

11-10-2016

Strategic Insights: Bridging the Civil-Military Gap

Tami Davis Biddle

Follow this and additional works at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Biddle, Tami Davis, "Strategic Insights: Bridging the Civil-Military Gap" (2016). *Articles & Editorials*. 447.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/447

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles & Editorials by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.

Strategic Insights: Bridging the Civil-Military Gap

November 10, 2016 | Dr. Tami Davis Biddle

The American soldiers who returned home from the war in 1945 were greeted with joy and open arms. They were feted in parades, and celebrated in books, films, and songs. They were the heroes of the war that created modern America—wealthy, technologically-advanced, and sitting astride the world. Later they would come to be known as “the greatest generation”; it is a label that many of them eschew, but it speaks to the way they have been appropriated in American public memory and national identity.

The soldiers who returned home from the war in the early-1970s came back to a nation that wanted nothing to do with them. Hostile stares, sometimes worse, greeted them on their arrival. American confusion, anger, and guilt about Vietnam were re-directed to its draftee army. After the war, the U.S. military adopted an all-volunteer force structure. For the services, this choice solved many of the problems of dealing with unpredictable civilian draftees and the sometimes-fickle population from which they were drawn. For the American people, it meant that their husbands, sons, and brothers faced very low odds of being asked to go to war. This shift, however, went far to sever the link between American civilians and the military that represents them, protects them, and does their bidding in the world.

The soldiers who have returned from recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have returned to a land that, while superficially appreciative, is almost entirely uncomprehending. Less than 1 percent of the American population now serves in the Armed Forces; therefore, most of our population has no contact at all with the military. It also means that we ask a very small number of our citizens to carry the full moral burden of the use of state-sanctioned violence to accomplish political aims. Indeed, most Americans have so completely separated themselves from this responsibility that they no longer realize they own it. Nevertheless, they do. In a system of representative government, the people—through their elected officials—are the ones who make the most important decisions; this includes decisions about peace and war. If the members of a given administration make unwise choices, they can be removed from power in the next election cycle. Military officers are not elected; therefore, they do not control when or where they go to war. That decision is in the hands of the American people, represented by an elected Commander in Chief, and elected members of Congress. When our soldiers go to war, they do so in order to fight the battles that we have asked them to fight; and they fight wearing the flag of our nation on their uniforms.

Today, the United States owns the largest and most capable military in the world, and yet we rarely teach our citizens about it—how it came to exist, how it functions, how it is controlled. Very few high school civics classes explain the civilian control of the military. Also, with a few exceptions, colleges and universities eschew the subject entirely. We do not teach our citizens about “just war” theory and the laws of war. Moreover, we do not teach them just how blunt and limited military force can be as an instrument of power. In this, we not only fail the nation, but we fail those who serve. Soldiers need American citizens to understand both the capabilities and the

limitations of military force. Soldiers need American citizens to know when the use of force is legitimate and appropriate, and when it is not. Finally, the U.S. military needs American citizens to help share the burdens and consequences that come with the use of force. Those consequences include wounds to the bodies and souls of our soldiers. If we refuse to accept these responsibilities, we inflict upon our soldiers a burden that they should not have to bear alone.

Soldiers will carry to war that which is necessary for survival. What they bring home with them will be highly contingent; it will vary with the events they witnessed and the decisions they made (often within terrible time constraints) in a world that tears apart the ordered and intricate structures of normal moral choice or turns them completely upside down. When we send soldiers to war, we ask them to traverse a landscape that is so alien and otherworldly that they cannot possibly return unscathed and unchanged.

Wanting to make a small difference in the educational landscape on these topics, I joined forces with a colleague, Professor Wendy Moffat of Dickinson College, to create a unique course that brought together senior officers and undergraduates. Our location helped us: Carlisle, Pennsylvania houses Dickinson College, a selective liberal arts college, on one end of town, and the nation's second oldest Army post—Carlisle Barracks—on the other. Carlisle Barracks is home to the U.S. Army War College, the Army's senior staff college. With the assistance of a Mellon grant designed to promote civil-military interaction, we brought together 25 officers and 20 undergraduates to study war and politics, and to come to grips with the nature of American civil-military relations.

We focused our students mainly on World War I, which enabled them to study a conflict that upended the European world of the early-20th century, and left a long and difficult legacy with which we still contend today. As we moved toward the end of the course, though, we shifted gears. We took our students to meet with recovering soldiers at Walter Reed. We invited writer David Finkel to come and speak to us about his emotionally searing book, *Thank You for Your Service*. Finally, we asked our undergrads to interview the veterans. The undergrads designed the hard, unflinching questions that called for open and honest answers: What is it like to say goodbye to your family and head into a war zone? What is it like to come back into a world that is ordered and predictable? What is it like to come home and feel, for a time, like a stranger in your own home and in your own land? By the end of the course they knew and trusted one another, and the exchanges were remarkable—both moving and unforgettable. We simply stood back and watched in awe the kinds of conversations that had become possible.

The nation needs more conversations like these. There are veterans in schools across America now. Educators and administrators ought to seek out ways to help them open a dialogue with the students around them. Both parties will benefit from the exchange, and we will begin the project of more fully educating our citizens about war, warfighting, and the costs and burdens of war hidden to those who have never traversed a battlefield.

The views expressed in this Strategic Insights piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This article is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press articles should contact the Editor for Production. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."

All Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press publications may be downloaded free of charge from the SSI website. Hard copies of certain reports may also be obtained free of charge while supplies last by placing an order on the SSI website. Check the website for availability. SSI publications may be quoted or reprinted in part or in full with permission and appropriate credit given to the U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA.