Did American soldiers in World War II have a strong sense of fighting for a cause?

Viewpoint: Yes, while American soldiers, sailors, and airmen fought for a wide variety of reasons, one primary motivation was a strong sense of fighting for a worthwhile cause.

Viewpoint: No, during World War II Americans often enlisted in the military for patriotic reasons, but once they entered combat they fought for the survival of themselves and their comrades.

The motivation of American soldiers during World War II was a mystery to their enemies and their generals alike. The issue was complicated by a GI culture that strenuously denied overt idealism, instead emphasizing that what they did was a job—the only way to get home. The point has been explained in the context of a Great Depression-era mentality that made a job something more than forty hours a week of time lost for life. Nevertheless, idealism has generally been discounted as an element of American performance.

S. L. A. Marshall is the most familiar student of the GIs' war to assert the primacy of comradeship and small-unit cohesion. According to his model, soldiers fought because they did not wish to let down their buddies or, more fundamentally, be considered cowardly or incompetent by the "primary group" that was the focus of their emotional identity in an impersonal army fighting an impersonal war. "Belonging" was also a survival mechanism. An individual without connections in a squad or platoon was subject to be given high-risk jobs while thrown on his own emotional resources—an often fatal combination.

In those contexts a personnel system based on individual replacements and a force structure that restricted regular rotation of units out of the line were major negative factors in combat motivation. On the other side of the equation, American soldiers responded well to competence. Effective leadership, efficient fire support, regular deliveries of hot food and mail—such things could compensate for cohesion disrupted by heavy casualties. Perhaps as well, idealism entered the mix through the back door. When asked by Stephen E. Ambrose why, in the brutal winter of 1944, more soldiers did not accept a military prison as an alternative to the line, he was told: "no man would choose disgrace." That is not a shame-based attitude. It is an affirmation of an honor that does not depend on glory.

Scholars often avoid focusing on single, monolithic explanations for complex issues—and with good reason. Much recent scholarship concerning the motivations of American fighting men in World War II, however, has overemphasized the "buddy theory" of combat motivation and almost completely forgotten that...
genuine patriotism remained a significant factor supporting the American soldiers' resilience. While one cannot deny that extensive research into unit cohesion and the psychological aspects of combat has provided useful insights into the behavior of American fighting men, this focus on a single aspect of combat motivation needs a corrective. American soldiers, sailors, and airmen possessed a strong belief in their cause that provided considerable strength to their determination to fight. In short, America's servicemen were motivated by many factors, one of which was sincere patriotism, and this element was as pervasive as any of the psychological explanations that are currently in vogue in the historic community.

It is important to look at this issue with balance. Research and scholarship have made a good case that soldiers (for brevity, all fighting men—soldiers, sailors and airmen—will be referred to as soldiers), once in combat, often have a strong sense of fighting for their buddies. This case, however, has been overstated. The essential point is not to disprove that soldiers felt a strong obligation to their comrades, but to show that these men also had a powerful desire to fight for the American cause. In the end, these reasons were reinforcing and not mutually exclusive.

There are many ways to approach this discussion, but it is useful to look at four general questions. First, what is the “buddy theory” that dominates current scholarship and the evidence used to support it? Second, what are the differences between the soldiers’ initial motivations to enlist and the reasons for his continued willingness to engage in combat, as well as differences between the major types of soldiers—combat and support? Third, a comparison of the American soldier’s view of the war with other national views raises the entire issue of ideology in warfare and posits the question—do the majority of combat soldiers divorce themselves from the basic causes of their struggle for the sake of seeking personal survival and approval of their fellow soldiers? Finally, is there substantial, but often overlooked, evidence that patriotism is a strong factor in the soldiers’ desire to fight?

An examination of the buddy or “cohesion” argument of soldier motivation reveals that the underlying argument has some validity but is often grossly oversimplified. Perhaps the most well-known study of soldier motivations for fighting was S. L. A. Marshall’s Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War (1947). Basing his argument on postbattle interviews, Marshall emphasized that few soldiers actually engaged in combat and hinted that fighting men were more interested in survival than supporting a noble cause. Another work published shortly after World War II, Samuel A. Stouffer’s psychological examination of the American soldier, The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath (1949), is similarly both valuable and misused. Like Marshall, Stouffer focuses on the elements of superior unit cohesion, and minimizes the role of soldier patriotism as a motivating factor. Gerald F. Linderman, in The World Within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II (1997) provides a more recent view of soldier motivation that looks at a greater base of evidence but does not stray far from Souffer’s conclusions. Other recent scholarship on the American army in World War II, to include works by Stephen E. Ambrose and Peter R. Mansoor, does much to correct the denigration of the American soldiers’ fighting performance, but their work still tends to focus almost exclusively on the benefits of unit cohesion and training.

All of these above works are excellent contributions to the literature of World War II, but they can potentially lead to a mistaken impression of soldier motivation. One weak area is a failure to look at the full view and nuanced of these authors’ arguments. For example, Ambrose and Mansoor demonstrate that the American soldier displayed superb toughness in combat, and that training and organizational structures made American units surprisingly effective. Both authors do not specifically address the motivation of the soldiers, however, and their focus on other issues could lead one to conclude that American soldiers were blank slates whose effectiveness was solely dependent on training, comraderie, and lower-level unit leadership. Perhaps even worse interpretations could be drawn from Marshall, Stouffer, and Linderman’s works. One problem with these efforts is the multiple views and interpretations given to the buddy theory of soldier motivation. The following questions illustrate the myriad of issues that are included in their writings. Did soldiers fight for the approval of their comrades? Was it for the positive praise of friends or to avoid their condemnation? Did they fight for some abstract concept of proving their manhood? Did they fight for hatred of an enemy who wanted to kill them, or perhaps even the more “noble” cause of destroying an unjust enemy? Did soldiers fight for mere survival, regardless of supposed peer pressure from their fellow soldiers? Did soldiers fight out of grim devotion to duty or simply a passive acceptance of their fate? Did they fight because small-unit leaders built a true sense of identity in their group? In short, the idea of “fighting for one’s buddy” is a complex concept. More importantly, answers to the above questions do not exclude the possibility that American soldiers fought for the nation’s cause. For example, Linderman presents a powerful argument that the American sol-
dier often felt alienated from his home front. A possible interpretation is that soldiers lost all connection with the reasons for the war; perhaps they even felt their nation had betrayed them. A closer look at Linderman’s evidence, however, reveals that soldiers often grew to resent, or at least feel separated from, the people living the “easy life” at home. Perhaps these soldiers never doubted their cause but resented those at home who did not contribute as strongly to the war effort.

Another potential problem with the scholarship of the buddy theory is the evidence used to support the case. Marshall’s work is probably the most infamous example of problems with evidence; he has been accused of fabricating statistics. Regardless of this accusation, the nature of Marshall’s evidence raises some questions because he only interviewed a limited number of Marines in the Pacific theater. Similarly, Stouffer’s work focuses on a relatively small sample of American soldiers in Italy. Linderman shows more breadth in his evidence, but from a statistical perspective, his selection of letters, memoirs, and interviews is not definitive. In all honesty, these efforts, especially Linderman’s work, deserve credit for making use of limited available evidence, and it would be intellectually dishonest to denigrate their efforts. Nonetheless, it is always difficult to generalize the motivations of large groups of people, and despite the best efforts of many historians, their evidence gives snapshots of individual opinions, but is not statistically conclusive.

A second perspective on the motivation of America’s soldiers concerns the differences between their initial reasons for enlistment and later attitudes of veteran soldiers in combat, as well as variations between soldiers in different branches. A vast majority of the scholarship on soldier morale is focused on the narrow perspective of infantry combat in the front lines—a worthwhile objective, but limited in its scope. Few writers examine the reasons for the initial enlistment of American fighting men, and few works address the motivations of the majority of America’s armed forces that were not frontline ground troops. Initially, the overwhelming majority of American fighting men enlisted for patriotic reasons. Especially after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, enlistment offices were filled with recruits who believed in the American cause. Although the United States instituted a draft prior to Pearl Harbor, the Army Air Corps and navy relied almost exclusively on volunteers, and even the army’s draftees displayed a willingness to serve and a general belief in the correctness of the nation’s cause. Perhaps after prolonged contact with the enemy, servicemen showed a greater cynicism towards authority, but there is almost no evidence that they abandoned their underlying belief in the cause. In addition,
a significant number of support soldiers who were essential to the war effort were not conditioned by combat conditions. What motivated the millions of troops who worked in logistics and administrative duties, and did not actually participate in combat? These soldiers did not face the dangers of the infantryman at the front, but they made a major contribution to the Allied victory, and no one has argued that they were motivated by the need for peer approval or survival. In sum, the majority of American soldiers initially enlisted for patriotic reasons, those that did not see combat probably continued to serve in belief of the nation's cause, and many soldiers in the front lines who felt a great kinship with their fellows did not necessarily abandon their initial motivations even as they lost their innocence.

For another view of the American soldier's motivation one can look at literature concerning other nations' soldiers in World War II. For example, Omer Bartov's recent scholarship on the German army, Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich (1991), while controversial, has certainly punctured the myth that German soldiers were completely divorced from the Nazi cause. However, current work on the Japanese fighting man has reflected greater complexity beyond the caricature of mindless followers of the emperor. In both cases, the Axis soldier suffered in combat, fought for his survival, and often found comfort in the support of his comrades as did their American counterparts. Yet, these soldiers also retained their belief in their country's cause. The common element of these studies is that ideology played a strong part in the common soldiers' motivation. Interestingly, unlike the large number of historians willing to posit the "patriotic" motives of soldiers outside of America, few scholars seem willing to claim that America's soldiers had similar motivations. In any case, the complex mix of motivations behind the efforts of German and Japanese soldiers, as well as other nations, indicates that most fighting men maintained a firm belief in their nation's cause. It is only logical that America's soldiers would not be the sole exception.

Finally, there is substantial evidence that American soldiers believed firmly in the righteousness of their cause. Letters, diaries, and interviews with veterans contain many references to a belief in America's war effort. This evidence is not reflected in a blind belief that was sometimes portrayed in contemporary propaganda. Instead, much of this attitude is revealed in a determination to carry through to victory. Also, there is a certain amount of hatred against the Axis powers, who were considered an evil enemy that needed to be crushed, particularly in the Pacific war. This attitude does not support the idea of fighting for one's buddy, and in fact, is much more closely connected to a belief in fighting for the Allied cause against an evil opponent. The tremendous bulk of evidence from American soldiers that expresses a longing to return home to loved ones also indicates a continued connection to life at home, as much as a desire to fight for comrades at the front. Prose, poetry, movies, and music from World War II were strongly patriotic and should not be dismissed as mere wartime propaganda. Modern Americans, in an environment of cynicism, may have come to expect the bitterness of the Korean of M*A*S*H (1970), the Vietnam of Platoon (1986), or even World War I's spawned antiwar works, such as Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front (1929) and Humphrey S. Cobb's Paths of Glory (1935). For a war of such enormous magnitude, World War II has produced relatively little antiwar, cynical material: one noted exception is Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961). It seems that many soldiers believed in the correctness of America's cause, and despite the harsh realities and immediate demands of combat, most soldiers retained this belief.

The motivations of America's soldiers in World War II were varied and complex, but they never eschewed a belief in their nation's cause. There has been much good work that focuses on the psychology of frontline soldiers and makes a strong case that in the midst of combat these men leaned heavily on fellow GIs in their unit. However, these arguments should not obscure the fact patriotism—a belief in America's cause—was also a crucial factor in many ways. Most soldiers initially enlisted for patriotic motives; a large majority of soldiers were never deferred from this belief; support soldiers were never shaped by combat experience; and even hardened veterans at the front did not necessarily abandon a faith in their nation. A balanced view of this issue reveals that a genuine belief in the nation's cause was a powerful motivation for America's troops throughout the war.

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Viewpoint:
No, during World War II Americans often enlisted in the military for patriotic reasons, but once they entered combat they fought for the survival of themselves and their comrades.

Over the course of World War II the United States fielded a total force of 16.3 million per-
sons, of which fewer than one million took part in extended combat. The U.S. Army alone fielded a force of roughly 8,250,000 men. The ranks of the fighting men in World War II primarily consisted of America's citizen soldiers, sailors, and airmen. The vast majority had been born between 1915 and 1925 and had endured the rigors of the Great Depression. Most entered combat between 1943 and 1945. From Europe to the Mediterranean, from the Pacific to Burma, fighting men comprised roughly 10 percent of the field force. They came as liberators, not conquerors, and were only too happy to return to their homes as soon as the war was over. Infantrymen, constituting 14 percent of American troops overseas, suffered approximately 70 percent of the casualties. This imbalance invites the question: "Why do men fight?"

In his brilliant expose of combat motivation during the American Civil War, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War (1997), historian James M. McPherson opined that Civil War soldiers fought for cause and country even more than they fought for comrades; the motivation was just the opposite for GIs in World War II. Recent evidence, including wartime diaries, journals, and correspondence, suggests that the American GI was equally motivated for cause and country, but as historian Stephen E. Ambrose indicates in Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944–May 7, 1945 (1997), the difference between Billy Yank and Johnny Reb and their twentieth-century counterparts was only that of expression. Heirs of their fathers' legacy in World War I and products of the Great Depression, the American GI found patriotic words hollow and tended to emphasize the comradeship that formed among combat soldiers sharing a common fate in the greatest war of the century.

Americans who contemplated World War II without the experience of battle viewed the conflict as essentially a struggle between the forces of good and evil, between fascism and democracy. To the men fighting in the front lines, however, battle assumed a far more frightful and dangerous dimension. To willingly risk one's life by charging into a machine gun or leading a platoon against an entrenched enemy on an exposed beach is so unnatural an act that it defies human comprehension. Yet, that singular act of courage was repeated on countless battlefields in World War II. Even Audie Murphy, America's most decorated soldier of the war, could not explain it. As recorded in Gerald F. Linderman's The World Within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II (1997), in approaching France's Mediterranean shoreline, Murphy pondered that "little men, myself included, who are pitted
against a riddle that is as vast and indifferent as the blue sky above us."

While it is difficult to achieve consensus among World War II veterans, several possible explanations emerge from the men and women now more willing to address their combat experiences. Captain Joseph Dawson, the commander of the first rifle company to penetrate German lines above Omaha Beach during the Normandy invasion on 6 June 1944, attributed his enlistment in the army in May 1941 to the perception that his country and his freedom were in peril from a force bent on destroying American society. Len Lomell, the Ranger who personally destroyed the German battery of 155 mm guns at Pointe du Hoc on D-Day, joined the Rangers for the adventure and excitement that such a unit promised. Many others simply went to war because they were drafted, caught up in the maelstrom of a war that confounded their human expectations.

Few realized what they were getting into when they entered military life. Military service functioned solely as an intermission in their lives. War could hardly be expected to be an extension of domestic life. Once in combat the GI found that war severed the traditional bonds of family and security. By December 1944 casualties were so excessive in the European Theater of Operations there existed a shortfall of three hundred thousand riflemen. Ambrose estimates that nearly one half of the three million men who served in the army in Europe came onto the Continent as replacements. Of these men roughly one half became casualties within their first three days on the front line.

Whether or not the individual rifleman or commander would measure up to the trial of combat was also a powerful motivating force. In the breakout across France and Belgium, Dawson tempered his resolution to meet the final tests with the realization that he was growing awfully weary and must not falter. George Wilson, a company commander of F Company, Twenty-second Infantry, recorded in If You Survive (1987) that he eventually reached his breaking point in the Hurtgen Forest. Wilson had seen so many others falter, he realized he too was on "the black edges." Still the vast majority of leaders continued on, leading their men until casualties had taken a personal toll. In The Men of Company K: The Autobiography of a World War II Rifle Company (1985), a collection of the thoughts of a group of combat soldiers, Harold P. Leinbaugh, a lieutenant in Company K, 333rd Infantry Regiment, 84th Division, freely admits that "We had questions about ourselves that could be answered only in combat." Morton Eustis, recently assigned to an armored division, expresses how worried he was "not whether I'm killed, wounded or taken prisoner . . . but how well I acquit myself when I come up against the real thing."

In reflecting on his own role in the war in Not in Vain: A Rifleman Remembers World War II (1992), rifleman Leon C. Standifer made a revealing distinction between going to war and going into combat. Not surprisingly, his motivations between war and actual combat differed as well. Most American GIs went to war for their country and local communities, but as they got closer to actual combat, that community became less the United States and more First Squad, Easy Company, Second Battalion. While God, Roosevelt, and Country were important, Standifer attacked a machine gun at Le Hirgoat for the approval of his squad. He wanted them to know that he was reliable because within a few minutes he might be badly wounded and need their help; if one of his team members were wounded, then Standifer willingly would risk his life to come to his aid.

What held the men of World War II together once they entered combat was unit cohesion. In the Pacific, Marine Eugene B. Sledge stated emphatically, in With the Old Breed, at Peleliu and Okinawa (1981), that "Company K . . . was home; it was 'my' company. I belonged to it and nowhere else." William Manchester agreed in Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War (1980): "Men . . . do not fight for flag or country, for the Marine Corps or glory or any other abstraction. They fight for one another." War correspondent Ernie Pyle also noted the sacred circle of comradeship among soldiers in the front lines. In describing the fighting in Italy during the winter of 1944, Pyle wrote, "There is a sense of fidelity to each other in a little corps of men who have endured so long, and whose hope in the end can be so small." Major Dick Winters, the central figure in Ambrose's Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne Division: From Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest (1992) added a particular distinction concerning the role of officers in Easy Company, 506th PIR, 101st Airborne Division: "I may have been the commander, but I was not a member of the family. The family belonged to the men; I was a mere caretaker." Even at unit reunions the original members of the Easy Company family sit together at a separate table.

The American GI fought in World War II because there was a job to do and there was simply no one else to do it. They were motivated by patriotism and community, but God and country faded the closer the GI approached the forward edge of the battle area. A popular wartime adage was that patriotism died five miles from the front. Then the soldier's or sailor's commu-
nal attachment to his comrade at arms assumed a far more important role. In actual combat, the American GI fought primarily for personal survival and for the survival of his comrades.

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