emanuel Leutze. Following the agony of defeat and retreat from New York, the minor tactical victory at Trenton provided a crucial boost to morale. The army was inspired by Paine's words, and "a thrill of patriotism and purpose ran through Washington's ragged ranks."⁶¹

After suffering exposure to the extreme conditions crossing the river in the night, the long march to the attack added injury to the insult of the suffering American soldiers, whose path could be followed "by the bloodstains on the snow."⁶² The Hessians did not think it possible for an attack to occur in such conditions, let alone one conducted by the Americans.⁶³ Yet, 2,400 cold and wet Revolutionary soldiers in the main force pressed the attack with great energy.⁶⁴ Having suffered snow, ice, hail, and a follow-on march—"standing up to horrendous physical affliction"—the Americans surprised the Hessians and won the battle with few American casualties.⁶⁵ Washington praised the men and noted that "the troops behaved like men contending for everything that was dear or valuable."⁶⁶ The identity fusion of the individual soldier with the army—and with the cause—created a fierce will to fight at Trenton.

The success at Trenton, followed by another successful action at Princeton, "had sensational effects . . . and inspired . . . renewed hope."⁶⁷ Papers praised the daring surprise attack with the details of the victory. The victory produced elation among the population and increased Congress's will to continue the war.⁶⁸ Trenton was perceived as a turning point in the war, as this victory made it apparent that others would follow. Likewise, the victory inspired "those everywhere in the country" who saw Trenton as "the first great cause for hope."⁶⁹ Fusion occurred as Washington united militia from various colonies into a single, collective national force.⁷⁰ The making of this force was not one of organization, but of identity, cause, and spirit. The power of identity fusion and dysphoric

⁶¹ Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 318.

⁶² Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 320.

⁶³ McCullough, *1776*, 279.

⁶⁴ McCullough, *1776*, 280.

⁶⁵ James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (New York: Little, Brown, 1974), 95–96.

⁶⁶ McCullough, *1776*, 282.

⁶⁷ Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man*, 98.

⁶⁸ McCullough, *1776*, 283–84.

⁶⁹ McCullough, *1776*, 290–91.

⁷⁰ "Trenton," American Battlefield Trust, 2025.

events were clear to Abigail Adams, writing that “affliction is the good man’s shining time.” Adams’ correspondent, Mercy Warren, also recognized the fighting spirit proffered by such fusion, noting that there was “no people on earth in whom a spirit of enthusiastic zeal is so readily kindled, and burns so remarkably, as among Americans. . . . From the state of mind bordering on despair, courage was invigorated, every countenance brightened.”⁷¹ This euphoric event reinvigorated the will to fight.

The Personification of Revolutionary Identity and Will to Fight

Beyond events, symbols like George Washington promoted identity fusion. As noted in section two, symbols help define the shared essence of the group, even for those who have no personal experience or contact. The new American flag, the Liberty Bell, and even an eight-piece rattlesnake symbolized the Revolution. There are also many notable heroes of the American Revolution, many of whom serve not only as examples of leadership and heroism but as symbols with which individuals fused their own identity. Nathan Hale epitomized identity fusion with words that have echoed through history, even if of dubious historical accuracy: “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”⁷² George Washington is celebrated for his leadership during the American Revolution. One author noted that Washington is “a national symbol, an alternate to the American flag.”⁷³ In Washington, we find the most powerful symbol that sparked and sustained identity fusion across the colonies, providing the continued will to fight. Highly fused individuals do not see themselves merely as members of a collective; they are the embodiment of it. It is paradoxical that “a cult of veneration formed around one man in a culture that was explicitly disdainful of the glorification of personality.”⁷⁴ Washington embodied revolutionary virtues and connected emotionally with soldiers and civilians. He was simultaneously highly fused personally to the collective identity and served as a symbol of the Revolution. He fostered greater identity fusion in others and increased their individual and collective will to fight. The symbolic power of Washington is captured in a summary of his influence during the Revolution:

Washington’s ascension to national honor was abrupt. On his way to Boston . . . he was repeatedly delayed by enthusiastic crowds. Symbols of his adoration emerged before he even did anything. . . . [B]efore even a shot was fired on his command, books were dedicated to him, children were named af-

⁷¹ McCullough, *1776*, 291–92.

⁷² McCullough, *1776*, 224.

⁷³ Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man*, xvi.

⁷⁴ Barry Schwartz, “George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095142>.

ter him, and ships were named after . . . him. . . . Before seeing a demonstration of Washington's military skill, . . . Congress voted him a gold medal and his praises were sung throughout the land. . . . The Massachusetts Assembly . . . praised his achievements. Harvard . . . voted him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. There was no letup in veneration when the real battles sent the now "godlike Washington" and his men reeling southward in defeat. Celebrations of his birthday [were held] while he was still the harassed commander of a lank, losing army.⁷⁵

It was not Washington's military prowess that provided his symbolic power. People identified with and found a tangible symbol of the cause in George Washington.⁷⁶ Individual identities merged with the cause through Washington.

Despite dedication to the cause and the dysphoric bonding experience of New York and the elation of victory at Trenton, many soldiers' terms of service were expiring. Washington appealed to the men whose service obligation was ending:

My brave fellows, you have done all I asked you to do, and more than could be reasonably expected, but your country is at stake. . . . You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships. . . . If you will consent to stay . . . you will render that service to the cause of liberty, and to your country, which you can probably never do under any other circumstance.⁷⁷

Washington's appeal had the desired effect. The soldiers agreed to remain and fight so long as they saw their fellow soldiers remain committed: "Something about this man touched their hearts. They could not name it, this mysterious, magical quality of leadership, but they could sense that he was asking nothing for himself but pleading for a cause bigger than all of them."⁷⁸ Such a will to fight cannot be explained by a short speech. The individual identity of the soldier was now bound, through trials, hardships, and hard-won successes, to the collective. The bonds of kinship were forged through battle. Washington personified this bond.

Washington declined a salary for his service, endured most of the same harsh conditions as his men, and refused royal titles. This symbolized his personal fusion with the group rather than being above it. After he was appoint-

⁷⁵ Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 21.

⁷⁶ Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 23.

⁷⁷ McCullough, *1776*, 285–86.

⁷⁸ Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 323.

ed commander in chief, it was said that Washington would play a major role in strengthening and uniting the colonies. His influence on the soldiers and younger officers was noted as especially powerful, observed as an immediate boost in morale. There was also hope that others would follow his example and place a higher value on the pursuit of liberty than their own personal interests.⁷⁹ A soldier retreating from New York with Washington wrote, "I saw him . . . at the head of a small band, or rather in its rear, for he was always near the enemy, and his countenance and manner made an impression on me which I can never efface."⁸⁰ Another soldier cursed Washington for refusing a drink, but later exclaimed after Washington turned back and imbibed, "Now, I'll be damned if I don't spend the last drop of my heart's blood for you!"⁸¹

Washington served as much more than a military commander; he embodied the entire Revolutionary cause as its living symbol.⁸² The power of Washington as a symbol of the shared essence and source of identity fusion fulfilled the popular desire for a tangible symbol of the American cause.⁸³ People tied their belief in the cause "in the form of devotion to a man" whom they viewed as "a visible symbol of the values and tendencies of his society."⁸⁴ In George Washington, soldiers and civilians found the shared essence of the Revolution and the collective will to fight.

This identity fusion did not end with the Revolution. As the revolutionary identity fusion was institutionalized and mythologized, it became the foundation of American national identity. The United States did not base its new identity on shared ancestry or ethnic background. Instead, being American depended on shared ideals and actions, all of which ultimately stemmed from the principles established during the American Revolution.⁸⁵ The Declaration of Independence initiated an American identity, which was later expanded on in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

This indicates the transgenerational potential of identity fusion and offers insights into contemporary conflicts. As the theory notes, shared essence and ritual foster this powerful bond. The American Revolution and personal identification with the nation have been perpetuated across generations through rituals such as Independence Day celebrations, Washington's birthday, battle reenactments, and monuments. President Washington issued the first Thanksgiving Proclamation, designating 26 November 1789 as a National Day of

⁷⁹ McCullough, *1776*, 43–44.

⁸⁰ McCullough, *1776*, 247.

⁸¹ Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 444.

⁸² Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 21.

⁸³ Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 22–24.

⁸⁴ Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 30.

⁸⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 409.

Thanksgiving, embedding national gratitude as a unifying ritual.⁸⁶ These and other practices have sustained the resolve among Americans for generations. The United States Marine Corps illustrates this transgenerational dynamic, demonstrating the enduring bonds and heightened will to fight that stem from such fusion.

The U.S. Marine Corps and Transgenerational Identity Fusion

I don't know where we get the likes of Corporal [Joel] Jaime . . . but the truth is . . . we got lots of 'em . . . and they're all willin' to kill you.⁸⁷

Tun Tavern, Tripoli, Belleau Wood, Samuel Nicholas, John Lejeune, and Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller; these events and people represent the bond of kinship—the fusion of identity—for U.S. Marines across generations. Identity fusion is passed down to those without first-hand experience with euphoric or dysphoric events. Identity fusion theory recognizes the power of rites of passage and ordeals imposed on participants, and the power of ritual, routinization, and repetition. Additionally, Marines’ functional equivalence—that all Marines share core capabilities—fosters fusion. Marine Corps Recruit Training, the Marine Corps Birthday, and the concept of functional equivalence reflected by “every Marine a rifleman” serve as examples of how the Marine Corps realizes transgenerational identity fusion.

Rites of Passage: Marine Corps Recruit Training

The primary rite of passage for U.S. Marines, foundational to the bonds expected by identity fusion, is Marine Corps Recruit Training, colloquially known as boot camp. This identity fusion is more than identification with a group. It is stronger and deeper than social identification. The individual does not view themselves as merely part of a group at selected times and places, while retaining some personal identity outside of that of the group. The fusion of identities is enduring, and it can be passed to others. It is a force “such as regiments hand down forever.”⁸⁸ Marines:

represent a great deal more than individuals mustered into a division. There is also what is behind [them]. The old battles

⁸⁶ George Washington, “Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, 3 October 1789.

⁸⁷ Eric M. Smith, “Vice President JD Vance and the Second Lady Usha Vance Attend the United States Marine Corps Ball,” X [Twitter] post, 8 November 2025.

⁸⁸ USMC 100504: “Such as Regiments Hand Down Forever,” United States Marine Corps Film Repository, Moving Image Research Collections, University of South Carolina.

long-forgotten that secured our nation. Traditions of things endured and things accomplished. . . . All this passes into the forward zone to the point of contact where war is grit with horrors and common men endure these horrors and overcome them along with the . . . reasonable promptings of fear.⁸⁹

The Marine Corps advertises boot camp as a test during which recruits must demonstrate physical, mental, and moral strength to be worthy of the title.⁹⁰ The right to wear the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor of the Marine Corps emblem is earned, and the reputation and will to fight is passed on to new Marines by the generations that served before them and helped to build the legacy and shared essence of fighting spirit and the determination to win.⁹¹ This is the very definition of the will to fight as produced by identity fusion.

At boot camp, Marines learn the iconic names and places that exemplify dysphoric and euphoric events, which fuse the new Marine with the Corps. As identity fusion theory predicts, boot camp—through classes, close-order drill, and ritual chanting and marching—transmits collective memories to new generations. Marine recruits learn of the euphoria of the flag raising on Mount Suribachi at Iwo Jima and the bonds created by dysphoric events at the Chosin Reservoir in Korea. This propagates the collective memory of events not personally experienced, forms bonds and pride in the group, and kinship with group members they have never met. Identity fusion is socially learned.

The culminating event at recruit training is the Crucible, which exemplifies both the euphoric and dysphoric experiences imposed on participants as expected by fusion theory. This 54-hour challenge imposes stress and requires individual endurance and teamwork. The Crucible is designed to teach new recruits how to create a cohesive team, rely on other group members, and be a reliable team member. This serves to create mutual and enduring affinity among Marines to each other and to the Marine Corps.⁹² The successful recruit is awarded the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor insignia, indicating that the fusion with the Marine Corps and all those who have gone before is complete.

Identity fusion begins on the painted yellow footprints at either the Parris Island or San Diego Recruit Depots and has long been recognized, though perhaps not understood in terms of a precise theoretical basis. The identity fusion that is handed down from one generation to the next, starting in recruit train-

⁸⁹ USMC 100504.

⁹⁰ “Marine Corps Boot Camp | Recruit Basic Training | Marines,” *Marines.com*, accessed 20 October 2025.

⁹¹ “Marine Corps Boot Camp | Recruit Basic Training | Marines.”

⁹² “Marine Corps Boot Camp | Recruit Basic Training | Marines.”

ing, continues to exist today and is still being transmitted from one generation of Marines to the next. It is in this setting that Marine *esprit de corps* first takes shape, and on these training grounds the next generation of Marines is formed. The identity fusion that is passed down through generations.⁹³

Marines like to highlight that the Corps is *of* Marines. It is not a branch of Service that one joins, but it is a being one becomes. Personal identity becomes fused with group identity, creating bonds as strong, if not stronger, than kinship as described by identity fusion theory:

It's here that these young Americans grasp a full understanding of what it is to be a Marine. That noble inheritance of tradition and honor is carefully handed down. It's here that they learn to be physically tough enough and mentally strong enough to withstand the ugly violence and terrors of war. It's here that they earn the right to share in legends of pride, earned with blood and courage on the battlefields. It's here that they become once and for all Marines, now and forever.⁹⁴

The individual's identity as a Marine is forged—fused—here. It provides the foundation of a Marine's will to fight. It is the individual Marine's identity fusion into that of the Marine Corps that creates and sustains the Marine Corps' superior will to fight.

Marine Corps Recruit Training serves as the foundational rite of passage, forging initial identity fusion. This fusion deepens throughout a Marine's career via the professional military education (PME) continuum, which includes both enlisted (EPME) and officer (OPME) programs. Enlisted Marines reinforce it at the Corporal's Course, Sergeant's Course, and the Staff Noncommissioned Officer Academy. Officers advance fusion beyond The Basic School through the Expeditionary Warfare School, Command and Staff College, War College, and programs such as the School of Advanced Warfighting. These formal episodes, combined with ongoing informal training and education within units—rooted in Marine Corps history, culture, leadership, ethics, and warfighting—keep kinship alive, iterative, and transgenerational, sustaining the will to fight across ranks and generations.

Collective Rituals

Through collective rituals, dysphoric and euphoric events that fused individuals to the group are remembered. Repetition provides a path to maintain the memory of events and people not personally known to the individual. Identity

⁹³ USMC 100504.

⁹⁴ USMC 100504.

with the Marine Corps is socially learned. This identity results in the sense of oneness or kinship, the impetus for pro-group action, extreme behaviors including self-sacrifice, and feelings of invulnerability expected by theory. The annual celebration of the Marine Corps Birthday illustrates the role of collective ritual in maintaining bonds of kinship.

The 10th day of November 1775 is a date all Marines know. As fusion theory notes, ritual chanting during marching or running serves as a conduit for knowledge and kinship. Most Marines know the chant: “Back in 1775, my Marine Corps came alive.”⁹⁵ It is important to note the ownership Marines take of this birthday and *their* Marine Corps. Invariably, during celebrations of the Marine Corps Birthday, Marines greet one another with “happy birthday, Marine!” The birthday is not referred to as the *anniversary* of a founding; it was a birth. The birth of the organization is shared as a common birth of every individual in that organization. Marines take the group identity as their own, as indicated by this possessive language.

In 1921, the 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, John A. Lejeune, ordered that a reminder of the honorable service of the Marine Corps be published. It is still read at every Marine Corps Birthday celebration. The proclamation reflects an innate understanding of identity fusion, its powerful effect on the will to fight, and how identity is passed down. A particularly relevant portion of Lejeune’s message suggests the transgenerational nature of identity fusion:

This high name of distinction and soldierly repute we who are Marines today have received from those who preceded us in the corps. With it, we have also received from them the eternal spirit which has animated our corps from generation to generation and has been the distinguishing mark of the Marines in every age.⁹⁶

The identity fusion of Marines to the collective, passed through generations, has long been recognized as contributing to the Marines’ and the Marine Corps’ famous will to fight. This extends to the concept of functional equivalency.

Every Marine a Rifleman: Functional Equivalency and Fusion

One of the perceptions of highly-fused individuals is functional equivalency—that on some level, each member of the group is the same, fostering a “powerful

⁹⁵ “Marine Corps Cadences,” DODReads, accessed 20 October 2025.

⁹⁶ *Marine Corps Order 47, Marine Corps Birthday Message* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1 November 1921).

sense of connectedness.”⁹⁷ One needs to look no further than “The Creed of the United States Marine” and the associated sentiment “every Marine a rifleman” to observe how this aspect of identity fusion theory functions within the Marine Corps.⁹⁸

While Marine Corps infantrymen are the specialists of ground combat, every Marine is expected to be capable. When it comes to the will—and ability—to fight, every Marine is able and willing to engage the enemy, no matter their specialty. The 2012 attack on Camp Bastion in Afghanistan serves as evidence. Marines from support forces, aircraft maintainers, and aircrew engaged the enemy in ground combat. One Marine who engaged in that fight later said, “At the time, all I could think of was the guys and girls in my shop and keeping them safe. . . . I didn’t really care about my well-being.”⁹⁹ These Marines drew on their basic infantry training and identity as Marines. Moreover, the feeling of kinship with Marines both past and present offers insight into the power of identity fusion across generations. Another Marine, injured in that fight, when asked if he wanted to go home, replied, “I told them I just got here, why would I want to go home?”¹⁰⁰ This sentiment reflects a long history of the Marines’ will to fight, reflected famously in the words of Marine Captain Lloyd W. Williams during the Battle of Belleau Wood in France in 1918, “Retreat, hell! We just got here.”¹⁰¹

There would perhaps be no Battle of Fallujah without a Hue City, no Hue City without a Chosin Reservoir, no Chosin without Iwo Jima. Success at Iwo Jima may have been in doubt without a Belleau Wood. The Marines fighting with the legendary Sergeant Dan Daly likely drew on the spirit of Chapultepec and Derna, as do modern-day Marines. Identity fusion produced the Marine who requested that his senior drill instructor, rather than the Commandant of the Marine Corps, award the Marine his Purple Heart medal.¹⁰² The results are Lance Corporal Jordan C. Haerter and Corporal Jonathan T. Yale, who selflessly stood their ground and sacrificed their lives for fellow Marines at a gate in

⁹⁷ Gómez et al., “On the Nature of Identity Fusion,” 919.

⁹⁸ “The Rifle Creed,” History Division, Marine Corps University, 2025; and LCpl Bridget M. Keane, “‘Every Marine a Rifleman’ Begins at Recruit Training,” Marine Corps Training and Education Command, 11 May 2012.

⁹⁹ Cpl Bill Waterstreet, “Purple Hearts and Guts of Steel: VMA-211 Marines Recognized for Actions at Camp Bastion,” Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, 29 August 2013.

¹⁰⁰ James Mercure, “Face of Defense: Marine Recalls Camp Bastion Attack,” DVIDS, 26 September 2012.

¹⁰¹ Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 1991), 301.

¹⁰² “Bo Tells the Story of Pinning a Purple Heart on One of His Former Recruits,” JC and Bo Show, YouTube, 8 October 2025.

ar-Ramadi, Iraq.¹⁰³ The results are Marine Corps legends John Basilone, Joseph Vittori, and Oscar Austin. Identity fusion creates the likes of Medal of Honor winners Jason L. Dunham, William Kyle Carpenter, and Dakota Meyer. It results in uncommon valor being a common virtue.

Similarly, knowledge of the United States' experience in the American Revolution has served as a pathway for identity fusion on a national scale, described as an "ism." Americanism is unique in terms of the incorporation of individual identity into national identity.¹⁰⁴ This fusion of personal and national identity fosters a kinship across various cultures within the United States. Identity fusion has served the individual and national will to fight for generations. Stemming from the spirit of the American Revolution, and passed down for generations, identity fusion surpasses patriotism. It transcends what an individual belongs to and becomes what an individual is. Personal and national identity are fused, forging a kinship that enhances the will to fight.

Implications and Conclusion

Fortitude, perseverance, boldness, esprit, and other traits not explainable by art or science are . . . essential in war. We thus conclude that the conduct of war is fundamentally a dynamic process of human competition . . . driven ultimately by the power of human will.¹⁰⁵

The implications of identity fusion and the will to fight are numerous. These include its role in counterinsurgencies, the centrality of popular will, the power of ideology in shaping resolve, the enduring relevance of nonmaterial factors in war, and caution against underestimating an adversary's will to fight.

Identity fusion theory provides a robust framework for understanding the will to fight—not as an ephemeral sentiment, but as a durable psychological mechanism rooted in the union of personal and group identities. This fusion, cultivated through dysphoric and euphoric events, rituals, and shared symbols, has important implications for military strategy, particularly in an era of protracted conflicts and widely distributed operations. For the United States and its allies, leveraging this theory offers pathways to enhance the will to fight, ensuring resilience amid adversity. Conversely, it illuminates methods for undermining an adversary's fusion, thereby eroding their collective resolve. As

¹⁰³ LCpl Casey Jones, "Heroic Last Stand, Marines Thwart Enemy Attack," I Marine Expeditionary Force, 20 May 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Diamond, *The Founding of the Democratic Republic* (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1981), 2–3.

¹⁰⁵ *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2018), 1-17.

Clausewitz observed, the moral elements of war often outweigh the physical; identity fusion theory and related concepts give some insights into how these elements can be forged or fractured.¹⁰⁶

For building the will to fight, theory suggests that military leaders can design experiences that promote oneness with the group. Dysphoric events, such as rigorous training regimens or simulated combat hardships, are exemplified by the Crucible of U.S. Marine Corps recruit training. Such activities aid in forging bonds that surpass mere identification with a group and instill a visceral sense of kinship. Complementing these are euphoric triumphs, whether in exercises or operations, that reinforce identity fusion, as seen in the surge in the morale of both soldiers and civilians following the Battle of Trenton. Rituals—annual commemorations, unit traditions, and recitation of canons like the U.S. Armed Forces’ Code of Conduct—transmit this fusion across generations, ensuring that even isolated forces in extensive battlespaces maintain a sense of kinship and connectedness to a broader group.¹⁰⁷ This is especially salient for conflicts in which forces are geographically dispersed. The fused individual’s perception of reciprocal strength and functional equivalence can sustain the will to fight and transform potential isolation into an opportunity for heroic resolve. The lack of proximity to other units or the homeland may be substituted with a formidable will to fight stemming from identification as an American, a Marine (soldier, sailor, airman, guardian), and a brother/sister-in-arms. Close kinship gained through identity fusion may offer the will that it takes to persist and prevail.

The Code of the U.S. Fighting Force embodies the use of identity fusion to strengthen individual will to fight. The code draws on history and transgenerational identity fusion, noting that “the Code, although first expressed in written form in 1955, is based on time-honored concepts and traditions that date back to the days of the American Revolution.”¹⁰⁸ The Article 1 of the Code of Conduct states, “I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.”¹⁰⁹ This draws on the concept of Americanism, reminding the individual what they are and their duty to potentially die for their country. This kinship formed by identity fusion creates an individual willing to fight and die for another member of the group, including those not personally known to them.

Article 6 of the Code of Conduct reminds the individual to “never for-

¹⁰⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 184–85.

¹⁰⁷ NAVMC 2681, *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force* (Washington, DC: American Forces Information Service, Department of Defense, 1988).

¹⁰⁸ NAVMC 2681, *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 2.

¹⁰⁹ NAVMC 2681, *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 4.

get that [they are] an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for [their] actions, and dedicated to the principles which made [their] country free.” Further, the individual is to trust in their “God and in the United States of America.”¹¹⁰ This code relies on individual identity being fused, rather than simply associated, with the national identity. The individual fuses with the group, embracing kinship, duty, and a willingness to sacrifice for it. The other’s group membership suffices: fighting and dying for it is not only appropriate, but a duty and honor, as theory expects. Such sentiments, previously afforded a place in an imprecise collection of enigmatic forces, are explained by identity fusion.

However, intentional efforts to produce identity fusion might be viewed as exploitive. Likewise, attempts to defuse individuals, even when in their best interests, could be unethical. The use of psychological operations to break existing bonds and create new ones may be counterproductive. The term *propaganda* is most often used as a pejorative: “It is a word fraught with emotional consequence.”¹¹¹ Any effort to educate, inform, or create new dysphoric and euphoric experiences for individuals might be problematic, especially in democracies.¹¹² Yet, as one author notes, efforts to inculcate identity fusion build on social contract theory, and may simply “ask the audience . . . to adopt a more selfless perspective.”¹¹³ In this way, identity fusion becomes “less about information operations” in terms of propaganda or psychological operations “and more about social identity and civic duty as elements of national security.”¹¹⁴ This is the “democratic propaganda of integration,” whereas the malevolent use of propaganda is described as “coercive strategies of agitation,” which are akin to the more familiar use of information or psychological operations for indoctrination.¹¹⁵

Despite the irrevocability aspect of identity fusion, it is not entirely impervious; it can be eroded through “defusion.”¹¹⁶ This erosion may arise internally from unchecked dysphoria without the balancing effects of euphoric reinforcement, leading to disillusionment. Mao Zedong recognized this, noting that there “must be an ever-present conviction, and if it is forgotten, we may succumb to the temptations of the enemy or be overcome with discouragement.”

¹¹⁰ NAVMC 2681, *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 14.

¹¹¹ Peter K. Fallon, “Propaganda 1.0: Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Propaganda,” in *Propaganda 2.1: Understanding Propaganda in the Digital Age* (London: Lutterworth Press, 2022), 1.

¹¹² Kevin P. Eubanks, “Private Snafu and Political Propaganda,” in *Dr. Seuss and the Art of War: Secret Military Lessons*, ed. Montgomery McFate (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 125–32.

¹¹³ Eubanks, “Private Snafu and Political Propaganda,” 141.

¹¹⁴ Eubanks, “Private Snafu and Political Propaganda,” 141.

¹¹⁵ Eubanks, “Private Snafu and Political Propaganda,” 141.

¹¹⁶ Newson et al., “Explaining Lifelong Loyalty,” 10.

ments.”¹¹⁷ Mao also captured the essence of fusing one’s own forces through shared hardships like the Long March—dysphoric events that merged personal identities with the revolutionary cause—while defusing enemies via propaganda that amplifies internal divisions and defeats.¹¹⁸ Mao highlighted betrayals or class fractures that can isolate individuals, prompting them to question why they should sacrifice for a fragmented group.¹¹⁹ Others have noted that *external* agents may cause defusion.

Russian strategist Evgeny Ivanovich Martynov explained the importance of “subversion of the enemy’s population,” noting that “almost every country carries within it the germ of internal political or social disease.”¹²⁰ His goal is to find and exploit collaborators “who are dissatisfied with the existing order”; in other words, those without strongly fused identities.¹²¹ Unknowingly drawing on identity fusion theory, Martynov claims that finding individuals “in the enemy’s camp” that can be used to subvert cohesion is

especially easy when moral decay and the general pursuit of material wealth occupy the society. . . . The idea of the fatherland loses its unifying power and the sense of patriotism weakens, being replaced by individualistic interests. . . . Any country in such a state of decay is easy prey . . . regardless of its visible external might, huge army, enormous [*sic*] fleet or highly developed culture.¹²²

Martynov highlights the significance of psychological operations that target societal cohesion, advocating moral-psychological assaults to fracture group shared essence—operations that defuse the individual from national identity. In modern war, such actions might involve cyber intrusions to manufacture disloyalties or media campaigns that subvert or desecrate symbols, with the effects of eroding functional equivalence and shared essence of a populace that might otherwise sustain the will to fight.

These implications underscore the role of identity fusion as both a bulwark and a vulnerability in modern warfare. By harnessing dysphoric and euphoric pathways, nations and military forces can cultivate the will to fight. Under-

¹¹⁷ Mao Tse-tung, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, FMFRP 12-18, trans. BGen Samuel B. Griffith (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1961), 88.

¹¹⁸ Mao Tse-tung, “Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: On Protracted War,” Marxists.Org, May 1938.

¹¹⁹ Mao, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, 87–89.

¹²⁰ Evgeny Ivanovich Martynov, “The Responsibilities of Politics in Its Relations with Strategy,” in *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy*, ed. Ofer Fridman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 90, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197606162.003.0003>.

¹²¹ Martynov, “The Responsibilities of Politics in its Relations with Strategy,” 91.

¹²² Martynov, “The Responsibilities of Politics in its Relations with Strategy,” 92.

standing defusion enables asymmetric advantages, potentially allowing us to bolster our own while diminishing the enemy's will to fight. By understanding experiences, history, rites, rituals, and symbols in more than a superficial manner, we may find ways to reduce adversaries' fusion and reduce their will to fight.

Identity fusion theory helps to demystify the will to fight, offering concrete insights into a phenomenon long recognized but imprecisely understood. The paths for identity fusion evident in the Revolutionaries' will to fight and the Marine Corps' transgenerational kinship provide a starting point for greater theoretical application. The examples here indicate that it is possible to integrate this science into strategy. Enhancing fusion fortifies our warriors and nation against adversity; exploiting defusion weakens foes. Ultimately, the will to fight is not merely awakened but intentionally, and honestly, engineered. Fused identities supply a moral force that, properly leveraged, ensures that those who stand together—as with Shakespeare's "happy few"—prevail not *despite* hardship, but through the enduring bonds that it creates.