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From Yesterday's Fears to Today's Realities

DEWITT C. SMITH, JR.

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To address the full range of our mutual civilian-military concerns with national issues is a task which, I think, far exceeds the single effort of any single individual.

My purpose here will be to suggest, however, a framework of understanding within which I think those of us who wear uniforms, and those who do not, must and can think, work, and contribute together to the achievement of the fundamental purposes of our free society. I have in mind a common and, hopefully, agreed ground of facts from which to approach our several interests. Among other things, we must substitute today's reality for yesterday's fears. From such a base we can achieve the human communication which is necessary to both understanding and shared progress.

Some of our citizens may still echo Plato's rhetorical question of long ago: "What is more important than that the work of the soldier be done well?" But I suspect many more agree with one of our founding fathers who counselled, "It ill behoves a democracy to become over-fond of its soldiery." Between those two viewpoints, I share that of the founding father. It is, of course, rooted in our historical experience in the Old World, and represents one of the strongest threads from which the fabric of American society was woven. I think the skepticism and criticism which we Americans have always directed at the military, however they may chafe on occasions, are absolute requisites of freedom. In our national case, they are a proven, 200-year-old asset. Significantly, this critical eye for the military has been missing in every unfree nation of which I know.

So saying, neither we nor American citizens at large can afford to let that properly skeptical attitude about the military lead to emotional bias, uninformed abuse, or, most common, to stereotyping this or any other segment of our people. Indeed, I think the disease of stereotyping or generalizing has been one of the major ills of our society. Stereotyping of blacks, Jews, southerners, New Yorkers, Catholics, college professors, businessmen, those on welfare and those who are wealthy; or generalizing about "the Ethnic," "the Establishment," "Middle America," or the military and civilians allegedly in constant opposition--all this is harmful; it is corrosive, divisive, and destructive of understanding and, hence, of human and national progress.

Related to this in a sense, we owe it to fairness and the pursuit of truth not to engage in repetitious pronouncements of conventional wisdom and the clichés of which it consists. Those in uniform must be fully in touch with the society they serve, understand its philosophical underpinnings and complexity, and appreciate that much of its greatness stems from its diversity of people and points of view. As a part of this, they must be prepared, in Harry Truman's words, "to stand the heat in the kitchen" or get out. One of the prices of public service is public criticism.

Equally, those who work with us, study us, and speak and write about us must avoid pushing ever forward essentially the same body of conventional wisdom as if it had some immutable form and life of its own. Change, of course, occurs all the time, and it should be the business of those who study the military, as it is of all scholars, to discern the fact and meaning of this change, and then to deal with current reality in their writings, studies, and other work.

It is my impression that people both in and out of mufti have engaged in too much stereotyping, as well as in perpetuating old facts and non-facts alike. Certainly as we work together, we need to be abreast of today's reality and, as Will Rogers said, not "let yesterday use up too much of today." We need, so far as possible, to proceed from some facts and mutual understandings. Here, as a soldier, I should like to set forth some points relating to the military which I, at least, consider to be fundamental.

First, I think it a fact that, in our country, the military is here to stay--a "necessary evil," you might say--and here to stay in rather substantial dimension. George Washington could afford to turn away from standing armies; we cannot.

America is necessarily involved in the affairs of a still imperfect, still dangerous world, in which it is by far the most powerful free nation. The old "moats" of the Atlantic and Pacific have dried up. Time and space no longer protect us, and we have neither the right nor the ability to look anymore to British and French "outguards" to protect us while we sleep or prepare. In the late 20th century, we are it. We are there. And also, in a nation so involved and committed as ours--a nation which wishes to remain free and secure itself--the military is here to stay.

Secondly, and following from that, it is tempting in peacetime to look around for something "productive," as some put it, for the military to do. I can understand that to a degree, instinctively, but I cannot accept it rationally or philosophically. So the second fundamental I want to underline is this: the most "productive" purpose to which military forces can be put in time of peace is deterrence of war--the preservation of peace through unmistakable but responsible strength. At my US Army War College, we use Elihu Root's founding words: "Not to promote war, but to preserve peace through intelligent and adequate preparation. . . ." Failing this, then military forces must be ready to fight and achieve their goals. To be capable of these fundamental functions in the world of today requires armed forces which are fully adequate, highly competent, truly ready, and credible to both allies and possible adversaries. What all must understand is this: the "Old Armee" is gone; readiness is a tough, continuous job; we *have* something to do! The preservation of peace and the security of our nation are tasks both "productive" and full-time.

Should there be time left over from that fundamental work of the American military then, yes, there are specialized people and resources which could be devoted on occasion to civic action projects, provided a policy decision is reached to so employ them. Such work could also be "productive," and for some in the military it would provide both interest and variety. But we must ever be sensitive to the political and philosophical issues related to the use of the military in civilian spheres of activity. We must keep in mind the proper interests and roles of civilian labor and business, and not impinge upon them. And we must remember that, with the military, primary missions come first, or there may be no other missions at all.

Turning from those fundamentals, there are also some present realities which I believe we must keep clearly in mind. I was thinking of these when I referred earlier to the substitution of today's reality for yesterday's fears. It was these realities which underlay my earlier observations about clichés, conventional wisdom, and recognizing change. The present factual unreality with which some people approach the examples I have in mind constitutes a classic example of how hard it is to remove old views, old barriers to understanding, when the passage of time has proved them wrong or outmoded.

For example, less than two decades ago, repeated alarms were being sounded about the advent of a "garrison state" in America. This spectre provided the raw material and catalytic inspiration for numbers of books, articles, and scholarly "papers." There may well be some value in such intense, democratic concern. But there is no value in it--indeed, there is damage--when it assumes the form of propaganda, and when it is perpetuated beyond the point when contrary evidence is available and the verdict has been returned. Certainly this nation of today is no garrison state. I can think of no country less like Sparta than the United States of America.

Associated with the concern over a garrison state has been the fear that, with large standing forces and with constant, priority focus on national security issues, the values of our society would be "militarized." I still read and hear of this concern frequently. There are, indeed, some differences between the values of our society and those which must obtain in an effective military force. But the military in this land is not static, narrowly based, or remote from the society it serves. Neither have its members ever sought to intrude upon the nature or the functions of our free society. This is another old fear, then, that I suggest we put in true perspective. There has been no militarization; indeed, there has been some recent concern that the military has been made less effective by the inroads which our societal values have made in its disciplined ranks. I do not share this fear, either.

Still another old fear, heard frequently yet today, is that some kind of inexorable bureaucratic momentum impels the military and all other large bureaucracies to seek ever more people and ever more dollars. I know these tendencies exist, but I also know that our free institutions work and that, in this case, they have worked to reduce the Army in size by half since Vietnam, and, in real dollars, to reduce its budget and share of the GNP as well. What compels the military to remain a substantial element of our society is not bureaucratic momentum, but a world which is still perceived as unsettled and dangerous.

Vietnam and the days which followed added at least two more fears to the storeroom of conventional wisdom. Somber pundits predicted that the American military, as a result of the trauma associated with the war in Vietnam, would proclaim a stab-in-the-back theory, turn inward in bitterness, form something akin to the Secret Army of France which followed Indochina and Algeria, and represent a threat to our society. This faithless vision, of course, did not come to pass. There was no current or historical reason to suppose it would. But even today, I occasionally hear faint echoes of this.

Somewhat similarly, at the time a President was undergoing the final trauma leading to his resignation, there were those who feared that the military somehow would be employed to intervene in the affair. This set some new standard of unfounded distrust and misunderstanding and was, of course, totally without foundation.

Perhaps most of all today, we have old fears intruding into the present, old prejudices ignoring present reality, when the volunteer armed forces are discussed. Substantial problems remain in this area: the possible impact of a full-employment economy on recruiting; how to acquire sufficient volunteers for the reserve components; the numerical adequacy of forces to meet major emergencies; and the degree to which support will be provided to assure recruitment and retention. But, while addressing them, we should not also have to face unfounded criticism and non-facts which have been repeated so often they are assuming a self-sustaining momentum. There also needs to be a clearing of the philosophical air.

For instance, to equate "volunteers" with "mercenaries," as some do, is not only insulting to those in service, but it begs the English language as well. These words are antonyms, not synonyms, in terms of both spirit and dictionary. Another example is the newfound infatuation of some with the illiberal concepts of a draft or universal service. While I am prepared to give affirmative professional support to whatever type of forces the people decide upon, I have come to the private conclusion that the ultimate democratic act is to volunteer. To draft is coercive and, in actual practice, it has also proved to be inequitable. Except in an extremity, when large numbers would clearly be needed, it seems to me that compulsory public service is an alien instrument within a free land.

That, however, is a personal point of view or philosophy. There are some impersonal facts which bear emphasis, because the non-facts on these issues have acquired such fashionable currency.

One concerns the quality of the volunteer Army. While the quality requires constant working at, and constant support, it is better than that of any Army I have known. In speaking of quality, I include such measures as mental levels, education, physical condition, civilian records, trainability, and discipline. And I speak as a two-time private of Canadian and American infantry who, like all middle-aged men, might like to think that yesterday was better. It was not. Rose-colored glasses just make it seem so.

Another issue concerns the composition of today's volunteer Army. Contrary to the fashionable cliché, it is widely representative of America. The representation is not in precise, point-to-point ratio, but neither is it so in any other institution--the Congress, the Civil Service, the press, or the professions, for instance. The people in this Army stem from our society, and come from all economic and social and regional segments in reasonable proportion. They are slightly unbalanced in ethnic composition, but that is because the Army truly offers equal opportunity. Our people are not static, remote, or in any sense unusually susceptible to misleading by arrogant civilian authority. They are in touch with the rest of America; they "go home again." Moreover, who, in a free society, is to establish the quotas to compel any institution to be exactly "representative"? Is anyone prepared to say that black is bad and white is good? Certainly I am not; it is not true!

Another question, that of cost, is an important factor for us all to consider. But the conventional wisdom, repeated *ad nauseum*, is that it is the voluntary nature of our forces which makes the costs of people so high. That, I think, is largely false or at least misleading. The "personnel costs" are up because, in a sense, we are paying an overdue bill for some 190 years of inequity. For that long, we bought servicemen and women on the cheap. Now, belatedly, we are trying to measure rough comparability with other work in our society, and to pay and support our military people comparably. Additionally, we include in our present "personnel costs" many of the debts incurred in the past, as well as substantial costs which could be charged to other agencies. Armed forces do cost money; so does life insurance. People especially are costly, but people are our primary resource, our main investment in national security. I believe

that there are changes in some of our systems which good conscience, good management, and changed circumstance dictate. But the key fact remains that armed forces are a costly necessity, and they will be costly whether draftee or volunteer.

Lastly, with respect to volunteer forces, one often hears of alleged indiscipline. That is simply untrue. The disciplinary record of the Army today, for instance, is far better than that of the year 1944, when a historic army entered Normandy. A disciplined military is, of course, absolutely essential in a free society. The Army today is better disciplined than any I have known, and that should be a source of national satisfaction rather than a target for misinformation.

Those, then, are some examples of attitudes and issues on which present reality casts brighter light than was anticipated in the fears of yesteryear. My hope is that, whatever the issues we address in the days to come, we will address them in present perspective and from a platform of established empirical evidence.

These successes in avoiding or overcoming earlier fears are really latter-day examples of what, in a larger and historical sense, I choose to call a democratic success story. This is a story too little understood, and too seldom told. And it is a success for which all segments of America can take credit. I speak of the success story of the American military, an institution not without warts, but an institution which, for 200 years and more, has remained loyally and effectively within the constitutional framework wisely devised by our forefathers. I know of no full parallel for this in any other land.

We have had no "man on horseback," no "garrison state," no militarization of society. Rather, we have had a military which has protected rather than suppressed the people, and has given equally scrupulous attention to safeguarding individual liberties and collective security.

Americans in the volunteer armed forces stem from the society they serve. They share its values and aspirations. Theirs is the same transcendent vision of a free land of free people. Their purposes are the nation's purposes.

Especially significant, the leadership of the American military is also broadly representative and in touch with the country. It stems from no single school, no one region, no single social or economic segment, no one ethnic source--and it holds no single point of view. Moreover, it is schooled in the wise and responsible use of military power, within a constitutional framework, and under proper civilian authority. American military officers have been, and remain, advisors on the use of power, but not advocates of its use.

This is a success story of, and for, all Americans; it has been an important element in the progress the American people have made in realizing their initial dream. In it, I suggest, are grounds to search for ideas and work for progress together.

This article was originally published in *Parameters* in 1977 (Vol. VII, No. 1). At that time then-Major General DeWitt C. Smith, Jr., was Commandant of the Army War College.

Reviewed 25 November 1996. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil.