

PREFACE

The coauthors of this book believe that readers are owed some explanation for how and why we came to write a book about veterans, without ever having served in the military ourselves. In a 2017 book about his first campaign for the presidency, a Sixties antiwar activist named Bernie Sanders described his engagement with veterans affairs in a way that reflects our own perspective:

Some may see it as incongruous for a strong progressive to be a fierce advocate for veterans rights. I don't, and never have. I will continue to do everything I can to make sure that the United States does not get entangled in wars that we should not be fighting. But I will never blame the men and women who do the fighting for getting us into those wars. If you don't like the wars we get involved in, hold the president and Congress responsible. Don't blame the veterans.¹

Like Sanders, Suzanne Gordon was very involved, as a college student, in protests against the Vietnam War. After becoming a journalist, she covered the GI Coffeehouse movement and related expressions of antiwar sentiment by active-duty military personnel in the early 1970s. Over the years, her freelance work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Washington Monthly*, the *Atlantic*, the *Nation*, the *Hill*, *Mother Jones*, *Jacobin*, *American Prospect*, the *Village Voice*, the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, and many other publications. She has also been a past commentator for CBS Radio and American Public Media's *Marketplace*.

In the 1980s, Suzanne helped trade unionists in the United States and Europe—some of whom were veterans—promote “economic conversion.” Working with them, she organized an international conference on this subject and coedited *Economic Conversion: Revitalizing America’s Economy* (1984). This book critiqued the cost and wastefulness of global military spending. Its cross-border contributors showed how factories engaged in arms manufacturing could be converted to the production of socially useful goods and services.

Over the last thirty years, Suzanne has been an advocate for a publicly funded national healthcare system in the United States. As coeditor of a Cornell University Press book series on the culture and politics of healthcare work, she has published studies of her own and by other authors that deal with patient safety, hospital funding and administration, home care and long-term care, nursing and medical education, and health systems in other industrialized countries.

In books like *Life Support*, *Nursing against the Odds*, and *Safety in Numbers*, Suzanne has written extensively about the invisible work of nurses—members of our largest healthcare profession. In her research, writing, and public speaking before tens of thousands of RNs and allied professionals, she has long stressed the importance of caregivers speaking up on behalf of patients and their families. And she has described how private hospital administrators and managers, including some “nurse leaders,” have used their organizational influence to thwart much-needed workplace improvements and systemic change.

Suzanne’s exploration of our veterans’ healthcare system began with a series of “team-building” workshops that she conducted for staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center in Palo Alto, California. Since then, she has published two books about the VA—*The Battle for Veterans’ Healthcare: Dispatches from the Frontlines of Policy Making and Patient Care* (2017) and *Wounds of War: How the VA Delivers Health, Healing, and Hope to the Nation’s Veterans* (2018). In 2017, Suzanne also coauthored a report for the American Legion titled “VA Healthcare: A System Worth Saving,” and helped found the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute (VHPI) to provide ongoing analyses of VA-related developments. In 2019, she wrote a nationally distributed guide for Rotary Clubs about how they can better partner with the VA on local programs to support veterans. Suzanne is a frequent speaker before audiences of veterans and VA staff members, healthcare union members, and healthcare reformers around the country.

Jasper Craven first started writing about veterans’ issues while working as a stringer for two Vermont newspapers. He was assigned to cover the Senate

Veterans Affairs Committee, then chaired by Senator Bernie Sanders, and Sanders's subsequent campaign for the presidency in 2016. Over the past six years, Jasper has published investigative reports on the problems of military personnel and veterans in a wide range of publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, *Politico*, *Washington Monthly*, *American Prospect*, the *Intercept*, *Task and Purpose*, *Vice*, *Reveal*, and many others. In 2020, he launched *Battle Borne*, a weekly online newsletter, which provides investigative reporting and commentary on veterans' issues and the military.

In his freelance work, Jasper has chronicled leadership misconduct and workplace harassment within the National Guard, local controversy over the deployment of F-35 fighter bombers, Capitol Hill lobbying involving the VA, White House attacks on VA employees (and misconduct by some VA police officers), the declining political clout of veterans' service organizations, and the courting of military voters by both major political parties. As a fellow at the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute, Jasper collaborated with Suzanne on a widely distributed *Congressional and Reporters' Guide to Veterans' Healthcare*, plus other VHPI reports on VA staffing issues, mental health care, and mainstream media coverage of the VA.

Steve Early is the author of four previous books about labor or politics. Although the beneficiary of a draft deferment at the time, he enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at Middlebury College in 1967. His one-semester experience as an ROTC cadet made him a staunch advocate of removing ROTC from campus, abolishing the draft, and ending the Vietnam War, in whatever order any of those goals could be achieved, locally or nationally. In May 1970, he was a local organizer of the national student antiwar strike that involved more than 4 million college and high school students. This formative experience demonstrated the power and potential of collective action for political or workplace change and, in his case, helped inspire fifty years of labor-related activism.

While attending law school in the 1970s, Steve worked with union members—some of them recently returned Vietnam veterans—in a high-risk industry (coal mining). In that and other labor organization roles, he assisted campaigns for workers' rights, safer and healthier workplaces, and affordable healthcare. Because of his long experience in difficult contract negotiations and strikes over job-based medical benefits, he is a strong supporter of Medicare for All.

As someone with a union background, Steve was drawn to the subject matter of this book because of the overlap between labor and veterans' issues in three areas. They include military service as a form of work (albeit

nonunion), the occupational health and safety hazards faced by military personnel, and how their later need for medical care and disability benefits is addressed through a national system of “workers’ compensation” (aka the VA) which is, in many ways, superior to state programs for injured private-sector workers.

Steve has also been struck by the parallel erosion of veteran organization influence and infrastructure, nationally and locally, and labor union decline in the United States. As documented in this book, both trends have had adverse consequences for an overlapping working-class constituency. One upside has been the emergence of newer groups advocating for younger veterans or nonunion workers. While some of these new formations are more promisingly “progressive” in their politics, they also tend to be less membership based, self-financed, or democratically run.

We have collaborated on *Our Veterans* not just because of our shared interest in the issues explored herein but also to amplify the voices of veterans we’ve met whose commitment to helping each other *and* their fellow citizens is a true public service. As readers will discover, the heroes and heroines of this book tend to be independent thinkers, critics of the status quo, and catalysts for new forms of advocacy. But among them, readers will also meet men and women, equally committed and courageous. They’ve tried to work within the structures of existing public institutions or nongovernmental organizations to achieve many of the same goals—whether better healthcare for veterans, a smoother transition from their military service to civilian life, or reduced use of military force, because of its profound and lasting impact on millions of people in the United States and abroad.