

# “Self-Interest Well Understood”: The Origins & Lessons of Public Confidence in the Military

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*Abstract: In recent decades, the U.S. military has enjoyed high levels of public confidence. We argue that the rise (and sustainment) of public confidence in the military reflects two phenomena. First, the public has a high regard for the military and its mission, arising from a shift to a professional (nonconscript) force that is perceived to be competent, fair, and accountable. Second, the public has little fear of military abuses in the domestic arena, owing chiefly to the reduced domestic presence of the military in the post-World War II era, with less emphasis on the physical defense of the homeland; and to the military’s careful cultivation of an apolitical culture since Vietnam. We conclude with a brief discussion of the military’s efforts to develop and encourage public-mindedness among its members, and the challenges to replicating the military approach in other institutional settings.*

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The U.S. military continues to be America’s most admired public institution, held in high esteem despite a broader decline in the public’s regard for American institutions.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many see the military as *the* exemplary American institution, from which the nation should derive lessons for application to myriad aspects of public and private life, including developing citizenship and civic engagement among America’s youth. Yet the relationship between the American people and its defense establishment has historically been anchored in two opposing sentiments: on one side, Americans see a large, standing military as a potential threat to liberty; on the other, they revere the U.S. military for its role in establishing the nation in revolution, preserving it against rebellion, and defending it from foreign aggression. In this essay, we examine the sources and implications of public trust in the military. We argue that the rise and sustainment of public confidence in the military reflects the ascendance of the latter view (reverence for the military

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and its mission) and the subsidence of the former (fear of military abuses in the domestic arena); and we explore the possible causes of these changes.

In recent decades, Americans' confidence in the military and its leaders has risen (see Figures 1 and 2, and Table 1). This increasing trust in and regard for the armed forces has been the notable exception to a general decline or stagnation in Americans' regard for other key institutions. The judiciary, organized religion, public schools, universities, the executive and legislative branches of government, the press, corporations, banks, organized labor – all have suffered to some extent. Why not the military? What accounts for this divergence?

One possible explanation is that the country is becoming more militaristic, but little evidence supports this view. Fewer and fewer Americans serve in the military. As of 2010, active-duty military personnel made up less than 1 percent of the labor force; adding the National Guard and Reserve Component raises the total to about 1.5 percent (see Figure 3). Indeed, some are concerned that the men and women of the armed services are becoming increasingly isolated from the nation they serve. In a speech at Duke University in September 2010, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed, "There is a risk over time of developing a cadre of military leaders that politically, culturally and geographically have less and less in common with the people they have sworn to defend." Such was the gist of a recent *Time* magazine cover story as well.<sup>2</sup>

What about the defense industry? Are public sympathies driven by economic ties to the military? It appears unlikely. Since 1981, defense spending has declined relative to GDP and has been relatively stable as a percentage of total government outlays. Thus, America's personal and eco-

nomics ties to its armed services have weakened in recent decades.

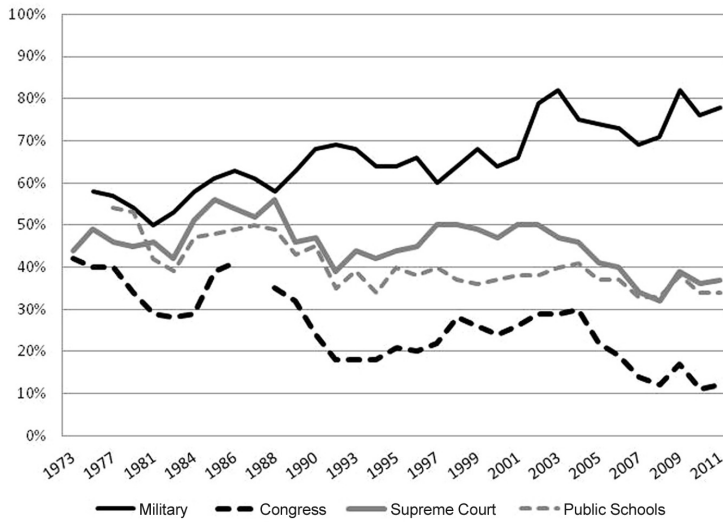
Suspicion of military power is rooted in the revolutionary ideals of the early American republic. The founders' fear of an unchecked military reflected both their personal experience of abuse at the hands of the British soldiery and their knowledge of history, particularly that of the Roman republic. In the military rule of Sulla, Julius Caesar, and other Romans, the American revolutionaries and framers of the Constitution perceived archetypes for what happens when too much power is entrusted to a charismatic leader of an army. Though agrarian democrats (Thomas Jefferson) disagreed with federalists (Alexander Hamilton and James Madison) in many fundamental questions of government, both groups believed that a standing army could endanger freedom. In a speech to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Madison expressed that fear:

In time of actual war, great discretionary powers are constantly given to the Executive Magistrate. Constant apprehension of War, has the same tendency to render the head too large for the body. A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive, will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defense against foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home.

Article 2, Section 2 of the Constitution lays out civilian control of the armed forces. More limitations (direct and indirect) on the powers of the military were enumerated in the Bill of Rights: notably, in the right to bear arms, the protection from quartering troops, and the protection from unreasonable search and seizure. The Posse Comitatus Act (1878) further limited the military's role in the domestic sphere. Reacting against Reconstruction, the Congress forbade the use of the Army for the enforcement of domes-

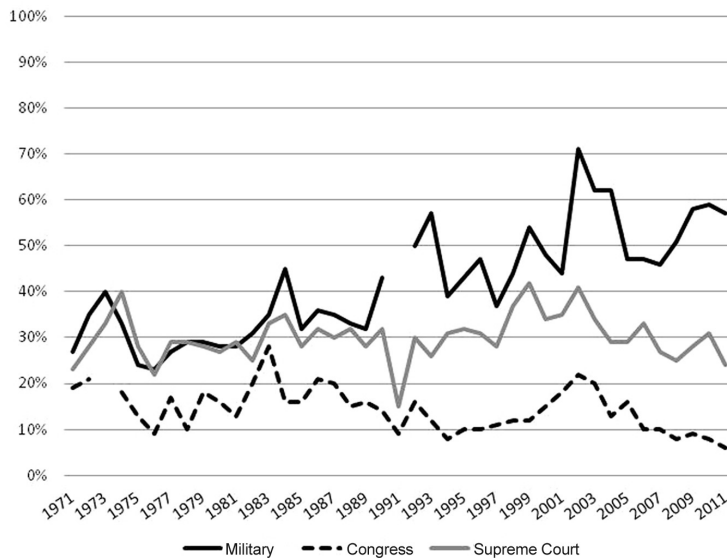
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*Figure 1*  
Percentage of Respondents Expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of Confidence in American Institutions, 1973 – 2011



Note that no survey was conducted in 1992. Source: Figure created by authors based on Gallup poll data.

*Figure 2*  
Percentage of Respondents Expressing “a great deal” of Confidence in the “people in charge of running” American Institutions, 1971 – 2011



Source: Figure created by authors based on Harris poll data.

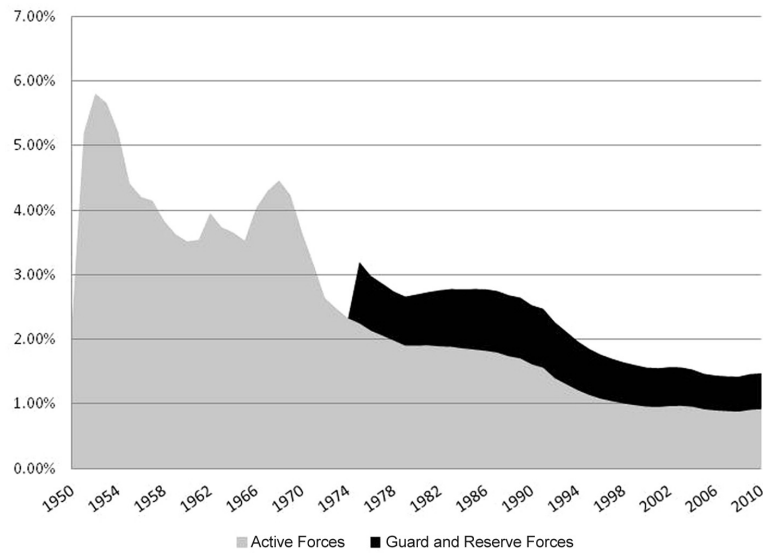
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**Table 1**  
Twenty-Year Change (between 1981 and 2011) in Percentage of Respondents  
Expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of Confidence in American Institutions

	1981	2011	Change
<i>The Church/Organized Religion</i>	64	48	-16
<i>The Military</i>	50	78	28
<i>U.S. Supreme Court</i>	46	37	-9
<i>Public Schools</i>	42	34	-8
<i>Congress</i>	28	12	-16
<i>Organized Labor</i>	28	21	-7
<i>Big Business</i>	20	19	-1

Source: Table created by authors based on Gallup poll data.

**Figure 3**  
The Military as a Percentage of the Labor Force, 1950 – 2010



Source: Figure created by authors with data provided courtesy of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Congressional Research Service.

tic laws, except by another act of Congress or a modification of the Constitution. Although one may still find fears of the domestic abuses of a too-powerful military in works of fiction, and in the paranoid fantasies of the political fringes, recent history has given Americans little cause for worry in this regard. As a result, Americans' historical fears of a too-powerful military have faded. Three changes have driven this trend.

First, the domestic footprint of the military has been dramatically reduced in recent decades. Through five rounds of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) from 1989 to 2005, 350 military installations have been closed. The number of active-duty military personnel has declined as well, from around 3 million in 1970, to 2 million in 1980, to slightly fewer than 1.5 million today. Relative to the U.S. population, this downsizing has been large: active-duty military personnel accounted for 1.5 percent of the population in 1970, 0.9 percent in 1980, and just 0.48 percent in 2010.

Second, the U.S. military's role of national defense (the physical garrisoning and defense of the United States itself) has had little significance in military planning and deployment since 1945. Ostensibly, all American military actions are in defense of the U.S. Constitution. The oath taken by the men and women of the armed services names "all enemies, *foreign and domestic*" (emphasis added); but in recent U.S. history, foreign enemies operating on foreign soil have predominated. The 9/11 attacks are a notable exception, although their unconventional character and brief duration precluded any significant U.S. military involvement in combating them. U.S. military power is projected across the globe but is barely noticeable at home. Since 1970, federal forces have been used only once in the domestic enforcement of law and order,

when Marine and Army units were sent to rioting areas of Los Angeles in 1992.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the military has generally detached itself from domestic politics. In the first century of U.S. presidential politics, the boundary between military and political high office was porous. Military accomplishments figured largely in the political rise of numerous American presidents, including thirteen of the first twenty-five, from George Washington to Theodore Roosevelt. Yet the current culture of the U.S. armed services frowns on overt political activity by senior military leaders – active or retired – despite the conservative leanings of the majority of officers. If the spectrum of politicization ranges from the apolitical model espoused by General George Marshall to the highly politicized maneuverings of General Douglas MacArthur, the current military leans strongly in the direction of Marshall.

The political community is also increasingly detached from the military. While numerous veterans (primarily from World War II) have sought and obtained the presidency,<sup>4</sup> the last senior military officer to obtain his party's nomination for the presidency is also the last one to win the office: General Eisenhower, who served as NATO commander prior to the 1952 election. Of the nation's 541 Senators and Representatives in the 112th Congress (2011–2013), 118 served or currently serve in the military (9 served in the National Guard or the Reserve), approximately 22 percent of the membership.<sup>5</sup> Although this figure is considerably higher than the proportion of veterans in the general U.S. population, Congress is more male (83 percent) and older (an average age of 57.8) than the general population, so a greater proportion became adults during the conscription era, skewing the probability of military service. Perhaps more significant is the strong downward trend

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in military experience in Congress, demonstrating how the post-conscription era population is now occupying a greater proportion of government positions. According to the Congressional Research Service:

The number of veterans in the [current] Congress reflects the trend of a steady decline in recent decades in the number of Members who have served in the military. For example, there were 298 veterans (240 Representatives, 58 Senators) in the 96th Congress (1979–1981); and 398 veterans (329 Representatives, 69 Senators) in the 91st Congress (1969–1971).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, through the military's shrinking footprint, its far-flung activities, and its maintenance of an apolitical culture (at least when viewed from the outside), it has become less relevant to the daily life of the average citizen. It may be that a crucial element to preserving and increasing public trust in the military is maintaining a distance between the preparation, conduct, and control of military operations and the domestic lives of Americans. In this way, the nation's traditional wariness toward military power has to some extent receded in recent decades. At the inception of the all-volunteer military four decades ago, some observers worried that it would emerge as a modern Praetorian Guard or a potent political menace. These fears have thus far been unfounded.

Societal trust in the military has not always been as high as it is today. The American people have a long-standing respect for the principles of duty and sacrifice embodied by the nation's armed forces, as well as a belief that the conduct of war has a rightful place in establishing and protecting the nation. The United States may have been "conceived in liberty," but it was birthed, and preserved, in

blood: in the rebellion against England; in the Civil War; in wars of expansion against Mexico, Native Americans, and Spain; and in the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indeed, from the viewpoint of the American people, the great lesson of the twentieth century was that American military power accompanied by the spread of Anglo-Saxon models of government and economy wrought widespread peace and prosperity.

This triumph, however, was not without setbacks. The Vietnam War was a traumatic experience for the U.S. military, and it damaged public confidence in the armed services. In 1966, a Harris survey found that 61 percent of respondents had "a great deal of confidence" in the military's leadership; five years later, just 27 percent felt that way.<sup>7</sup> Yet these effects of the war were not restricted to the leadership of the armed services. The events surrounding the war undermined trust in the leadership of virtually all major American institutions (see Table 2). What is notable is that only the military has recovered the confidence that it lost.<sup>8</sup>

As discussed above, part of this recovery may stem from a decline in public fears of military interference in civic life. But a purely negative explanation for the rise in confidence in the military is incomplete. Institutions also derive public support from other factors: namely, competence and a concern for society's best interests. Thus, has the military become more competent and more public-minded since the Vietnam War?

The consensus within the military is that the force has achieved a high level of readiness and effectiveness. Yet the transition from a conscript to an all-volunteer force initially resulted in a decline in competence—what then-Army Chief of Staff General Edward Meyer called "the hollow force."<sup>9</sup> (The term still has great



Table 2

Percentage of Respondents Expressing “a great deal” of Confidence in the “people in charge of running” American Institutions (bold indicates decline from prior survey)

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	1966	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011	Change, 1966–2011
<i>Organized Religion</i>	41	<b>27</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>21</b>	25	<b>24</b>	<b>-17</b>
<i>The Military</i>	61	<b>27</b>	28	47*	<b>44</b>	57	<b>-4</b>
<i>U.S. Supreme Court</i>	50	<b>23</b>	29	<b>15</b>	35	<b>24</b>	<b>-26</b>
<i>Congress</i>	42	<b>19</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>	18	<b>6</b>	<b>-36</b>
<i>Major Educational Institutions</i>	61	<b>37</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>32*</b>	35	<b>30</b>	<b>-31</b>
<i>The Press</i>	29	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13*</b>	13	<b>11</b>	<b>-18</b>
<i>Organized Labor</i>	22	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	21	<b>15</b>	15	<b>-7</b>
<i>Major Companies</i>	55	<b>27</b>	<b>16</b>	20	20	<b>13</b>	<b>-42</b>

\*Figure is an average of nearest adjacent data because no response was provided for 1991. Source: Harris, *Index of Confidence*, May 18, 2011, <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/780/Default.aspx>.

resonance in the defense community; it has been invoked, for example, in current discussions of the effects of defense budget cuts.) By the mid-1970s, significant changes were under way in the Army (and in the military more broadly) that would result in the professional, effective force that executed U.S. policy in Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, the Balkans, and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, there have been struggles and failures. For the sake of this analysis, we distinguish operational/tactical problems (the result of poor *military* planning or execution, or of effective enemy action) from scandal (the result of personal or *institutional* failure). Operational struggles include the failed rescue of hostages in Iran in 1980 (*Operation Eagle Claw*); the 1983 bombing of the Marine Corps bar-

racks in Beirut; Task Force Ranger (“Black Hawk Down”) in Somalia in 1993; and most recently, the military’s slow response to the development of the insurgency in Iraq. In the wake of these setbacks, the U.S. military has demonstrated remarkable resilience and strength, and the American public has been forgiving. Indeed, the blame for operational or tactical military failures tends to rest with the *political* leadership of the military: the president and the secretary of defense, among others. Consider, for instance, the repudiation of the conduct of the Iraq War as demonstrated in the 2006 U.S. midterm elections. This pattern is supported by the civil-military relations model described above: U.S. military leaders have assumed a largely instrumental role in the formulation of

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national security and military policy. Thus, they advise but defer final judgment to their civilian leaders and, perhaps more significant, avoid public dissent once a policy decision is made. As General Colin Powell describes it: "When we are debating an issue, loyalty means giving me your honest opinion, whether you think I'll like it or not. Disagreement, at this stage, stimulates me. But once a decision has been made, the debate ends. From that point on, loyalty means executing the decision as if it were your own."<sup>11</sup>

The military's ability to avoid blame for its recent operational or tactical struggles may be partly rooted in its current approach to civil-military relations. While loyalty in response to criticism of policy may seem an obvious behavior for military professionals, there are legal alternatives available to them. Indeed, a standard question asked of service chiefs in their confirmation hearings is whether they will express their personal views of executive policy when questioned by Congress. The answer given is yes; but in recent memory there have been few instances of such candor. We would do well to remember that an officer's oath is to support and defend the Constitution – not the policies of an administration. Prior generations of military leaders occasionally interpreted this as an obligation to resist what they perceived to be the dangerous errors of their civilian leaders.

From the 1930s through the 1960s, the debate on military policy was often both public and acrimonious. For example, Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgway waged a long (and futile) campaign against President Eisenhower's "new look" military policy.<sup>12</sup> The president did not nominate Ridgway to a second term, selecting as his replacement General Maxwell Taylor, who promised to be more pliant. (He wasn't, as it turned

out.) At the end of the Vietnam War, the U.S. military's leaders understood well that exercising a firmer hand in the formulation of policy has a cost: shared responsibility for policy failures. The current model for civil-military relations pushes much of that responsibility back to civilian leaders. The military has sustained the public perception of competence through its effective execution of the policies it is given. Rightly or not, the public therefore understands military failures as being rooted not in the military's execution, but in unwise policy.

In addition to valuing competence, society also expects institutions to serve a greater good. This public-mindedness is grounded in three principles: selflessness, accountability, and fairness. These factors are highlighted by the other institutions that enjoy widespread public confidence: small business and the police. According to a 2011 Gallup poll, 78 percent of Americans expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military; 64 percent said the same for small business, and 56 percent for the police. In contrast, Congress (12 percent), the presidency (35 percent), and big business (19 percent) are held in relatively low regard by the American public.

What does the military have in common with the police and small business? In the case of the former, unselfish service is a common trait. The police (ideally) have no other purpose than to protect and serve the nation's communities. In performing this service, capable men and women make sacrifices. They give up potentially lucrative and rewarding opportunities in other jobs. They put themselves in danger, sometimes sacrificing their lives. Small business is perceived to share two key traits with the military: fairness and accountability. In small business, Americans see the best qualities of



the nation's economic system (opportunity for those who seek it, rewards for those who succeed), absent the abuses and corruption that they impute to big business and banks. Small business owners pursue self-interest, but their success is deserved because it emerges from their own hard work and not from a manipulation of the system's resources. Small businesses create wealth and opportunity; they are a gateway for immigrants to enter the American middle class, and they evoke the entrepreneurial spirit and mythos of American economic history – think of Andrew Carnegie, Bill Gates, the fictional heroes of Horatio Alger stories, and so on. Furthermore, small business owners are exposed to risk; if a small business fails, it is left to fail. Thus, fairness works both ways.

Accountability and merit-based rewards are two sides of the same coin: there is no justice in rewarding success if there are no consequences to failure. In this regard, we may understand some of what lies behind the military's resilience in the face of a second challenge: scandal. Unlike tactical or operational failure, scandal presents a different problem. It is typically a failure of the institution itself, and blame therefore must reside within it. One may ask how the military has sustained the public's confidence through wrenching institutional failures: for example, Abu Ghraib, the Walter Reed scandal, and the Pat Tillman friendly-fire cover-up. This is a complex question that is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the military's culture of accountability is a crucial element of the institution's resilience.

The military's internal processes of self-correction and policing are swift and generally unambiguous. When wrongdoing occurs, the perpetrators are brought to justice. Incompetent leaders are removed from their positions; for senior

leaders, such removals are usually career-ending. The Walter Reed scandal, for instance, ended the careers of two generals (including the surgeon general at the time); the secretary of the army was fired as well. For men and women who have chosen careers in the military, honor and reputation are the currency of personal success. To end a career in disgrace is a powerful symbol and a reminder of personal and institutional accountability. The public appears to understand this. It does not expect perfection from the military; it expects consequences for internal failures. The military has generally satisfied these expectations.

In their book *The Meritocracy Myth*, sociologists Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller argue that the American dream rests upon the belief that America is a land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their own merit takes them.<sup>13</sup> Individuals get out of the system what they put into it, and getting ahead is based on individual merit – a combination of factors including innate abilities, working hard, having the right attitude, and having high moral character. McNamee and Miller go on to point out, however, that certain social forces in America can suppress or negate the effects of merit in the race to get ahead. Such forces include inheritance, social and cultural advantages, unequal educational opportunity, the decline of self-employment, and discrimination in all its forms. Yet the military is seen to be relatively free of these sources of injustice.

The military places soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen and women in a culture in which advancement and recognition are based on individual achievement. The social sources of injustice described by McNamee and Miller are countered by military policies that eliminate nepotism, negate socioeconomic and cultural differences, and express zero tolerance

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for any type of discrimination. Nepotism and inheritance are eliminated by the lack of horizontal entry into the profession. The only way to move up the hierarchy in the military is to start at the bottom. Thus, most Americans believe that the military provides opportunity to all Americans; they have faith that competence is recognized and rewarded, and that training and educational resources are provided. Simultaneously, they are reassured by the fact that incompetence and failure have consequences in the military. Much of the anger toward American corporations today stems from the feeling that the men and women who lead these firms have escaped the just consequences of their actions. This offends Americans' strong sense of fairness.

The military's embodiment of selflessness, merit, and accountability has led some to seek broader lessons from the example set by the armed forces. In particular, the military is offered as an exemplar in instilling the notions of service and civic responsibility in America's youth. Calls to reinstate a draft (or at least a draft as a part of compulsory national service) are indicative of this sentiment. According to this view, the draft, beyond meeting the manpower requirements of the military in a way that reflects the society it serves, would draw the country together through the common experience of national service, would encourage the development of shared values, and would be a powerful remedy for the individualism that seems to dominate today's society. The sociologist Charles Moskos, harkening back to the draft days in the post-World War II era, has noted:

During the peaceful years of the 1950s – a time not unlike our own, when the threat of mass destruction hung in the air – most Ivy League men had to spend two years in

uniform, before or after college, working and bunking with others of very different backgrounds and races (the military, remember, was about the only racially integrated institution at the time).

This shared experience helped instill in those who served, as in the national culture generally, a sense of unity and moral seriousness that we would not see again – until after September 11, 2001. It's a shame that it has taken terrorist attacks to awaken us to the reality of our shared national fate. We should use this moment to rebuild institutions like the draft that will keep us awake to this reality even as the memory of the attacks fades.<sup>14</sup>

While a return to the draft seems a remote possibility, there are other ways to leverage the virtues of the military in promoting good citizenship, and to translate the values engendered through military training, education, and leadership development. Retired military officers have been summoned to lead troubled school districts in places such as Washington, D.C., Seattle, Huntsville, and Wake County, North Carolina. Programs to rehabilitate wayward juveniles via teen boot camps and junior ROTC detachments have multiplied in schools across the nation in an effort to instill the values of self-discipline and leadership. Additionally, public school military academies have emerged in response to the yearning for renewed citizenship. In Chicago – where more than ten thousand high school students now wear a uniform to class – retired Army officer and current principal of the Chicago Marine Academy, Paul Stroh, has stated that the mission of public military schools is simply to “produce a student that is prepared for post-secondary education and that eventually will become a leader in their community, at the city, the state, or even the national level.”<sup>15</sup>

Turning to the military model for the education of America's youth has received some criticism. Boot camps have been under closer scrutiny after instances of abuse, junior ROTC and public school military academies have been accused of surreptitiously serving as recruiting offices, and the pedagogical competence of military officers serving in positions of educational leadership has been questioned. Nevertheless, admiration for the role of the military in imbuing the values of citizenship in young people has endured.

But what exactly is it about the military that takes America's youth – who are often in a stage of life more characterized by self-interest and selfishness than sacrifice and selflessness – and transforms them into soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen who are willing to set aside self-interest in pursuit of the greater good?<sup>16</sup> What makes them willing to expose themselves to the consequences of their decisions (including the potential loss of life) when a different career choice would offer a path less fraught with danger? Is it the stripping away of the individual identity in order to emphasize uniformity (and uniforms)? Is it the discipline of a hierarchical system with clearly defined ranks, organizational rituals, customs, and courtesies? While these aspects of the military are often the most noticeable, they are also the most superficial. The development of selfless and responsible citizens begins with the recognition that service members are, above all, Americans; and an acceptance of the contradiction inherent to American society: the tension between self-interest and individualism, on the one hand, and commitment to and sacrifice for the common good, on the other.

Instead of stamping out all vestiges of American individualism in its members, the U.S. military surrounds its members

with a culture that redefines self-interest. It is a culture that relies on what Alexis de Tocqueville called “self-interest well understood.” From his travels throughout the United States during the early 1800s, Tocqueville noted:

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Americans . . . are pleased to explain almost all the actions of their life with the aid of self-interest well understood; they complacently show how the enlightened love of themselves constantly brings them to aid each other and disposes them willingly to sacrifice a part of their time and their wealth to the good of the state. . . . Each American knows how to sacrifice a part of his particular interests to save the rest.<sup>17</sup>

Tocqueville's Americans valued their liberty – their ability to choose for themselves and enjoy the fruits of their labors – yet they also grasped the essential paradox of liberty: that its maintenance requires collective action. People during that period understood that citizens who acted to further the interests of society ultimately served their own interests through the betterment of the society in which they lived. This could happen only if they subjected themselves to a collective authority of civic and political groups.

Some have lamented the decline of the civic society Tocqueville observed (notably Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*), but the American military retains the individualism essential to being an American while also emphasizing the principle of “self-interest well understood.” Uniforms, jargon, salutes, discipline, and hierarchy may encourage this principle, but as social psychologist Edgar Schein points out, these are secondary *reinforcing* mechanisms – practices that are visible to outsiders, and therefore likely to be seen as the roots of the organizational culture.<sup>18</sup> They tell us that some sort of culture is present, but they

do not tell us how it came about, what it does, or how it endures.

It is through its leaders – from the lowest level sergeant to the highest ranking general – that the military passes on its culture of “self-interest well understood.” In the army, for example, this process begins the first day a new member is introduced to the military via the drill sergeant, who, along with the non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps in general, epitomizes the two characteristics that make the military a well-regarded American institution: competence and selflessness. These two themes characterize the Noncommissioned Officer Creed (abridged below), which is recited with pride by every sergeant in the Army:

No one is more professional than I. . . . Competence is my watchword. My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind – accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my soldiers. . . . All soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership. I know my soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own.

For many new soldiers, the NCO is the first adult in their lives whose primary purpose is to develop them into better men and women, and better leaders. In their NCOs, soldiers discover a curious mix of high expectations, hard truths, and unexpected compassion. Soldiers gradually realize that NCOs are drastically underpaid considering their line of work, spend inordinate time working with soldiers at the expense of family and personal needs, and are utterly devoted to their soldiers and the Army. Soldiers learn that NCOs take equal pride in being the “backbone of the Army” and subordinating their needs and interests to those of the officers over them or the soldiers under them. Through constant exposure to these role models, each new genera-

tion in every service of the military learns the principle of “self-interest well understood.”

The culture is also embedded through the actions and attitudes of military leaders at the highest levels. As discussed above, the U.S. military is led by civilians. The concept of civilian control of the military ensures that the most decorated, highest ranking officers will still subordinate their views to the civilians appointed over them. It is the duty of military officers to render their expert military opinion, but it is the decision of the civilian political leadership that determines the strategic direction of the military. For the good of the nation, military leaders are subordinate to their elected political leaders. From President Truman’s firing of General Douglas MacArthur in 1951, to General Stanley McChrystal’s relief as commander of forces in Afghanistan in 2010 by President Obama, history provides numerous examples of this subordination – a fact built on service and accountability.

The men and women of the armed forces, including senior officers, sacrifice a great deal of personal liberty. They subordinate their wills to the protection of the U.S. Constitution and, more tangibly, to the will of their superiors and the code of conduct of the organization. Yet such a commitment must be reinforced by other organizational practices. In this regard, the reinforcing mechanisms of military culture establish and guard privileges that are found almost nowhere else in American society. This is the implicit contract of military service. To the soldier, sailor, marine, and airman, the nation says, “Give me your liberty, and I will give you freedom.”

Members of the armed forces live free from many of the fears that daily weigh on their civilian counterparts. The value



of the individual is reinforced in the complete social safety net (by “complete,” we do not suggest it is without flaws) that surrounds service members from the day they enter the service until the day they leave, and in some cases, long after they retire. Individual identity may be diminished by providing soldiers common uniforms, for example, but the value of individuals is enhanced. Socioeconomic differences are erased. Personnel of similar rank receive similar housing, health care, and compensation. They shop in the same department and grocery stores (the post exchange, or PX, and the commissary). Discrimination is minimized in a system that emphasizes (and includes in performance evaluations) equal opportunity, but stops short of using quotas in order to avoid reverse discrimination. Thus, contrary to McNamee and Miller’s observations that meritocracy is a myth in America, individualism via the workings of meritocracy is alive and well in the U.S. military.

This push-pull dynamic of the subordination and protection of individual liberty is perhaps most powerfully demonstrated in the military’s code of comradeship. Military men and women take tremendous personal risks for the sake of a fallen or wounded fellow. Returning to the example of the Army, soldiers are encouraged to strive for personal advancement, but always within the context of others – whether that be a buddy, the unit, or the profession. This juxtaposition of the individual with the obligation toward others is core to the Soldier’s Creed:

I am an American Soldier.  
 I am a warrior and a member of a team.  
 I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values.  
 I will always place the mission first.  
 I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.  
 I will never leave a fallen comrade.  
 I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills.  
 I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself.  
 I am an expert and I am a professional.  
 I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy, the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.  
 I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.  
 I am an American Soldier.

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For a soldier to promise never to leave a fallen comrade – even if that means endangering himself in the process – requires a transformed understanding of individualism. The individual is of great worth, but it is always *the other* individual. No soldier demands special treatment, for he or she knows that such demands are unnecessary. It is the principle of “self-interest well understood.”

The Soldier’s Creed, though, is merely an artifact of Army culture. We find an organization’s true values and beliefs not in creeds or published proclamations, but in observing how rewards and recognition are dispensed within the organization. Corporations dole out pay raises and bonuses to reinforce and recognize those who exemplify desired corporate values. Instead of monetary remuneration, the military relies on awards or medals to applaud those who uphold and exemplify its values. The highest award in the military is the Congressional Medal of Honor, awarded by the president to a service member who “distinguishes himself or herself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his or her life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States.”<sup>19</sup>

Recipients of the Medal of Honor are so respected by other members of the

*The Origins & Lessons of Public Confidence in the Military* Table 3  
Post-9/11 Medal of Honor Recipients

Recipient	Service	Location	Year	Situation
Paul R. Smith	Army	Iraq	2003	Killed while holding the enemy at bay, allowing for the wounded to be carried out
Jason Dunham	Marines	Iraq	2004	Fought hand-to-hand with the enemy and hurled himself on a grenade to protect fellow Marines
Michael P. Murphy	Navy	Afghanistan	2005	Led a four-man reconnaissance team in a fight against superior numbers, exposed himself to hostile fire in order to call for help
Jared C. Monti	Army	Afghanistan	2006	Killed while trying to rescue a wounded soldier from intense small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire
Michael A. Monsoor	Navy	Iraq	2006	Saved the lives of his fellow SEALs at his sniper position by diving on a grenade
Ross A. McGinnis	Army	Iraq	2006	Saved the lives of four soldiers by diving on a grenade while inside a Humvee
Salvatore Giunta	Army	Afghanistan	2007	For risking his life to save a wounded soldier from being captured
Robert James Miller	Army	Afghanistan	2008	Fatally shot while diverting gunfire from Taliban forces so that his fellow soldiers could escape
Leroy Petry	Army	Afghanistan	2008	Picked up and threw a live grenade away from his fellow soldiers
Dakota Meyer	Marines	Afghanistan	2009	Rescued 23 Afghans and 13 Americans in the heat of battle

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military that they are customarily saluted, regardless of rank or status. The Medal of Honor may be the military's most vivid symbol of the application of the principle of "self-interest well understood." Of the servicemen awarded the medal during and since World War II, almost 60 percent died as a result of their heroism. This extraordinary standard of self-sacrifice has continued in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (see Table 3).

In a time of cynicism toward public institutions, American society continues to hold the U.S. military in high esteem. Competence, accountability, and subordination of the institution's interests to those of society are the main drivers of societal confidence. American society has also taken notice of the military's success in transferring institutional selflessness to

the individual. As a result, many aspects of the military are being emulated throughout the country in an effort to instill the principles of citizenship in America's young people. Yet the symbols of military culture – including discipline, uniforms, and ceremony – only scratch the surface. While meaningful and perhaps ennobling to many of today's youth, these characteristics of the military are themselves subordinate to the fundamental principle of "self-interest well understood." This principle is conveyed through a culture that retains American individualism and American collective engagement. It strives to maintain and protect a meritocracy built on accountability, while equally emphasizing the institution's obligations to the soldiers and their families, and the soldiers' obligations to their comrades and the profession.

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#### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this essay are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.
- <sup>2</sup> Mark Thompson, "An Army Apart: 45,000 Troops are Coming Home to a Country that Doesn't Know Them," *Time*, November 21, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> National Guard units from all fifty states were sent to support the recovery of the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina – a quasi-federal response. Some federal units were sent as well, though not for the purpose of law enforcement.

- <sup>4</sup> President Truman served in World War I. Nominees Wendell Willkie (Army) and Adlai Stevenson (Navy) enlisted during World War I, but the war ended before they saw action. Presidents Kennedy, Nixon, Ford, and George H.W. Bush served in World War II, and President Johnson served briefly in the Pacific. President Carter entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1943 and served in the post-World War II Navy. Democratic nominees George McGovern (World War II), Al Gore (Vietnam), and John Kerry (Vietnam) saw combat, and Michael Dukakis served in the peacetime Army. Republican nominees Bob Dole (World War II) and John McCain (Vietnam) also saw combat. Independent nominee Ross Perot served in the Navy. This review is restricted to presidents and presidential candidates who served in the nationally controlled military, as opposed to National Guard units.
- <sup>5</sup> Note that a very small proportion of members of Congress have children in the military.
- <sup>6</sup> Jennifer Manning, “Membership in the 112th Congress: A Profile” (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2011), <http://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/R41647.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> In evaluating such polls, we should remember that to some respondents, one may do no wrong, and to others, one may do no right. The important changes occur in between, and the Harris data show a significant shift in the way the “middle” of the country feels about the leadership of the military since the end of the Vietnam War. Gallup confidence polls support this result, but because they aggregate two responses in the historical tables (“a great deal” and “quite a lot”), the data show less variance and are somewhat less informative. See Figure 1, above. Gallup, *Confidence in Institutions*, June 9–12, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.
- <sup>8</sup> The decline in public confidence in labor leadership has been small, but that is from a low baseline (just 22 percent).
- <sup>9</sup> James J. Carafano, “Avoiding the Hollow Army,” *Army* (July 2005): 69–70.
- <sup>10</sup> For more discussion, see Richard Lock-Pullan, “‘An Inward Looking Time’: The United States Army, 1973–1976,” *Journal of Military History* (April 2003): 483–512; and John L. Romjue, *The Army of Excellence: The Development of the 1980s Army* (Fort Monroe, Va.: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1993).
- <sup>11</sup> Colin L. Powell, with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995).
- <sup>12</sup> A. J. Bacevich and Lawrence F. Kaplan, “Generals versus the President: Eisenhower and the Army, 1953–1955, a Case in Civil-Military Relations” (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University, 1997).
- <sup>13</sup> Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).
- <sup>14</sup> Charles Moskos and Paul Glastis, “Now Do You Believe We Need A Draft?” *Washington Monthly*, November 2001.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Stroh, as interviewed in the segment “Chicago’s Military Academies Raise Education Debate,” *PBS NewsHour*, December 26, 2007.
- <sup>16</sup> The perspective in this section reflects the Army service experience of two of the authors, and many examples are therefore drawn from the Army. It is the authors’ belief, however, that these examples are also representative of the experiences of members of the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps.
- <sup>17</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 502–503.
- <sup>18</sup> Edgar H. Schein, “How Founders and Leaders Embed and Transmit Culture: Socialization from a Leadership Perspective,” in *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), chap. 13.
- <sup>19</sup> *Military Awards*, Army Regulation 600-8-22 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 53.