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Twilight of the Citizen-Soldier

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What is the citizen-soldier? The question demands something beyond the obvious answer, any soldier who is also a citizen. Judged by that criterion, the citizen-soldier is alive and well in the United States and, for that matter, most other countries. Soldiers, more than ever before, vote: in the United States, base commanders are evaluated on the basis of their success in generating large turnouts for national elections. Free speech is most certainly alive and well. Service men and women write, call, or email their representatives in Congress, who duly probe into accusations of mistreatment, malfeasance, or abuse. There are newspapers for each of the services, and overseas (*Stars and Stripes*) that delight in ripping into the high command, and local papers are filled with letters from uniformed members of the armed forces, openly identifying themselves as such. A military legal system operates that gives the accused rights which are comparable to, and in some cases superior to, those of the civilian legal system.

And yet, I think, most of us would agree that the American military is not, in fact, a citizen-soldier force. It is somehow qualitatively different from the armies that fought the Civil War and the World Wars (Korea and Vietnam are already, I suspect, transitional wars). The term seems archaic, even quaint--except, perhaps, as applied to reservists. Why? How is a military composed of soldiers who are certainly citizens somehow not composed of citizen-soldiers?

Viewed legally, we have an army of citizen-soldiers; viewed historically and philosophically, we do not. The true citizen-soldier is distinguished from his professional or semi-professional counterpart in three ways, all of which suggest that military service follows from true citizenship. The first is his *motivation* for military service. In the case of the true citizen-soldier, military service is either an obligation imposed by the state or the result of mobilization for some pressing cause. Democratic states generally impose only two kinds of forced labor upon their citizens--jury duty and military service. The former serves the administration of justice; the latter serves the purpose of defense. These two high and essential objects of government ennoble coerced service--and this is the reason why obligatory schemes of nonmilitary service, which have much weaker justification, will find it hard ever to succeed in countries like the United States. In the absence of conscription, mobilization for a particular struggle is the other way in which citizenship elicits military service. The state is embarked upon some great crusade or adventure, and in the spirit of ancient Athens, citizens make the highest contribution to it by offering their service as soldiers. For the normal volunteer of today, neither motivation applies. Patriotism, a desire for personal challenge, monetary or career incentives--all mold the young man or woman who joins today. But in all cases (except perhaps that of patriotism), the link between citizenship and service is thin.

The true army of citizen-soldiers represents the state. Rich and poor, black and white, Christian and Jew serve alongside one another in similarly Spartan surroundings--at least in theory. The idea of military service as the great leveler is part of its charm in a democratic age, one of whose bedrock principles is surely the formal equality of all citizens. The voluntary military, by way of contrast, is very rarely representative. To be sure, in the contemporary United States recruiters attempt to maintain some rough balance among ethnic groups, although even here it is clear that minority groups are overrepresented. Recruiters pay no heed, however, to socioeconomic, religious, or other kinds of ethnic diversity in the ranks. That the children of millionaires almost never serve or that a bare handful of Ivy League graduates don a uniform is not even a matter for comment.

Third, and perhaps most important, the true citizen-soldier's identity is fundamentally civilian. However much he may yield to the exigencies of military life, however much he may even come to enjoy it and become proficient in military

skills, he is always, in the core of his being, a member of civil society. His participation in military life is temporary and provisional. For the volunteer, and certainly for the multiterm soldier, sailor, airman, and marine, the military identity coexists with that of the citizen. The issue is one of identity, and not solely length of service. There are reservists who are, in fact, merely part-time professionals, and in the great wars of the last century there were those who served for five years and remained civilians at heart. The term citizen-soldier acts as a useful replacement for an oxymoron, the "civilian-soldier."

Using the admittedly rough and ready criteria described above--motivation, representativeness, and identity--one can still conceive of a variety of military systems built around the citizen-soldier. Militia systems, for example, such as that of the Swiss, exemplify one kind of citizen-soldier military; the mass volunteer armies of the early Civil War represent another; and the scientifically selected and mobilized hordes of World War II, yet another. In each case, the citizen-soldier appeared not only in the ranks, as draftee or volunteer, but also as officer and leader. Indeed, the figure of Cincinnatus, the Roman peasant general, exemplifies a kind of citizen-soldier familiar throughout history from Nathanael Greene or Daniel Morgan in the American Revolution, to John Logan or Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain in the Civil War, and even to the colonels and naval captains of my parents' generation, who provided virtually all of the junior and much of the mid-level leadership of World War II.

The Disappearance of the Citizen-Soldier

Since ancient times, armies of citizen-soldiers have contended with counterparts of various types--professional volunteers, mercenaries, or hybrid systems. In the 19th century and through the end of the last, they dominated warfare. The age of mass--in education, industrial production, and logistics--made numbers the dominant fact in war, and armies of citizen-soldiers are large. But since World War II the citizen-soldier has been on the wane, for a variety of reasons. Technology certainly played a large role: nuclear weapons at one end of the spectrum, and expensive, sophisticated conventional weapons at the other made the mass concept if not obsolete, then questionable. Sheer numbers played a role as well. As military organizations shrank in size, it became more difficult to sustain conscription on a universal basis, even for countries in straits as dire as those in which Israel finds itself. When most young men do not serve in the military, those who do are not fulfilling a common obligation of citizenship, but are merely unlucky. And, as sex differentiation retreated in the workplace, the inevitably male-oriented world of military service (particularly in ground combat organizations) made an identity between citizenship and military service difficult to sustain.

Armies of citizen-soldiers are best suited to desperate struggles and wars of mass mobilization. To the extent that the late 20th century was a time of limited war, the citizen-soldier system was maladapted to the strategic challenges of risks run for ambiguous or second-order purposes. Not surprisingly, by 2000 most European powers had abandoned conscription or were on the verge of doing so, replacing their short-service conscript and volunteer forces with those of long-service professionals.

In 2001 the American military is, like its counterparts around the world, largely a professional force. And yet the myth of the citizen-soldier is alive and well. Consider, for example, Hollywood. Steven Spielberg's smashingly successful movie *Saving Private Ryan* depicted the quintessential citizen-soldiers commemorated in historian Steven Ambrose's book *Citizen Soldiers*. Captain John Miller's men, like Miller himself, are present as a result of obligation; they are in for the duration, but only the duration of the war; they represent much of the ethnic richness of American life; above all, they are civilians at heart, dreaming of wives and sweethearts left behind.

The magic of *Saving Private Ryan* lies not only in the movie's intrinsic power--and no movie about the all-volunteer force comes close to it in dramatic force--but in the American military's reaction to it. The director received a gala celebration and decoration from the United States Army; troops in Korea interviewed by reporter Tom Ricks insisted that they too were like Miller's band of reluctant warriors. But the US Army is no longer composed of Millers, Ryans, and Horvaths; it no longer faces the kind of desperate struggles that characterized Omaha beach; and its men (and now, women) no longer worry about overcoming an enemy in order to return to their normal lives--military service *is* their life.

The charm, if that is the right word, of the citizen-soldier does not end here, however. The astounding popularity of

General--now Secretary of State--Colin Powell, a general who self-consciously titled his memoir *My American Journey*, reflects a yearning for the Cincinnatus type--paternal but folksy, sturdily reassuring, and easily imagined in a variety of civilian settings, including the Oval Office. General Powell's own writings reinforce the sentimentalized view of the citizen-soldier reflected in *Saving Private Ryan*. In an essay for *Time* magazine on the G.I. as the "person of the century" he wrote as follows:

As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I referred to the men and women of the armed forces as "G.I.s." It got me in trouble with some of my colleagues at the time. . . . I persisted in using G.I.s and found I was in good company. Newspapers and television shows used it all the time. The most famous and successful government education program was known as the G.I. Bill, and it still uses that title for a newer generation of veterans. When you added one of the most common boy's names to it, you got G.I. Joe, and the name of the most popular boy's toy ever, the G.I. Joe action figure. And let's not forget G.I. Jane. G.I. is a World War II term that two generations later continues to conjure up the warmest and proudest memories of a noble war that pitted pure good against pure evil and good triumphed.

The victors in that war were the American G.I.s, the Willies and Joes, the farmer from Iowa and the steelworker from Pittsburgh who stepped off a landing craft into the hell of Omaha Beach. . . . They were America. They reflected our diverse origins. They were the embodiment of the American spirit of courage and dedication. They were truly a "people's army," going forth on a crusade to save democracy and freedom, to defeat tyrants, to save oppressed peoples, and to make their families proud of them.

The volunteer G.I.s of today stand watch in Korea, the Persian Gulf, Europe, and the dangerous terrain of the Balkans. We must never see them as mere hirelings, off in a corner of our society. They are our best, and we owe them our full support and our sincerest thanks.[1]

Powell's characterization of the G.I.--the citizen-soldier of World War II--is roughly right, if sentimentalized; what is remarkable, however, is his insistence on retaining the appellation "G.I." for young men and women who, however admirable, are fighting no crusades, who have enlisted rather than been drafted, and who are far from being a cross section of American society. But the myth of the citizen-soldier persists.

The Consequences: The Unremarked Demise and the Unnerving Rebirth of the Citizen-Soldier

There are various possible explanations for the persistence of the ideal of the citizen-soldier years after his disappearance as a real phenomenon. We may have here the lag inevitable as a generation that grew up with one powerful and evocative reality is unwilling to set it aside. It is possible that the notion of the citizen-soldier is somehow rooted deeply in the nature of democracy itself. Conceivably, as well, Americans may be unwilling to confront in a direct way the consequences of having a large and powerful military--the military, after all, that polices the world--which is not composed of citizen-soldiers. But the disjunction between perception and reality has real consequences for America's role in the world, two of which stand out.

The first is America's perceived, and real, reluctance to take casualties in any large number in conflict, a reluctance often ascribed to a tender regard for the life of American citizens. In recent years it is clear that this has become a real constraint on the ability of the United States to exercise power, to the point that military commanders have gone into the field with the injunction that "the first mission is force protection" ringing in their ears.

Recognition of the plain fact that ours is no longer an army of citizen-soldiers should make us question this explanation of American casualty sensitivity. The truth is that armies of citizen-soldiers have been far more likely to suffer deaths and wounds in vast numbers than smaller, professional forces. The army of citizen-soldiers fighting a war for great causes has proven itself far more willing to bleed profusely than the army of highly trained, expensive professionals fighting for ambiguous goals. There is indeed good evidence that casualty sensitivity stems not from social pressure to care for the life of citizens but from the military's own changing scales of human values.

A more recent, deeper, and perhaps more worrisome trend is very different. It is an assertion of all the rights of citizenship by professional soldiers, most notably in the open participation of recently retired general officers in electoral politics by endorsing presidential candidates, but also in the rash of partisan commentary by officers shortly

after the election of President Bill Clinton. The defense of such behavior is that soldiers in uniform are, after all, citizens, and so long as they obey orders they retain all the rights of expression of their counterparts in the civilian world--and most certainly so the moment they doff the uniform.

This is a remarkable inversion of the citizen-soldier concept; instead of subjecting the individualism of civilian life to the discipline of military life to serve the larger ends of society, it becomes a means of softening the rigors of military tradition in order to allow free expression to serve the preferences of individuals. Thus, even as the citizen-soldier--Colin Powell's G.I.--has indeed disappeared into the twilight, a new kind of citizen-soldier has emerged: the politically engaged professional officer, who abates none of his rights to freedom of expression despite military discipline.

The dangers here are, or should be, obvious. They stem not from the demise of the citizen-soldier, however, but from an unwillingness to examine closely his replacement: the volunteer professional, thinking afresh about his rights and responsibilities, and the constraints of law and custom put upon those who wear a uniform. In this enterprise nostalgia for the Minutemen, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Sergeant York, or Captain John Miller, understandable though it may be, will serve only to confuse an issue that is complicated enough.

NOTE

1. Colin Powell, "The American G.I.," *Time*, Special Issue, "Time 100," 14 June 1999, internet, <http://www.time.com/time100/heroes/profile/gi01.pdf>, accessed 27 March 2001.

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