

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 30
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2000*

Article 8

8-16-2000

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Recommended Citation

Thomas S. Langston, "The Civilian Side of Military Culture," *Parameters* 30, no. 3 (2000), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1992.

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The Civilian Side of Military Culture

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From *Parameters*, Autumn 2000, pp. 21-29.

The current interaction between civilian reformers ("agenda pushers" to their antagonists) and the professional military is part of a long history of tension between civilian society and the armed forces. As Samuel Huntington famously argued, this tension becomes especially intense in periods of transition from war to something else, as in today's ongoing adjustment to the end of the Cold War. Where will the pressures toward "transmutation" end?[1] The answer lies with the American society and its attitudes and expectations of the military, with what can usefully, if awkwardly, be termed "civilian military culture."

The purpose of this article is to attempt answers to a number of questions about our civilian military culture. To begin with, what are its core characteristics? Second, what are its origins? Third, are civilian attitudes about the military presently undergoing change, or merely the appearance of change? And finally, how might the military most prudently respond to cultural pressures from civilian America?

Core Attributes

In the works of historians, political scientists, and sociologists, a rough consensus exists on three core attributes of civilian military culture. Americans are typically impatient about combat, sensitive to US casualties, and skeptical of the military's "right to be different." [2]

Impatience about combat is suggested by the experience of Americans in war. Only two of our wars lasted longer than five years. The Revolutionary War (1775-1783) was one of them, and it sorely tested the endurance of the population. The social safety valve of Loyalist escape to Canada and an often-casual attitude toward militia obligations relieved what might otherwise have been unbearable pressure on the government to win the war quickly or acknowledge defeat. To a remarkable degree, the perseverance of a single man, General George Washington, allowed the war to continue until it was won. The only other American experience with large-scale, sustained combat was in Vietnam (1964-1973). In that war, the crossover point in American public opinion was the Tet Offensive of 1968.

Tet was a catalyst of opinion change for a number of reasons. One of them was that it gave the lie to administration and Pentagon assurances that victory was near. If those who planned and conducted the US part in the war had chosen to do things differently, perhaps the public might have supported a longer war. We will never know. What we do know, though, is that American support for the war declined as US casualties mounted. In fact, the Vietnam experience was remarkably similar in this respect to the Korean War. [3]

American sensitivity to US casualties has been a feature of even our most major wars. World War I is instructive. When the United States entered the war, the British, Germans, and Russians had already suffered horrendous casualties, numbering in the millions, and had been fighting for three years. From April 1917 through the next year, the United States lost 116,516 military personnel in the war. [4] Yet the cost was too much for the US Commander-in-Chief to bear. Woodrow Wilson, greatly troubled by the American casualties, could accept those losses only if the reality of the war could be aligned with its rhetoric. Only in wars fought on American soil have Americans demonstrated a resolve to "pay any price, bear any burden."

On top of impatience and sensitivity must be added skepticism. Skepticism has in fact been a key feature of US attitudes toward the military since the nation's founding.

Some of the nation's most illustrious early leaders, in particular Thomas Jefferson, regretted even the necessity of a standing military force. Jefferson therefore became an early and successful exponent of transmutation. If a standing army could not be eliminated, it could at least be oriented toward useful--meaning civilian--pursuits. Hence Jefferson's use of the military for exploration and road-building, and his decision to appoint as superintendent of the US Military Academy an amateur scientist rather than a professional soldier.[5] More recently, the evidence of an underlying civilian refusal to grant the military autonomy is legion.

Fortunately for those who believe the military continues to have a vital role in defending the nation's interests, civilian impatience, sensitivity, and skepticism do not add up to simple hostility. Impatience, to begin with, does not extend to all uses of the armed forces. The Indian wars were drawn-out affairs. Though the public did, on occasion, call for a sort of "Weinberger-Powell Doctrine for Fighting Indigenous Peoples," the Army over the long term waged a patient "siege" against Indian civilization. Today, as John Mueller notes on the basis of his studies of American public opinion, civilians demonstrate remarkable patience (or its equivalent, indifference) in support of unconventional operations, so long as no US soldier dies.[6]

Similarly, reluctance to sacrifice American soldiers is clearly not "anti-military." Nor is it absolute or irrational. A survey released in 1999 by the Triangle Institute for Strategic Studies (TISS) suggests that the mass public is actually more willing to absorb losses than conventional wisdom would suggest.[7] To "stabilize a democratic government in Congo," the public claimed a willingness to accept almost 7,000 US casualties, while both civilian and military elites answered in the hundreds.

These figures need to be interpreted with caution. Other surveys in the post-Cold War period suggest that Presidents are right to act with extreme caution about US casualties, because the public has grave doubts about even the most basic US commitments abroad. "Defending the security of American allies," for instance, was accepted by a majority of Americans as an obligation of the United States at least in theory in 1990. By the mid-1990s, only a minority agreed that it was very important. Support for "protecting weaker nations" against aggressors similarly dropped to well below a majority.[8]

Also, in the TISS survey, respondents were first told that "a President decided" to send troops to one place or another. This question wording is troublesome, because it suggests to the respondent that a President has already taken action, and does not mention any disagreement with his decisions. In a recent article James Burk argues that the public--in responding to real, not hypothetical, missions--reacts to elite consensus or conflict. Elite consensus is associated with tolerant support; elite conflict can cause support to crumble.[9]

Senior officers (and their Commander-in-Chief) are prudent not to gamble on the elite consensus that preserves public support. Nevertheless, the point remains that casualty sensitivity is related to rational perceptions of costs and benefits. It is an issue to be neither ignored nor bowed-down-before, but managed and addressed.

The skepticism of the American public toward military difference is also balanced by the fact that Americans sometimes give themselves wholeheartedly to military causes, and periodically choose war heroes as national leaders. It is also indicative of a balanced view toward the military that when things get tough in civilian life in the United States, generations of Americans have been exhorted to fight the "moral equivalent of war" against hard times at home. The military, as an ideal and an institution, has at times been tremendously popular in the United States.

In fact, most American civilians hold the military in high esteem today. Among younger American adults especially, the military and the people who run it are respected and admired.[10] While boomers are more negative than youth toward the military, the general public registers impressive levels of confidence in the armed forces. Indeed, in a recent check of American regard for societal institutions, the public displayed more confidence in the military than in any other institution.[11] And among the things the public seems to admire of the services is their famously non-democratic organizational culture. There were only three other institutions in which a majority expressed either "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence. Two of these, the police and organized religion, are also distinguished by hierarchical organization and discipline.

Origins

American civilian attitudes toward the military are, then, ambivalent, not hostile. The origins of this ambivalence are national ideology and patriotic sentiment.

In terms of ideology, America has a famously Lockean-Liberal mainstream, in tension with its need for military security. Lockean Liberals value individual commitments over group loyalties. The professional armed forces, with their premeditated assault on the destructive individualism of recruits, stand apart as bulwarks of anti-liberalism.

Liberalism thus helps explain a part of the American civilian military culture. Americans, being Classical Liberals, view war as an aberration. This helps explain civilian impatience with the military. But Liberalism does not offer a straightforward explanation of the other attributes of US civilian military culture.

At first glance, it may seem that the American fixation upon casualties is also a straightforward product of national ideology. Liberalism, one often hears, proclaims the "infinite value" of every human life. Yet in our laws concerning such things as workplace safety and airplane traffic control, our government implicitly assigns finite values to human life. Moreover, as a nation we are in some ways absolutely careless with our lives. If saving lives were really the highest priority of a liberal nation, Americans would be hard pressed to explain the centrality of cars and handguns to their culture. A high sensitivity to casualties must come, then, not simply from Liberalism, but from something else.

The place of military service in the American psyche is perhaps that "something else." It is not simply that members of the armed forces die in uniform or in service to others that makes Americans anxious to preserve their lives. Police officers die in uniformed service to others, as do firefighters, paramedics, and civilian rescue personnel. Their losses are mourned, but do not occasion calls to terminate such services.

It is, rather, that members of the armed forces serve the nation as a whole. This makes them symbols of American national identity and purpose. In addition to this, everyone knows that, at times, men across the nation have been required to serve in the military (but not the police). Because of this fact, there is a sense that those who serve in the armed forces literally as well as symbolically take the place of those who do not. These facts about military service, when combined, help to make sense of the great caution with which US civilian leaders evaluate the costs and benefits of military deployments today.

With regard, finally, to civilian skepticism, the negative half of ambivalence could certainly reflect Liberal hostility. But what of the periodically positive view that Americans exhibit toward their armed forces?

Liberalism's influence on attitudes toward the services and their non-liberal ways can perhaps best be compared to the effect of the American frontier on attitudes toward the community. The frontier, historians tell us, was a powerful inducement to individualism. At the same time, however, the frontier experience taught individualists the necessity of community.[12] On the edge of the wilderness, there were things that needed to be done that no individual could do alone. On the frontier, and off it, conservative practices and institutions keep individualism from descending into chaos, and Americans act as if they instinctively know this.

Amplification

There are a host of changes in the world that are enhancing the pressures which civilian military culture places on the services. Technology has made impatience potentially an even greater problem than before. With just a few thousand dollars' worth of equipment, a reporter can file real-time stories and videos of combat, provided he can get close enough to the scene to capture it in a viewfinder. As for casualty sensitivity, two major trends are potentially contributing to a rise in the influence of this dimension of civilian unease. First, there is demography. American families today are smaller, and youth scarcer. In 1994, only 3.35 million Americans turned 18, the lowest figure since 1964.[13]

Another factor, highlighted by Charles Moskos, is elite disengagement from military affairs. When the sons of the establishment go to war, Moskos observes, the mass public is considerably more likely to fall in line than when privileged youth abstain from or protest against military action.[14] Today, there are grounds for concern along these lines. As the writer Thomas Ricks observes, ignorance of the military is becoming endemic among segments of America's civilian elite, some of whom wear that ignorance as a badge of honor.[15]

Skepticism toward the military and its way of life is also interacting with movements in the social and political environment. Formerly, crosscutting cleavages in the major parties ensured ambivalence about the military in both Democratic and Republican camps. Today, the Republican Party is overwhelmingly the party of choice for military professionals.

Among civilian elites, from 1976 to 1996 "Independent" status lost ground, while Republican Party identification picked up--from 25 percent of the public to 34 percent. Among military officers, these trends were accelerated. In 1976, 46 percent of officers were Independents and 33 percent were Republicans. Twenty years later, 67 percent were Republicans, while only 22 percent were Independents.[16]

The greater portion of this shift is simply the military's response to ongoing changes in the national party system. In the past, more officers were Democrats, but more Democrats were hawks. As hawks, especially from the South, abandoned the Democratic Party, where else but to the Republican Party would one expect the professional military to go? The regional realignment of the South also affects how people in the nation at large think of the two parties, making the Republican Party the obvious home for pro-military partisans and the Democrats the party for more skeptical observers of the armed forces.

On this last point, consider the difference in perspective between the most recent Democratic Chair of the House Armed Services Committee, Ronald Dellums, and his predecessor, Les Aspin. Dellums got his start in politics in the Oakland/Berkeley antiwar environment of the late 1960s and remained a vociferous critic of the military throughout his lengthy House career. Aspin, a relatively pro-military Democrat from Wisconsin, supported President Bush during the Gulf War.

A smaller but more important part of the explanation for increasing Republican partisanship of officers is an increase in their self-professed conservatism. Sixteen percent of officers described themselves as either "somewhat" or "very" liberal in 1976. In 1996, there were no very liberal officers to be found, and only three percent of officers surveyed said they were somewhat liberal. The proportion of officers identifying with conservatism increased during the same time from 61 percent to 73 percent.

Among enlistees as well, there is evidence that "the institution as a whole is increasingly attracting more conservative and Republican elements of civilian society . . . and appealing to fewer among its more liberal and Democratic segments." [17] Beginning in the mid-1980s, a significant shift began in regional accessions. Northern representation within the services dropped while the southern presence increased. Today, the South is overrepresented by about eight percent in enlisted accessions each year. Recent numbers for the Marine Corps tell the same story. Fiscal Year 1999 active accessions from the six southern states in the Marine's 6th Recruiting District totaled 5,691; those from the ten northeastern states in District 1 numbered 4,811.[18] The South's overrepresentation in terms of military bases and expenditures makes it difficult to counter these trends. The military simply has a much greater presence in the South than elsewhere. Indeed, in 1996, the South had only 15.4 percent of US population, but 31.5 percent of military personnel.[19]

At the same time as the military is becoming more southern, it may soon become more white. African-American enlistment propensity has declined significantly since 1984, the first year that such data was disaggregated by race. This decline, moreover, does not correspond statistically with the end of the Cold War or even with unemployment in the civilian economy. Because of the declining size of the force, and the higher starting point of African-American versus white propensity to enlist, this long-term trend has yet to break the significant bond between the African-American community and the military. But the trends suggest that it is only a matter of time.

The trends that are making the officer corps and the military more homogeneous may be part of a broad realignment of civilian society along a pro-military and a not-pro-military line of cleavage. This polarization raises the possibility of skepticism run riot if unified Democratic Party control of government reappears. It could also tempt the professional military into an overly close association with party politics.

What Should Be Done?

The major implication of this analysis is that military professionals can expect increasing pressure to conform to civilian preferences. How might the professional military respond? The finer points of any answer depend on precisely what sort of military force the nation needs in the future, which itself depends in large part on the nature of future war. These are topics beyond this article's scope, but some broad assumptions suffice to generate a first-impression answer.

We can start with two assumptions. First, the services will continue to engage in dangerous missions, conventional and unconventional. Second, the Revolution in Military Affairs cannot eliminate the risk of death for US personnel in missions at any point along the spectrum of force. For these reasons, military professionals will continue to be confronted by the problems of impatience and casualty sensitivity. They might try to meet these head on, either by increasing bureaucratic resistance to missions of marginal importance--where commanders know from experience that even a handful of casualties can bring a deployment to an embarrassed halt--or by attempting to educate the public on the nature of military service.

Resistance to nonessential missions has been strong since the US defeat in Vietnam, and this resistance has promoted the influence of the armed forces in Washington.[20] But despite this, the civilians are still in control, and civilian leaders tend to be highly internationalist.[21] Even a very pro-military President of the future might be more interventionist than many military professionals would prefer. (It is instructive in this light that Patrick Buchanan, the most isolationist of the conservative contenders for President in the year 2000, left the Republican Party in his bid for office.) If they cannot stop such missions, might military leaders persuade the public to take a more stoical view of US casualties? There is no reason to believe that they could. Any such attempt would, in any event, potentially undermine the military's influence over how and when to deploy.

The alternative is to address the issue of casualty avoidance through finesse. This would be especially appropriate if civilian leaders are going to continue to call upon the armed forces to perform numerous non-war-fighting missions. For such deployments, it would be beneficial to all parties for the troops to be supported by a less sentimental public. It would be highly inappropriate to finesse civilian authorities in such situations, but would it be inappropriate for civilian and military leaders together to finesse the issue of casualties in such operations? I think not; but how might it be done?

One answer, which has been mentioned by Samuel Huntington as well, is that serious thought be given to the creation of a new organizational entity for peace operations.

When a soldier (or sailor, airman, or marine) dies in a peace operation today, it can hardly be seen as anything but wasteful. Consensus is lacking on whether it is a soldier's job to be in a place like Somalia, Haiti or, eventually, the Congo, and the public responds appropriately. If we had special troops for such missions, the death of "peace officers" might be perceived by the public as being akin to the loss of police officers in the line of duty. An instructive parallel might be drawn here to Foreign Service Officers. By the State Department's own reckoning--as recorded in the lobby of the State Department building--67 civilian government officials died in "heroic or other inspirational circumstances" from 1976 to 1999. Their deaths engendered no public questioning of their mission.

A peace force could be crafted in any number of ways. The Special Forces Command, perhaps joined with the Central Intelligence Agency, could form the nucleus of such a group. Or the Marine Corps might more simply be tasked to fashion itself more clearly into what every marine is already taught he or she is a part of, a "global 911 force." Or, as Huntington has suggested, a civil operations component might be added alongside the active and reserve components, and each of the four services be tasked to support it. The US Coast Guard, Huntington observes, is a model of an organization with a military structure and ethos, but one *not* organized in peacetime to "fight and win the nation's wars." [22]

As regards skepticism towards the military, this can no more be changed than can the underlying ideology of the public. But the trend toward the Republicanization of the armed forces and the polarization of the public along a line of military cleavage can and should be addressed. The armed forces cannot turn back the clock to make the Democratic Party more hospitable to military professionals. But whatever military leaders can do to build bridges to a broader cross-section of the civilian public should be encouraged.

In conclusion, analysis of the civilian military culture does not provide easy solutions to the problems faced by the

armed forces. But this analysis points the way to some opportunities for creative adjustment on the part of military professionals. Certainly one lesson is that the broad and ambivalent civilian culture on military issues is not likely to change for the better without leadership from both civilian and military leaders. The direction of change within military organizations should be chosen not in accord with, but in awareness of, civilian attitudes and expectations.

NOTES

This paper was prepared with support from the Bradley Foundation. An earlier version was presented at the Naval War College, Newport, R.I., at a conference on US Military Culture, Ethics, and the Future of War, 15-16 November 1999.

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