

A CRISIS IN SELF-IMAGE: THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN AMERICAN CULTURE

by

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Since the publication of my essay "The Moral Dimension of War and the Military Ethic" in the June 1982 issue of *Parameters*, my correspondence leads me to conclude that the discussion of professional ethics evokes the broader and possibly even sharper issue of the eventual role to be played by the military establishment in American life in general. I also infer that this matter is a touchy subject; there are distinct inhibitions that affect what might be termed a free-wheeling examination of this question. Yet despite the habitual reticence of the military professional to enter the thicket of social analysis and criticism, he seems to be keenly aware, privately at least, that cultural portents in the United States introduce the need for hard thinking about the future responsibilities of those who are entrusted with the security of the Republic. Matters such as the all-volunteer Army, the resistance to draft registration, and, more broadly, a disquieting palpitation of the national will, all hastily surface in these somewhat nervous speculations.

There can be little doubt that for nearly two decades the American professional military establishment has undergone a crisis of self-identify. I need not chronicle this experience at any length, but it is pertinent to examine, briefly, some of the immediate factors that have prompted this lack of a clear-cut conception of the overall role of the military. Let us consider the external influences first:

1. *Vietnam.* Despite placating rhetoric, the war in Indochina was the first major conflict to be lost by American arms. Armies have suffered defeats before and have risen to be even stronger as a result. The Prussians were humiliated by Napoleon at Jena in 1806 and came back to seal the French Emperor's doom at Waterloo in 1815, to cite only one example. No army can reasonably anticipate a wholly uninterrupted sequence of triumphs over the years. Indeed, the American experience has been overly fortuitous in some regards; American soldiery has not become very familiar with the bitter taste of defeat and learned the necessity to arise, phoenix-like, in response.

But the reversal in Vietnam was decidedly complex. The military professional became convinced, in part justifiably, that his failure to secure victory was due to perverse limitations placed upon his action by political restraint and maneuver and that sizable elements of the domestic population did not accord him the support to which he was entitled. There was more than a hint of betrayal.

2. *Resistance to Draft Registration.* Opposition to conscription is ancient; it is not a peculiarly American phenomenon. Indeed, conscription is less politically feasible, now, in some European states than in America. And it is apparent enough that there are no current plans afoot to reinstitute the draft in the United States (except as an emergency measure). The fairly substantial opposition to

the otherwise innocuous procedure of registering age groups in case of future need, on the other hand, has been startling and disconcerting.

3. *The All-Volunteer Army.* Opposition to the registration law came at a time in which there was considerable soul-searching regarding the all-volunteer force. Despite the recent surge in enlistments, I believe that this experiment must now be called a substantial failure, and the reasons for this are scarcely encouraging to those who manage the military establishment. In theory, an all-volunteer force is a sensible concept, but the real issue is whether it was instituted on its merits or was conceived solely because of an admitted inability to install some form of mandatory national service. In application, whatever its origins, the plan has hardly been an unvarnished success. This has been due in part to external factors. Enlistments have tended to reflect the need for the more depressed elements of the population to view the service primarily as a means of economic sustenance. Widespread unemployment in the country has certainly stimulated this perception. Regrettably, two results have become apparent: insufficient numbers of personnel have been recruited who are readily adaptable to the more-or-less technologically sophisticated duties required in a contemporary army, and many of these economically motivated enlistees have been short-timers, not career-oriented, with the result that there have been drastic shortages in the career noncommissioned ranks. There have been internal factors as well. The Army itself was really not adequately prepared to shape a mass of non-career-oriented recruits into a hard-hitting professional force, simply because the Army lacked a solid professional élan and was reluctant, too, to employ the techniques of professional adaptation to a fuller degree. Also, the Army, like the other armed services, and perhaps in a spirit of begrudging realism, too often sought to recruit and retain its personnel by entreaties having little to do with professional self-esteem, but, rather, on the basis of advantages related essentially to civilian-style emoluments—larger salaries, educational benefits, and so on.

4. *Reliance on Technology.* With the coming of the Reagan Administration, it was evident that there would be a long-neglected increase in expenditures for military hardware in order to rectify the regrettable decline in research and development that arose from the fact that the Indochina War had consumed so much of that era's defense budgets. This was ostensibly heartening, but more sagacious members of the military community began to detect what could be a significant and even ominous trend. Was the increasing reliance on advanced technology some variation of the Maginot Line hypothesis that proved so fatal to the French in 1940? Granted that survival in a dangerous world in the closing decades of the 20th century would require national sacrifice, but was this dedication to survival, this nod to reality, to consist only of sacrifices of the purse? Was America, in substance, disposed to continue to enjoy the national self-indulgences of her cultural life-style while walling off the menaces of the outer world by erecting some picket line of complex, expensive weaponry? Was national survival possible on this basis alone, or did it demand a more comprehensive conception of collective sacrifice? There were certain parallels, perhaps, between America in the last segment of the 20th century and Byzantium in those long centuries when a rich and comfort-loving empire was sustained only by the power and guile of a highly professionalized standing army, posing as a shield, a distinctly pragmatic one, between the envious hordes without and the

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smug and indolent inhabitants of the great city.

5. *The Vacillation of Foreign Policy.*

The period from 1960 onward provides a confusing chronicle of America's identification of her national interests and global goals, that includes an exceedingly perplexing set of choices of how these shifting objectives were to be pursued. As these variables fluctuated, the American military professional sought—and was obliged to seek—means of adapting conceptions of national security to accord with what were for the most part clouded visions of America's aims in the world. If a consistent motif could be ascertained during those years, it was that American policy was loathe to assume any overt initiatives, save in specific and limited instances, and those largely of an economic and political character. Thus, what was in essence imposed upon the strategist was a worldwide defensive posture, occasionally active, but principally passive. It was the case of an affluent and still-powerful empire seeking to preserve what it already possessed. Such an omnibus definition sharply imposed a certain mind-set upon military planners, recalling, perhaps, Clausewitz's often misunderstood observation that the defense is the stronger form of war (but only if it is accompanied by the capacity to wage effective offensive operations). Of course, it must be acknowledged that the advent of nuclear weaponry imposed a retaliatory strategy for a host of reasons, but under this often stifling mantle of cataclysmic power the military forces of the Western alliance were prone to man the walls like Roman legionnaires staring into the murky forests of Germany.

The responses of the military community to a twisting path of American foreign policy were twofold: either to accept the situation with stoic resignation or to attempt to influence that policy by entering the political fray, at least to a modest extent. Neither tactic proved effective in stabilizing the definitions of American objectives in world affairs.

6. *The Rising Tide of Antimilitarism.*

The term "militarism" is introduced here

purposefully to remind the reader that this word now has decidedly sinister connotations, summoning up lurid visions of jackbooted storm troopers and uniformed despots. The voice of pacifism has long been heard, but in contemporary America, as in much of Europe, the idea of war becomes equated with a deadly pestilence (a metaphor, of course, enjoying a venerable reputation). But this definition makes of armed conflict an evil in itself, unmitigated by the possibility of justification on ethical grounds—the concept of St. Thomas's "just" and "unjust" wars receding. If war is a pestilence, an organic affliction, it is capable of infecting human beings, and in epidemic proportions. Metaphorically again, crime is often spoken of in the same manner. The populace comes to view crime as a dark evil that is somehow kept from their doors—at least most of the time—by the efforts of policemen. But these police are much too close to the disease; they are necessary, vital wardens of the public security, but they are also somewhat beyond the pale of respectability too, like charnel-house workers or dogcatchers.

In the past, the soldier was not seen in this light—comparable to the policeman, who kept the infection of crime at bay. Now, however, there is the supposition that the soldier's proximity to war—to violence and naked power—tends to infect him and distort his perspective, beguiling him into an enthusiastic affection for the very thing he is supposed to be thwarting.

Of course, this is all rhetorical nonsense. But that it does not alter the fact that large segments of the American people view professional soldiers as people engaged in a necessary but dirty business. Such an attitude must invariably shape not only the image of the soldier in the culture, but also the military man's image of himself.

7. *Collapsing Educational Homogeneity.* It is frequently overlooked that education en masse is the most powerful socializing force in a culture. Indeed, education has had, traditionally, two roles: the production of competent social leadership and the promulgation of the *nomos*—the sacred values—of the society. To put it

bluntly, contemporary American education does neither. It fails to perform the latter function because it is hopelessly fragmented, cut loose from the anchorage of a coherent and unified world view, disposed to flutter ineffectually in the winds of public expectation and vanity, intimidated from asserting some unifying precepts of moral worth.

This trivializing of mass education has had a profound effect upon the character of the military establishment (including, incidentally, a tendency for intraservice education to suffer from the same vices). No longer can those who direct American military policy make assumptions regarding the basic homogeneity of outlook that education has been immemorably entrusted to impart. The effect is not only a moral one (the demise of concepts of decent behavior, self-discipline, personal honor, et al.), but also one more functional. American education, in the throes of a chaotic eclecticism, feeds the egocentric fires that afflict the culture as a whole. It is an education for self-aggrandizement, justified by the most shallow and cynical of rationales. Such an orientation, now amplified to influence entire generations of young people, is antithetical to all those qualities not only necessary for a prudent and competent military establishment, but also for the survival of the nation as a viable cultural organism.

8. *Moral Disarray.* The issue of the moral condition of the American culture may be left to ethical critics to dispute, but what is now beyond contention is the fact that American culture no longer enjoys a pervasive ethical base; the civic ethic has come close to extinction. Whether individual Americans live more moral lives or are now more ethically enlightened is open to argument, but in the more collective sense there is only the ghost of a moral consensus. Extreme individualists and voluntarists may well applaud this presumably invigorating diversity, extolling a liberation from the bondage of moral dogmatism; but, viewed in the longer historical perspective, it is doubtful that such a lack of agreement regarding ethical fundamentals is conducive

to the social cohesion necessary to preserve a society from the encroachments of militant, volatile, and anti-civilized alien creeds. If a culture becomes, in substance, an ethical Tower of Babel, then what sorts of moral guidelines exist for its guardians, those who are responsible for its defense? Are they to be individual manifestations of this sprawling diversity? If not, to what ethical standard should they repair?

9. *Rampant Pluralism.* In a wider scope, problems related to morals and education and a number of other features of the national life arise from the fact that America is, as is well known, a "pluralistic" society. To say this is very much like saying that such-and-such a society is "free." Freedom, as an abstraction or as an empirical condition, lends itself to a bewildering number of possible definitions, let alone gradations and interpretations. Thus, pluralism is not difficult to loosely define—referring to a social condition in which numerous diverse elements exist simultaneously and in essential harmony, in contrast to a social system founded upon a unitary or absolutistic base. But in precise instances pluralism is far more intricate to describe. Any society that is not an unrelenting despotism contains a measure of pluralism of some variety—ethnic, religious, political, intellectual, and so on. The real issue regarding pluralism, then, is joined when the term is meant to imply that a society has no prevailing convictions sufficiently strenuously espoused to warrant their enforcement, beyond, perhaps, the corpus of a legal system designed to protect individual rights. Thus, pluralism becomes a sort of national "equal-time" doctrine that claims no preferences or judgments for the contending bodies of doctrine, reason and evidence notwithstanding. A society dominated by this form of pluralism is directed only by shifting vectors of opinion, operating without a stable core of elemental philosophical agreement.

Has American pluralism gone that far? It is, perhaps, without common religious convictions now, its moral consensus is evaporating, and its political homogeneity is

essentially procedural rather than substantive. Indeed, one can even say that some beliefs and practices hitherto held to be pathological (if not innately wicked) are now granted immunities that permit them to exist under the canopy of social respectability.

If all these factors are combined into a mosaic, the military professional, still imbued, at least in part, with the historical rectitudes of his calling, is now haunted by a most chilling conjecture: Is he charged to protect a society that reveals signs of a pronounced decadence? Complicating this prospect, he is not standing outside that culture, he is not an omniscient observer, but he too is a part of this accelerating process of national metamorphosis.

The crisis of self-image of the American military professional arises from two causes: The first is a confusion within his profession broadly relating to social and ethical responsibilities. The second is a growing anxiety about his relationship with the nation as a whole, an anxiety rooted in his tendency to believe that the society is in deep trouble and that his own somewhat vague moral and historical conventions are, to some extent, finally superior to the flux, the egocentric turmoil, that pervades the country.

He has come to this conclusion gradually and reluctantly. He had not been schooled, indeed, in this sort of detached analysis, this examination of warring doctrines, and his first instinct was toward adaptation. If this was a naive impulse, it was certainly thwarted in any case by the fact that the military officer in the post-World War II period could not find much in the way of reliable norms to adapt to. It was clear enough, then, that he was existing in a social climate in which duty, for instance, was a concept of shifting meanings. It was also a concept that, however one chose to define it, did not harmonize readily with the vociferous spirit of self-aggrandizement that American life exhibited, softened a bit, perhaps, by the argot of the "success ethic" but, still, decidedly resembling avarice and systematic selfishness.

There was a time in which, I think it is fair to say, many officers chose to pursue a

professional life that was in many respects similar to the upward progress of a corporate executive and with about the same moral and social convictions and conditionings. This was the era of that "military-industrial complex" of which the late President Eisenhower spoke with a note of warning. Discounting the fevered verbiage of the political left in this connection, this *entente cordiale* between senior officers and industrial magnates had the effect of expanding the influence of the latter over the former, decidedly in socioethical terms. The Pentagon, in those years, very much resembled the nerve center of some complex technological enterprise, rather like the Bechtel Group of more immediate recall. It was the age of the managerial mystique, of the "whiz kids," the slide-rule disciples of Robert McNamara (late of the Ford Motor Company, of course).

Vietnam brought down that house of computer cards—crashing—and with it the reputations of many otherwise admired military commanders. A subaltern might well have asked, What was the officer to be now? What mold was there to follow? The epoch of the military-industrialist, the corporate manager, was gone, and so was the preeminence of the technocrat. The would-be soldier-diplomats were not doing too well, either. They had a poor track record. Turner at the CIA and Haig at State were the last minions of that breed, and both stalked away to their tents, hardly to the sound of wild approbation.

Here, then, was a crisis in role-models. Vietnam had revived that singularly American esteem for the resourceful platoon leader—Natty Bumppo (James Fenimore Cooper's wilderness scout) with an M-16—but a military career could hardly subsist on this kind of hazardous and intermittent duty. It was at that moment, when recoiling from the shock of Indochina, that the American military professional began to consider not only the internal conditions that affected his loss of a positive self-image, but also the external ones, the ones that were being generated from the society at large. Thinking about the matter in personal terms, he began to examine it from an institutional point of

view, too: What would be the ultimate position of the military services in a society where change and upheaval seemed to be constantly altering the rules of the game? And he realized, foremost, that what he confronted was *alienation*, a widening gulf between the military profession and the country it served.

This alienation is not generated by a fundamental hostility on the part of a majority of Americans toward military professionals. Quite obviously, devotees of the extreme left are more or less traditionally antimilitary (often for more than theoretical reasons). But on the part of the country as a whole, the alienation arises both from misunderstandings and from a mounting dislike on the part of many citizens of facing unpleasant facts of life. The most profound misunderstanding concerns the function of armed force in political affairs. The proverbial man on the street understands well enough the need to defend the country, but he sees this defense territorially; he conceives of it with the simplicity of an animated cartoon, viewing American military power as a cordon of sentries posted against the barbarians. And Vietnam induced him to suspect any form of military activity that does not consist of manning the ramparts, so to speak. Further, this citizen sees the professional soldier as one persistently dissatisfied with this passive role (in part, true) and wishing, even conniving, to engage in reckless foreign adventures. This is, of course, a hopelessly immature viewpoint and one that is compounded of a lack of knowledge and communication. In that connection, it is lamentable that American journalism, print and electronic, has done such a miserable job of explaining military affairs to the general public. It seems that the era of the military specialist in journalism has passed, that the day of the Hanson Baldwins and S. L. A. Marshalls has ebbed. Most contemporary journalists are military illiterates; their frequently visible hostility toward the military establishment grows out of an immense ignorance of military history and military affairs.

But the alienation is deeper. It is deeper because the moral focus of the country has shifted away from the commitments that *must* govern any military organization. If one talks to young people about military service and listens to their protestations of horror over that prospect, one hears what is predominantly a litany of objections to what they believe would be the services' enforced subordination of their private value-systems. These value-systems are, at base, chiefly concerned with subjective prerogatives; infringement on self-exploitation is feared as the most threatening of eventualities. Popular psychology has taught youths to value "personality" above all else, and politicians and advertising specialists have instructed them that material consumption is a balm that will expunge all forms of human unhappiness. Perverse as it may be, literally millions of Americans—of all ages—fervently believe these tenets.

In one sense, this problem is that of the ancient "One and the Many" put forward by Plato, but, in the past, individualists have adapted well to military service (often becoming the most brilliant of commanders) and shown themselves fully capable of suspending, if necessary, their private penchants while serving the common good. That was because these otherwise unregimented souls did acknowledge some end, some standard, as being finally superior to their own immediate desires. Even the idiosyncratic poet seeks to serve his art as a higher end. But in the contemporary milieu, millions have become habituated to the thesis that there is nothing that stands above their private conceptions of self-interest. This is the price to be paid, I believe, for the radical secularization of the national culture; God, no longer existing, anthropologically speaking, is replaced by the restless, insatiable ego. History reveals, incidentally, that most highly successful military establishments have rested upon a base of lively religious commitment. Why? Simply because a religion, however metaphysically constituted, supplies the military purpose with three important contributions: a belief in higher authority; a

confidence in the ultimate triumph of the faithful; and an eschatology, an operative rationale for dying. Cultures without this degree of religious fidelity must substitute a particularly rigorous and binding military ethic in its place. Rome may serve as a suitable illustration of this point. After the decline of the state religion of the Republic (and with it much of the social piety and patriotic discipline of the state), the Roman army functioned very successfully for several centuries on the basis of a professional credo that was an ingenious blend of law, custom, pride, and an inculcated sense of service.

Not a few officers have questioned the efficacy of codes of behavior that would appear, in contemporary circumstances, as more than a little archaic, considering the arguments on behalf of universal egocentricity. Can duty, fidelity, honor, and courage indeed be explained in egocentric terms, reducible to psychological motives? Were saints and martyrs really motivated by ego-fulfilling drives?

Recently the military services in the United States pursued what I have earlier called "adaptation" to the prevailing mores. Of course, such a word was not used. As a matter of fact, the most commonly employed term was "democratization." On the surface, this process appeared to be aimed at removing some of the appurtenances of hierarchy, visible distinctions between officers and enlisted men. But the thrust was deeper and more comprehensive. It was directed toward replacing a traditional military outlook with a more fashionable utilitarian one. The enterprise failed in this latter goal, but in the process it did shake the professional confidence of many mid-career officers who were torn between the continuities of Marlborough, Nelson, and Robert E. Lee and the chatty communiques of Admiral Zumwalt.

The fact of the matter is, of course, that no military organization can be a "democracy" or anything approaching it. More to the point, it cannot exist as though it were a Quaker meeting; it has to rest on principles so implacably articulated and so unreservedly accepted that men would die,

willingly, under its aegis. It is as simple as that.

The lesson to emerge—still only barely seen—is that it *does not matter* what aberrations a society might choose to clutch to its bosom; that makes no difference to the soldier. The military code, the self-conception of the profession, must be, if necessary, *independently derived*. That dictum is easy to state, but is quite terrible to contemplate in its full ramifications. It implies that a military establishment could justifiably become a specialized subculture that functions despite the cultural milieu that surrounds it. I think no band of military professionals would choose such a predicament, but circumstances might well dictate such an uneasy arrangement.

This postulate constitutes no mandate to overthrow the state or to seize the society under the shadow of bayonets. But it is a mandate for the self-preservation of the military apparatus. That segment of the public establishment must be prepared to defend itself not in the interests of guild self-perpetuation, but in order to perform the role for which it was created: to protect the nation. And not, I hastily add, to protect the nation against itself—that is the stuff of military coups and palace revolutions—but rather to continue to protect the nation even if the nation makes little effort to protect itself, not only in material resources but in the exercise of its social will.

The "crisis in self-image" of the American military establishment becomes critical, since the failure to resolve this crisis not only hampers the ability of the armed forces to actually defend the state, but also renders them incapable of defending themselves! And the self-preservation of the professional military may be crucial to the maintenance of national stability.

A major inhibition to the recovery of a forceful self-image is the siege mentality noticeable in many military quarters. Some officers feel that they are threatened in their duties by a marked lack of appreciation by the public at large, that they are scorned petitioners at the bar of public judgment. In one sense that is true; Congress distributes the

funds on which they operate. But it is a faulty psychological premise. The fact of the matter is that Congress is not populated entirely by idiots and venal timeservers; the military will not be turned away by a willful legislature. That being true, the military establishment should concentrate its energies toward internal reform, and without constantly juxtaposing proposed reforms against the capricious dicta of public whim.

Of course, the public is poorly informed about military affairs, about the needs of national security. More effort should be expended to remedy this undesirable state of affairs, but no public relations onslaught will convert the public into a sophisticated and sympathetic body of supporters. The public, however, can be impressed by leadership—not leadership of the political style, but one that evokes a clear-cut military image, leadership that does not equivocate and that bears all the signs of solid competence. That leadership must be focused on the condition of the armed forces, primarily in a moral and intellectual sense. It must be focused on the restoration of a sense of self-confident purpose, the nature of which it is the military's own function to determine.

The military seems to have hurt feelings these days because it perceives that it is not popular. Armies have rarely been popular, except when an enemy has begun to bombard the walls. The appetite of the American armed services for popularity is inordinate, a product, in part, of the American ethos. The yearning for popular esteem usually induces a compliance with compromise. But some compromises are too dangerous to make.

It is not a reckless assumption that one role of the American military establishment may be to become stewards of values that, neglected by the country as a whole, may yet revive if continuity is preserved. One may recall that European civilization itself was hoarded by a few isolated, rock-bound Christian religious sanctuaries during the

dark reign of primitive atavism. Military service is the ultimate manifestation of citizenship; it should also exemplify the higher responsibilities of citizenship, a citizenship not of the nation-state alone, but of the community of civilized mankind as well. The soldier, mounting guard on the frontiers, may also be what Edmund Burke once called "an instructor to [his] fellowmen in their highest concerns." The soldier cannot perform this function by uncritically reflecting the transient passions and mean vanities of his times. He must overcome the crisis in his self-image by creating, himself alone, his own identity, one that conforms to the canons of propriety and service that the pages of history indelibly illuminate. He should not fear being part of an elite—he does not serve his country or his civilization well if he is not. The word "elite" is another term not to be shunned merely because it has gained a dubious linguistic status in the hands of popular sociologists with ideological axes to grind. No, the military profession is the exemplification of the concept of the *aristoi*: those who chose freely to dedicate themselves to self-cultivation and to live in accord with demanding public standards. If an army is not a "natural aristocracy," it is nothing. And in times of cultural malaise it may well be that a nation's soldiery must personify those virtues of constancy and sacrifice temporarily abjured by others.

The role of the military in the national life will not be perilously curtailed if those within it, remembering that the armed services are not uniformed versions of the Bureau of Parks and Recreation or the Job Corps, will retain the knowledge that they are the Guardians, the indispensable Sword of the Republic—and are entitled to the perquisites that follow from that awesome designation. Let us be servants of history, if you will, and not the baggage-bearers of some New Byzantium.

