

Strategy Research Project

The American Warrior Caste: Risk and Opportunity

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The American Warrior Caste: Risk and Opportunity

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Abstract

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The American Warrior Caste: Risk and Opportunity

From the dawn of history wise men have seen that the perpetuation of free institutions depends on the power of self-defense. To be permanent, democratic political institutions must include a democratic system of military security...A free state cannot continue to be democratic in peace and autocratic in war. Standing armies threaten government by the people, not because they consciously seek to pervert liberty, but because they relieve the people themselves of the duty of self-defense. *A people accustomed to let a special class defend them must sooner or later become unfit for liberty.* An enduring government by the people must include an army of the people among its vital institutions. For this reason, *the maintenance of a single professional soldier more than necessary threatens the very groundwork of free institutions.*

—General John McAuley Palmer¹

Throughout the first 200 years of American civil-military relations, civilian and military leaders alike struggled to find the right balance of emphasis on the citizen-soldier and the professional soldier. America's Founding Fathers viewed a large standing army as a significant threat to the Republic and codified measures to keep the fledgling military under civilian control. For nearly two centuries, their vision was manifested in a small military which consisted of a nucleus of military professionals who were augmented by citizens mobilized to perform their civic duty for America's common defense in times of crisis. After the Vietnam War, this paradigm was flipped as a conscript army became socially unacceptable and politically untenable. As a result, the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) was introduced to provide a highly professional military manned solely by volunteers. The presidential commission charged with examining the AVF, recommended implementation but also acknowledged popular concerns that the AVF would "be separate and acquire unwarranted influence within the government."²

While the AVF and the resulting civil-military gap have been studied exhaustively, little attention has been paid to the warrior caste which has taken root within the gap. A

“caste” can be defined as “any class or group of people who inherit exclusive privileges or *are perceived as socially distinct*” – exactly what the Gates Commission feared. The members of the U.S. Armed Forces, particularly those who have joined the “family business” by following parents or close relatives into military service, are generally unaware that they are now members of an exclusive and insular group which yields power and influence that is unprecedented in American history.

This study will demonstrate that an American Warrior Caste (AWC) has developed and that its existence is inexorably linked to the civil-military gap. Specifically, it shows that the AWC’s physical and psychological separation from the society it serves presents a significant threat to the future of the United States through the elimination of the need for society to participate in the common defense of the United States. Identifying the threat posed by the AWC is the first step toward mitigating its effects.

Case Selection

While the AWC consists of all four branches of the U.S. military, this study will focus on the Army for two reasons. First, the Army is the oldest and largest branch, has the most contact with the American people, experiences the most significant growth during crises and war, and sustains the most casualties in combat.³ Second, and perhaps most importantly, when Americans are asked to envision their military, they are arguably most apt to think of the Army infantry soldier as images from popular movies such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Platoon*, and *Black Hawk Down*⁴ come to mind. The prominence of the American soldier in the public psyche was further exemplified when in December 2003, three young soldiers from the U.S. Army’s 1st Armored Division appeared on the cover of Time magazine as the “Person of the Year: The American

Soldier.” The accompanying article lauded the contributions of all service-members in the post-9/11 period, but Time magazine chose to personify the cumulative effort of the post-9/11 U.S. Armed Forces through these soldiers.⁵

From the “Minute-Man” to the “Army-of-One”

America’s Founding Fathers considered a large standing army as a dangerous entity to be avoided. In 1776, Samuel Adams cautioned, “A standing army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the Liberties of the People,”⁶ and “should be watched with a jealous eye.”⁷ Having endured taxation to finance the occupying British army and unpopular Parliamentary policies such as The Quartering Act, many colonists deeply resented the British army and saw the prospect of a standing American army to be little different. Adams believed that the soldiers of an American regular army would consider themselves separate from the populace, become more closely aligned with their officers than their government, and ultimately develop loyalties to their commanding officers over the constitutional principles of the nation. James Madison would later express his concerns to the 1787 Constitutional Congress in Philadelphia, cautioning that military forces designed to protect America from foreign dangers, could also be maliciously employed by tyrannical leaders within the United States.⁸

General George Washington deferred to civilian authority while commanding the Continental Army⁹ and sought to maintain a moderate military capability through the maintenance of local and state militias which would remain connected to the people. “When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen.”¹⁰ Washington recognized an inseparable connection between citizenship and military service, and saw defense of the nation as a collective responsibility which was the basis of the republic.

“It may be laid down as a primary position and the basis of our system, that every Citizen who enjoys the protection of a free Government, owes not only a proportion of his property, but even of his personal services to the defense of it.”¹¹ As President, Washington signed the Uniform Militia Act in 1792 which required all white, male citizens to be enrolled in the militia for common defense of the republic.¹²

The militia, not the regular army, was seen as the nation’s primary fighting force, but with few existential threats Americans felt little need to train and equip the militia. The interwar regular army consisted of a small cadre of all-volunteer professionals who served as the nucleus for the military as it grew to address relatively infrequent wars such as the Mexican War, the Civil War, and the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection.¹³ In the interim, the U.S. Army served as a constabulary force which supported territorial expansion and internal development. For political as well as economic reasons, it was neither organized nor equipped for significant large-scale combat.¹⁴ Emory Upton, author of the 1904 *Military Policy of the United States*, was deeply troubled by the amateur and incompetent leadership he witnessed during the Civil War and advocated for abandonment of the citizen-soldier model in favor of a larger professionalized regular army which would “entrust the conduct of war to officers who devoted their lives to studying war.”¹⁵

General John McAuley Palmer benefitted from the combined experiences of two world wars and harshly diverged from Upton’s views, serving as a strong proponent of the role of the citizen-soldier in American defense. Ambitious 20th century German and Japanese policies enabled by highly efficient standing armies provided a blunt cautionary tale. These armies, Palmer contended, “were open to political objections”

and had “no place among the institutions of a modern democratic state based on the conception of government by the people.”¹⁶ These opposing militaries were rooted in “criminal doctrine” which had to be eradicated lest it fall subject “to the behest of a group of schemers.”¹⁷ Palmer argued that the World Wars proved what a small professional military augmented by citizen-soldiers could accomplish, and that the hazards of a professional military were unwarranted.¹⁸

Despite Palmer’s warnings, World War II brought about a revolution in civil-military relations. Upton’s writings, published posthumously, regained traction and in part contributed to the dissolution of the citizen-soldier construct. U.S. military elites had gained unprecedented power and prestige during World War II, enabling them to lobby for the creation of a large standing military establishment which would be ready for rapid employment in support of America’s new role as a global superpower.¹⁹ In this new role, global presence led to global power, which in turn required global power projection capabilities. In Palmer’s view, “the means [military power] were dictating and perverting the ends [political aims]”²⁰

At the onset of the Cold War, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall urged Congress and the Truman administration to adopt a system of “Universal Military Training.” Under the highly controversial “UMT,” a system very much akin to what Washington promoted in the Uniform Militia Act some 150 years earlier, all young male citizens would receive rudimentary military training and then be assigned to National Guard or Reserve units for a six-year period. To the military establishment, the UMT model was prohibitively expensive and failed to satisfy the military’s expansive requirements. UMT implementation would force over 2 million citizens on the services in

a two-year span, overwhelming the military's post-World War II training capacity.²¹ Once trained, insufficient time would remain in the UMT soldier's one-year active duty obligation for the military to effectively capitalize on its investment. By comparison, post-World War draftees had a two-year active-duty obligation, thus increasing their utility.²²

Cold War national security policy demanded robust occupation forces in Germany and Japan, as well as globally forward-deployed forces which the UMT could not deliver for the required duration. To the American people, UMT implied compulsion and appeared to the populace to be an underhanded way of impressing the American male population into military service,²³ despite President Truman's argument that the compulsory nature of UMT would bolster "the ideals of responsible citizenship."²⁴ In a period where policies which appeared to threaten the democratic notions of individual liberty were met with resentment, newly elected President Eisenhower distanced himself from UMT in favor of strategies which relied more on robust air power than on ground forces.²⁵

With the abandonment of UMT in 1952, Congress relied on Selective Service to manage the American military-age male populace. Coupled with a draft, it fueled the military through the Vietnam era, keeping the citizen-soldier vestige on life-support. Inequality in the application of the draft, the strain of an unpopular and protracted war, and the notion of "unencumbered individual autonomy," led to widespread discontent. Richard Nixon ran for the Presidency on a platform of ending the draft and appointed the Gates Commission on March 27, 1969 to "develop a comprehensive plan for eliminating conscription and moving toward an all-volunteer armed force."²⁶ In doing so, Nixon "weakened the most immediate connection that existed between the national

security state and average citizens,”²⁷ yet brought about “the most successful federal innovation since the self-adhesive postage stamp.”²⁸

Under the AVF, Americans no longer had to be concerned with compulsory military service, and policy-makers had a large force of disciplined and highly-educated professionals who were willing to undertake an austere life by their own volition. Further, through implementation of the Total Force Doctrine, the National Guard became an appendage of the standing army, rather than a state-based militia to be called upon for the defense of the nation in times of great crisis. Public angst and changes in doctrine had directly led to the death of the citizen-soldier.

The Gates Commission ultimately recommended the establishment of a purely voluntary force over concerns by members of Congress and influential veterans’ groups, stating that it would “strengthen our freedoms [by] maintaining standing forces that minimize government interference with the freedom of the individual to determine his own life in accord with his values.” The Commission presented five objections in its final report, which for the most part were extraordinarily insightful in identifying potential issues.²⁹ Most were accurate, and even in those cases where the inverse has proven to be true, the concerns the Gates Commission presented provide an outline of the root causes of the civil-military gap and resulting AWC.

Objection (1) An [AVF] Will Become Isolated from Society and Threaten Civilian Control

While the Gates Commission felt that the long-standing U.S. institutional framework and solid public attitudes would help prevent separation, they observed that the constant rotation of men in and out of the military under Selective Service created a healthy linkage between society and the military. Further, the influx of draftees with a limited commitment to the military guarded against the development of a separate

military ethos. The AVF they cautioned, might result in a “mercenary army,” apt to serve the interests of the military over those of society.³⁰ True to their prediction, the AVF has become isolated and developed a distinct culture, “in a world apart from the cultural, intellectual and even geographic spheres that define the kaleidoscopic United States.”³¹ Civilian control, while not lost, has been degraded but not for the reasons the Commission expected.

Americans’ perceptions of war, their military, and the role of the public in the shared burden of defense has resulted in a gradual degradation of the linkage between the AWC and the national psyche. Admiral Michael Mullen told a group of West Point Cadets, “I fear they [the American populace] do not know us. I fear they do not comprehend the full weight of the burden we carry or the price we pay when we return from battle.”³² Since 2001, 6,892 U.S. service-members have been killed and over 52,000 have been injured in Afghanistan and Iraq, yet polling demonstrates little public concern.³³ Despite these casualty figures, only 47 percent of respondents said that the military’s sacrifices were greater than the public’s, and 43 percent felt that the American public had to make “a lot of sacrifices.” While 70 percent admitted that the greater burden fell to the military, they also felt it was part of being in the armed forces; only 26 percent felt it was unfair.³⁴

If Americans struggle to grasp the severity of the military casualty statistics, it is less likely that they can appreciate the unquantifiable psychological damage to those who have served, the number of broken marriages, or the impact of absent parents on military children. With fewer veterans to return to the civilian sector, this message is not shared with society and as a result, “most Americans now roughly as much about the

U.S. military as they know about the surface of the moon.”³⁵ This sentiment is echoed, perhaps unintentionally, in the Chairman’s Forward to the *2015 National Military Strategy*, “...we are blessed to be able to count on the young Americans who chose to serve, *to live an uncommon life*, and to defend their fellow citizens.”³⁶ With 71percent of Americans admitting that they have no understanding of the problems faced by those in the military, the uncommon nature of military life is clear.³⁷

Countries with large conscript armies, especially those facing significant internal or external existential threats, often disperse their forces throughout the territory in smaller “garrison towns” which increases civilian-military contact. The United States has the luxury of consolidating its military forces where land is plentiful and cheap because it lacks a credible threat to its borders. As a result, the military has less contact with the population except in the small, isolated “military towns” in close proximity to military installations. The majority of Americans therefore, have very little contact with service members except for chance encounters in airports where each regards the other as an oddity.

The BRAC (Base Re-Alignment and Closure) program has further increased this problem by reducing the number of military installations in the continental United States and further isolating the AVF. Initiated in 1988, the BRAC Commission is a cost-cutting measure in the face of “a sustained period of tight and declining resources,” by seeking to reduce excess infrastructure capacity. This effort has resulted in the closure of almost 100 military installations nationwide, isolating 50 percent of the military to California, Virginia, Texas, North Carolina, and Georgia,³⁸ further reducing the military’s contact with a significant portion of the U.S. population.³⁹

In addition, veterans are voluntarily segregating themselves in rural America to achieve a higher quality of life and to live near others with similar values. In 1980, 80 percent of all U.S. counties had a veteran population of at least 10 percent. By 2010, only 26 percent of American counties were 10 percent veteran.⁴⁰ The segregation of veterans into rural enclaves in Florida, Texas, and Alabama, states which already generate a disproportionate number of Army recruits, further reduces the number of Americans who have contact with the nation's premier recruiters. The Gates Commission identified that veterans returning to civilian life are an important factor as they enrich their communities, and serve as positive role models that young Americans want to emulate.

Empirical data shows a direct linkage between retirees and recruitment. The four states with the highest percentile of the civilian population who are veterans, rank in the highest eight states for Army recruitment.⁴¹ Further, 79 percent of those 50-64 reported having an immediate family member who is a veteran, but only 33 percent of those who are 18-29.⁴² As Americans in the recruiting pool are less likely to have an immediate family member who has served, otherwise unrelated veterans become an increasingly critical touch point for the nation's youth.

With 9 percent of the populace drafted into service during World War II, there was no isolation from war and every town in America bore their share of the burden. 21st century wars by comparison do not "intrude into the everyday world of offices, shopping malls, schools, and soccer games."⁴³ Today, Americans between the ages of 18-24 from Florida, Georgia, or Maine, are twice as likely to join the military than their counterparts from North Dakota or Utah. In 2013, 44 percent of all military recruits came

from the southern region of the United States despite it having only 36 percent of the nation's 18-24-year-old population. Some of the lowest enlistment rates (14 percent) are from the northeast (except for Maine) despite having 18 percent of the same demographic.

While 53 percent of American males stated that they would recommend military service, 60 percent of males in the south said that they would.⁴⁴ It can be argued that the higher enlistment rates in the south are due to the large number of military bases in the American where pro-military attitudes tend to prevail. Maine has lost more resident soldiers per capita in Afghanistan than any other state,⁴⁵ despite having only 0.4 percent of the total U.S. population.⁴⁶

Why does Maine defy regional and national norms? A Heritage Foundation study identifies demographic composition factors indicative of states with high enlistment rates: household income, level of education, race/ethnicity, and regional/rural origin.⁴⁷ Maine has fewer residents who are unemployed and/or living in poverty than the national average; is only slightly less educated than the American population as a whole; is one of the most ethnically and racially homogeneous states; and is the nation's second most rural state.⁴⁸ While this data offers clues, none of it is overly conclusive.

While the Gates Commission was worried about a loss of civilian control over the military, there is evidence to suggest that the true loss is one of *legislative control* and *oversight*, due to the abdication of responsibility by Congress and the media. Congressional military experience has dropped 73 percent since the Vietnam War. With fewer veterans serving in Congress, members are hesitant to ask the tough questions

and take the Chief Executive to task when he circumvents Congress on the employment of military power. Because of the lack of military expertise, members of Congress appear to defer to senior military leaders, rather than demonstrating a desire or willingness to seriously challenge their advice or decision-making. Concerned about reelection and the potential ramifications of being seen as anything less than 100 percent supportive of the military, politicians routinely pledge their unflinching support.

Media outlets exist in a highly competitive, time-constrained news cycle. Reporters are wary of criticizing senior military officials in combat zones because of the peril associated with burning bridges and losing critical access. As a result of these two issues, the connective tissue between the military and society has been weakened by the AVF construct because Congress and the media have reduced their vigilance. As the civil-military gap broadens, this oversight becomes even more critical and harder to achieve in light of declining familiarity and expertise.⁴⁹

Objection (2) Isolation and Alienation Will Erode Civilian Respect for the Military and Hence Dilute its Quality

The Gates Commission acknowledged concerns that the end of conscription would lead to public neglect, reductions in defense budgets, a decline in military prestige, and ultimately a reduction in the quality of individuals attracted to military service. As this study will later demonstrate, Americans now get more military for their tax dollar than at any other time in history, and it is political suicide for a politician to propose significant cuts to compensation and benefits while the military is at war. The Commission correctly identified the Vietnam draft as the major cause of anti-military sentiments which eroded public support for the institution.⁵⁰

While it has been argued that the military went through a dark period following the Vietnam War, the post-9/11 military enjoys enormous prestige and respect. 91 percent of Americans expressed pride in the military forces fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, and 78 percent stated that they have great confidence in the military institution. Perhaps more telling, however, is that the U.S. military was the highest of 16 U.S. institutions and is the only institution to have consistently gained public confidence since these polls were started in 1970. Finally, 84 percent of respondents stated that the modern military “contribute a lot to the well-being of a society,” more so than teachers, scientists, or doctors.⁵¹ While the Commission’s concern was off target, the rosy sentiments expressed in polling data contribute to the growth of the AWC’s stature and feelings of exceptionalism.

Objection (3) An [AVF] Will Be All-Black or Dominated by Servicemen from Low-Income Backgrounds

While the Gates Commission incorrectly thought that the AVF might result in “An Army of the Black” in which the “black and poor bear a disproportionate share of the burden of defense,”⁵² they were entirely correct that membership in the AVF would no longer reflect the demographics of the American population. Many Americans today maintain a popular notion that the AVF disproportionately draws in minorities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have few options available to them, but the inverse has proven to be true.

Studies have determined that both the enlisted and officer ranks of the AVF disproportionately attract members who do not come from disadvantaged backgrounds and that the quality of both the officers and enlisted (when many feared recruitment standards would suffer) has only increased consistently since implementation. AVF

members are significantly more likely to come from high-income backgrounds with only 11 percent coming from the poorest fifth of neighborhoods, while 25 percent came from the most affluent fifth. In terms of education, just over 0.3 percent of enlisted Soldiers lack a high school degree (or equivalent) as compared to 21 percent of their civilian peers.⁵³ Racially, blacks currently represent 21 percent of the Army but 12 percent of the population, while the inverse is true of Hispanics who comprise only 12 percent of the Army but 17 percent of society. While 55 percent of active-duty service-members are married,⁵⁴ Pew Research Center reports that in 2011, 51 percent of Americans were married, an all-time low.

More concerning is the political affiliation of the AVF which has grown increasingly Republican since over time. A 1976 study of senior military officers found 33 percent to be Republican and 46 percent to be Independent. Twenty years later, Republican affiliation had grown to 67 percent, while Independents dropped significantly to 22 percent. A 2009 survey found that 60 percent of active-duty Army officers consider themselves to be Republican, roughly 15 percent Independent, and 18 percent Democrat. While this polarization is concerning, the vast majority of those affiliated with either major party are considered “weak partisans.”⁵⁵ In the public sector, Republicans are 22 percent more likely to recommend joining the military than democrats, and Republicans are 14 percent more likely to have a veteran in their immediate family.⁵⁶

Objection (4) An [AVF] Will Lead to a Decline in Patriotism or in Popular Concern about Foreign Policy

The Gates Commission rightly identified concerns about the importance of veterans in American society, stating that military service exposes young men to “an important experience” which creates greatly enhanced “capabilities, behaviors, and

behavior patterns” which they then carry back to the greater society. Further, military service provided most American men with something that was shared across geography, race, creed, and economic strata. Veterans displayed increased patriotism and were thought to be better informed and more concerned about both foreign and domestic affairs.⁵⁷ At the time of the Commission, a staggering 47 percent of adult males were veterans. Implementation of the AVF has caused elimination of “selfless service” and “common defense” from the American psyche and vernacular. Sebastian Junger points out that “a society which doesn’t offer its member the chance to act selflessly isn’t a society in any tribal sense of the word; it’s just a political entity that, lacking enemies, will probably fall apart on its own.”⁵⁸

Objection (5) An [AVF] Will Encourage Military Adventurism

The Gates Commission correctly identified that the professionalism and readiness of the AVF would encourage policymakers to seek military solutions before using diplomacy. Although more expensive than a conscript military, Americans have demonstrated that they are willing to shoulder the cost of the AVF in order to secure the nation’s interests in an increasingly complex and dangerous world. While the price paid for the AVF is actually remarkably small in the context of U.S. history, the military institution Americans get at a bargain contributes to the existence of the civil-military gap and growth of the AWC.

During World War II, between 9-12 percent of the population served in uniform in World War II and 2 percent served during the Vietnam era, yet America’s 1.4 million service members in the post-9/11 period account for less than 1 percent of the population.⁵⁹ Military spending accounted for 43 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1944, 15 percent in 1952, 12 percent in 1968, and less than 6 percent in

2010.⁶⁰ This means that at the height of the Global War on Terror, the American tax payer benefitted from what has arguably been the most capable conventional military force in world history, for a much smaller percentage of the GDP than those fielded in the previous three major conflicts. While this appears good on the surface, in the larger picture it means that the United States sends its forces “into battle on behalf of a society that barely breaks a sweat – demographically, economically, or financially”, and can do so, “without asking the great mass of its citizens to make any contribution – let alone sacrifice – whatsoever.”⁶¹ During World War II, Americans felt the impact of war whether it was through the draft, rationing, or increased taxation. Now, Americans go about their daily activities without thinking about the employment of their military.

More frequent employment of the armed forces is arguably a byproduct of the reduced cost to American taxpayers. The United States has employed its military over 330 times since 1798,⁶² about half of which occurred following World War II when America established itself as a superpower with global security interests beyond securing commerce.⁶³ There were nineteen overseas military deployments during the draft period of 1946-1973. Between 1973-2010, there were more than 144 such deployments, five times higher than that of the draft force. While America has not seen broad mobilizations in the scale of the early 20th century, this data suggests that the advent of the AVF has brought more frequent use of the U.S. armed forces, possibly due to the absence of domestic political constraints inherent in a draft force.⁶⁴

Increased reliance on the active military and reduced reliance on the National Guard and Reserves have also contributed to the military adventurism the Gates Commission feared. Former Army Chief of Staff, General Creighton Abrams felt that

structuring the active force in order to require significant mobilization of the Reserves and National Guard for large-scale protracted conflicts would keep the military connected to Congress and the people.⁶⁵ The Army, he felt, “is an expression of the nation. If you take them out of the national context, you are likely to screw them up...and part and parcel of that was that you couldn’t go to war without calling up the reserves.”⁶⁶

While Reserve and Guard elements have participated in both Afghanistan and Iraq, they have not been mobilized in numbers that give pause to political and military leaders. Because these reservists are willing volunteers, politicians have not faced significant opposition to their deployment.⁶⁷ Based on tough lessons learned in French Algeria, theorist Etienne de Durand argues that, “mobilizing the population generally comes with a heavy price tag attached to it; the nonnegotiable need to show quick results.”⁶⁸ The separation of the AVF employment from the view of the populace, and a limited reliance on mobilized Reservists means that policy makers can embark on military adventurism at will without upsetting constituents, arguably prolonging current conflicts.

America’s post-Cold War position as the sole superpower in a militarily unipolar world, has further contributed to increased reliance and increased use of the military instrument of national power. Conversely, the economic environment has become multipolar and near-peer competitors have emerged. Not only is U.S. and European economic power in decline, booming economies in countries such as China and India, and the emergence of powerful transnational organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, indicate a significant shift in relative economic power. As a

result, America's significant comparative advantage in coercive military power has become the most cost-effective instrument of power.

The American Warrior Caste

"This splendid military isolation – set in the midst of a largely adoring nation – risks fostering a closed culture of superiority and aloofness."⁶⁹ Clearly separated from the society it serves, the U.S. legions readily meet "caste criteria" as its moral, ethical, and philosophical outlooks differ greatly from those of the American populace, and as it become more distinct from society. In 1995, Thomas Ricks followed a group of young Marines through boot camp and saw how, after having been assimilated into the military culture, they felt alienated when going home for post-graduation leave. "Each of these new Marines seemed to experience a moment of private loathing for public America. They were repulsed by the physical unfitness of civilians, by the uncouth behavior they witnessed, and by what they saw as pervasive consumerism."⁷⁰ Why does military life stand in such stark contrast from civilian life, and why is military service so attractive to some, yet unthinkable to others?

Since ancient times, military personnel have usually displayed an attitude that they are superior to their civilian counterparts. Life in the modern industrialized world is far more genteel than in the days of Washington's militias when many people lived hand-to-mouth, shelter was less adequate, and the specter of death from disease was ever-present. Modern military life, in both training and combat, is generally more demanding, violent, and physically challenging than what most civilians will ever encounter. The Army and Marines in particular are overwhelmingly masculine-defined institutions, in which interactions between aggressive young males are highlighted by altercations and insults, and even fist fights, as a means of establishing cohesion.

Almost every service-member accepts “the social legitimacy of violence and the infliction of pain, suffering, death, and anguish on other human beings.”⁷¹

American society plays a role in perpetuating the “superior aspect” of the AWC values. First, studies demonstrate that only 17 percent of Americans within the recruiting pool are eligible for enlistment and only 4 percent of Americans are both qualified *and* willing to serve.⁷² The 83 percent unfit for service are due to physical, moral, and educational deficiencies. Compare that to the economic and educational background of modern recruits who enlist fully aware that they will likely go to war, and it is understandable why they feel superior. Second, since 9/11, well-intentioned or guilt-ridden Americans have contributed to a sense of caste exceptionalism by offering discounts at chain stores, early boarding on airline flights, free rental car upgrades, and free admission to professional baseball games, to name just a few. While this is appreciated, it creates a sense of entitlement amongst AVF members and contributes to caste exceptionalism.

When the U.S. military was manned by conscripts, it was the senior officer and Non-Commissioned Officer who subscribed to the military values. At best, conscripts sought to do the best job they could, complete their obligation, and return home. There was a sharp contrast between the attitudes of the careerist and the draftee. With an AVF of those who have “opted in” to the military institution and its values, the gap in opposing viewpoints between the new recruit and the career-soldier has narrowed. Following Vietnam, the military placed a great emphasis on Professional Military Education (PME). In doing so, the military codified its culture, traditions, and values, establishing a formalized means by which to pass them on from generation of soldier to

generation, thus ensuring promulgation as well as their standardization across the Army.⁷³

A sub-caste has formed within the AWC, one consisting of “military brats” who have taken up the mantle borne by their parents. Arguably the children of veterans are more likely to meet recruitment criteria because of the culture, discipline, and values instilled at home. In 1988 40 percent of American youth had a veteran parent and that number dropped to 18 percent by 2000.⁷⁴ By comparison, 80 percent of today’s service-members come from a family in which a parent or sibling is currently serving in the military.⁷⁵ More alarming is that in 2007, of the 304 active duty Army General Officers, 180 of their children were serving in uniform.⁷⁶ The juxtaposition of these two statistics suggests that the military is not just a family tradition or business, but a distinct warrior caste.

Following the Korean War, T.R. Fehrenbach argued that America would require “legions” for be successful. Is a warrior caste what America needs so long as policy-makers continue to commit forces in pursuit of national security objectives rather than employing the other instruments of national power? Is a warrior caste all bad? It has been argued that the transformation of the AVF into legions has created a military with immense expertise in combat. The modern AWC is intolerant of tactical and operational failure due in part to the high value placed on physical and mental toughness. The high casualties experienced in both world wars and Korea due to inexperience, lack of realistic training, and limited military expertise no longer occur at the lower levels. In recent years, the AWC has demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to challenge their civilian masters and those senior military officers who have are perceived to have

failed strategically. One only needs to look at bookstore shelves which are inundated with first person accounts of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many of which offer scathing criticisms of the strategic shortcomings.

The Risks and Rewards of an American Warrior Caste

“The United States is so powerful that the only country capable of destroying her might be the United States itself.”⁷⁷ The Gates Commission identified that the possibility of military intervention in political matters occurs “when civilian political leadership is weak and indecisive or when its legitimacy is called into question.”⁷⁸ One could argue, backed up by substantial data, that the conditions for the AWC’s intervention into politics is becoming a more distinct possibility.

Imagine a situation in which a nation’s military has a 78 percent public approval rating, while the legislature’s is 12 percent. This body, once capable of taking military leaders to task by asking the tough questions, has seen its veteran population dwindle to 22 percent, is increasingly deferential to senior military leaders, and can no longer make informed decisions about the raising, sustaining, and employment of the military. That same legislative body has become polarized, with the moderate membership of both parties evaporating.⁷⁹ This polarization is a reflection of the nation’s people who have adopted more polarized political views themselves, leaving little room for open discourse.⁸⁰ Partisan politics are not limited to politicians. In the three most recent general elections for the chief executive, the nation’s senior military officer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), addressed every member military member, telling them to remain non-partisan. Despite the CJCSs’ concerns about service-members straying from the norm of political neutrality,⁸¹ there is a growing trend of retired Generals leveraging their military rank to lend support to the two major

candidates. The candidates, in turn, take every opportunity to flaunt the list of Generals who are backing their candidacy.

The newly elected president is the first to enter office with an initial approval rating below 50 percent and elicits the highest disapproval rating ever for a new president.⁸² With no military experience, the President selects a staggering number of General Officers (active and retired) to serve in key cabinet and security positions, even nominating some for critical diplomatic positions. Almost immediately, one of these retired Generals resigns his position in scandal. Several candidates decline the position and several Service Secretary positions go unfilled as prospective candidates appear to distance themselves from the administration. During this same time period, old and new adversaries are emerging around the world, challenging the nation's interests as they pursue their own. Despite record highs for the stock market, deficit spending is out of control. The legitimacy of the chief executive who entered office without winning the popular vote, is called into question. Cyber events lead to fake news stories, as well as the manipulation of online documents and historical accounts.

The rank and file of the world's most experienced and lethal military, have largely ignored ideological concerns to this point, despite their political and religious tendencies. They swore to protect and defend the Constitution, which symbolizes the nation's core values, and they have stood by, unflinching, as those values have been challenged. Society has become an uncomfortable place for the military as they have become more alienated from it.

The values of this society are seen by the military to be abhorrent. The values that they hold dear are better than those of society...perhaps, if society adopted the

values of the military, America would be better off. The President's brash actions and lack of political acumen result in his impeachment and removal from office before his administration can fill key government positions. General officers who have filled key positions, see calamity coming and start making casual suggestions to the senior active military personnel, addressing the need for military leadership before the country falls into complete chaos.

The scenario outlined above is not fictitious. Indeed, the conditions laid out describe the United States in 2017.

Given the above situation, could the values, professionalism, and public confidence held by the Warrior Caste be channeled into a positive leadership revolution? While some may see the AWC's "superior values" as a defective trait which must be rectified, one could also argue that the United States needs the young men and women of the caste, those who are willing to risk their lives in undertaking tasks that most Americans would prefer to not think about. Could their commitment to the United States, the core values espoused in the Constitution, and their spirit of selfless service reduce, if not eliminate, the possibility of a coup? Further, in an environment where public confidence in national institutions is lagging, can the AWC's positive public image enable it to provide positive leadership in a time of crisis?

Recommendations

While the AVF may not be the optimal system for raising an army, it is the system that we have and it is doubtful that, barring a clear existential threat, Americans will have the stomach for anything but the AVF as we know it. Although a 2005 poll found that twenty-seven percent of respondents supported "the reinstatement of the draft in the United States," this number had waned significantly since 9/11 when seventy-six

percent of Americans voiced support for a draft “if it becomes clear that more soldiers are needed in the war against terrorism.”⁸³

In 2011, then Secretary of Defense Gates stated that a return to compulsory service was not only politically impossible, it would fail to deliver the technical skills, experience, and attributes needed for success in 21st century warfare.⁸⁴ These sentiments, combined with the inability of the citizen-soldier model to provide a force adequate to cope with modern threats make it clear that the AVF will endure. Therefore, policymakers and citizens alike should focus on strategies for mitigating the negative effects of the AWC, such as the persistent civil-military gap. The only way to effectively eliminate the AWC is by eliminating the gap in which it exists.

In 1813, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “We must train and classify the whole of our male citizens, and make military instruction a regular part of collegiate education.”⁸⁵ Not only must a decisive effort be made to return Reserve Officer Training Corps detachments to campuses at the nation’s most prestigious universities, new programs must be specifically placed to “reach the unreached” and educate the American populace in military history and the fundamentals of strategy. Even for those who never enter military service, understanding war and those who fight them is critical for a well-informed populace and electorate.

Key Leader Engagement has become part of the military lexicon over the past 15 years and it is just as applicable within the United States as it is in combatting insurgencies in far flung locations around the globe. A centrally coordinated plan must be developed for the best military leaders to establish *enduring* relationships with key leaders in civic organizations, academia, industry, and local political spheres. This

campaign would undoubtedly cost money and take leaders away from their daily tasks, but it is imperative that the military's message be carried to the key influencers at the local level.

Outside of encouraging veterans to get involved in local and state politics as they return home, there is little that the military can do to shape the number of veterans in Congress. However, the military can focus on educating those Representatives who have never served in uniform. Programs which bring local leaders to military bases in their region have proven to be effective tools for educating elected officials, but the program needs to be broadened. Representatives without military bases in their locale must be afforded the opportunity to visit bases in adjacent states, perhaps accompanied by fellow representatives who are veterans and can facilitate their education.

The Army's recent Soldier for Life initiative bears promise in bridging the civil-military gap, but will this initiative make the AWC a more glaring issue? While the Army needs veterans to serve as ambassadors, veterans who are increasingly retiring to those rural areas which provide the preponderance of military recruits will only perpetuate the current situation rather than offer a solution to the AWC. A more effective tool might be programs which encourage retiring soldiers to take on a second career as teachers in America's public schools. To reach the "unreached populations" incentives for these teachers to acquire jobs in areas which historically produce the least number of recruits would do more to bridge the civil-military gap.

Conclusion

The elimination of conscription and the subsequent implementation of the AVF have led to the creation of a civil-military gap in the United States. While Americans are overwhelmingly supportive of their military, they do not understand it or the burdens it

bears, or how to best raise and employ it. The physical and psychological separation of the AVF from the society it serves has, in turn, led to the growth of a socially distinct warrior caste, highlighted by a sub-caste comprised of the children of veterans who have made military service a family business over subsequent generations. Not only has the AWC eliminated the need for all citizens to contribute to common defense, it has led to a force which can be employed too readily and at such a low cost that Americans no longer question the commitment of their armed forces. As a result, the force is being employed more frequently, the gap continues to grow, and the AWC continues to gain more influence as the civilian control over it wanes.

The AWC's increased power poses a threat to the future of the United States by compromising civilian control and eliminating the need for Americans to participate in the defense of the nation. In the absolute extreme, the AWC itself could directly challenge civilian control due to the clout it wields among declining democratic institutions. If properly harnessed, the great professionalism, values, and character of the AWC can be directed to address many of the challenges currently facing America.

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