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# FOOTNOTES

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## WAR AND THE MILITARY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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At past FPRI history institutes I have praised and thanked the teachers in attendance because I likened them to front-line soldiers in the war to prove the ignorance of America's youth is not invincible. Our subject this weekend makes that simile especially apt, so in my capacity as a college professor and my capacity as a high school parent, I salute your heroic calling.

My task is to offer some general remarks on how to think about war and the military in the broad sweep of American history--remarks I hope will be heuristic but also provocative. Indeed, my first provocation is to open the conference by recalling a certain notorious film clip, General George Patton's famous speech to the Third Army, as delivered by George C. Scott in *Patton* (1970):

Men, all this stuff you've heard about America not wanting to fight, wanting to stay out of the war, is a lot of horse dung. Americans traditionally love to fight. ALL REAL Americans, love the sting of battle. When you were kids, you all admired the champion marble shooter, the fastest runner, the big league ball players, the toughest boxers . . . Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time. I wouldn't give a hoot in Hell for a man who lost and laughed. That's why Americans have never lost and will never lose a war.

I Googled that speech and learned how thoroughly Hollywood bowdlerized it. The real address contains scarcely a sentence without an obscenity or bloody oath.

Of course, Patton was trying to encourage--literally instill courage in--nervous young men about to storm Hitler's West Wall. So the sentiments he expressed were more suited to a football locker room pep talk than a Fourth of July oration.

Nevertheless, Patton had a point when he cried, "Americans love to fight, traditionally." Indeed, the popular author Geoffrey Perret even titled his American history *A Country Made By War* (1989). And if that is so, then Americans simply must affirm their military and their wars because without them the great nation we inhabit today would not exist. The United States was born in an armed revolution. The Union was saved in a great Civil War. The nation realized its Manifest Destiny and achieved unprecedented world power largely through war. Perhaps Americans are not more belligerent than other great nations, but they are certainly not less belligerent. In its brief 230-year history the U.S. has waged at least a dozen major wars and scores of minor conflicts on the frontier and overseas. The U.S. today spends more on defense than the next six Great Powers combined, and stations armed forces of some variety in over a hundred countries. The United States is a militant republic, the American Creed a fighting faith, and our politics and foreign policy have been driven, as often as not, by the fact or fear of war. Moreover, we teachers cannot even describe the main social, economic, and cultural trends in American history without frequent reference to war and the military. One need only name the abolition of slavery, establishment of the income tax, triumph of women's suffrage, the Civil Rights movement, and the youth rebellion of the 1960s to suggest how great transformations have been partly driven by war. The only comparable influence in U.S. history, I think, has been evangelical religion.

Whether or not Americans really romance war, at least when they like their odds and deem the fruits of victory worth the risk, they certainly love to study it. At Penn the courses in military and diplomatic history attract up to ten times more students than social or cultural history. Cable TV's History Channel obsesses on World War II and the Civil War to the exclusion of almost everything else. Best-selling histories are disproportionately concerned with wars and war leaders: witness the four new biographies of Ulysses S. Grant over the past few years. Blockbuster

movies are often about historical battles and wars, or else fantasy fights of the Star Wars, Star Trek, and Lord of the Rings variety. Look at the Game Boy, Nintendo, and Play Station titles and you encounter ubiquitous combat in ghetto streets, outer space, or Bowser's islands.

What does that tell us about ourselves and our country? I don't know. Or at least, I do know the American people are too disparate, complex, perhaps schizophrenic to be caricatured. Looking at their history, Americans are surely proud of the soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen who have defended their liberty and national honor. Americans thrill to the victories they won and mourn the trials suffered by servicemen and their families. But at the same time most Americans are loath to glorify war and are quick to imagine military service as somewhat alien to civilian values. Americans worship at the altars of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and cherish equality, civility, and compromise--all of which military discipline, duty, hierarchy, and coercion contradict. Military service, whether performed by professionals, conscripted citizens, or volunteer militia, inevitably strikes Americans as abnormal. If civilians are called to the colors, they deem it an interruption born of an emergency thrust upon the nation by some wicked enemy: an emergency to be gotten over with as quickly as possible and as violently as necessary, so that citizens can return to their hometowns, families, and jobs. If, by contrast, professionals fill the ranks of their armed forces, then Americans tend to view them as a caste apart, a sort of fighting order of monks who sacrifice the blessings of civil society so that others may continue to enjoy them. Thus, fighting men and women take on a sacred, even sacrificial character in what I call the American Civil Religion.

These thoughts may strike some as vague, speculative generalizations. But I submit they already suggest three enduring themes that are not vague at all. One is the cultural gap between the military and civil society that has waxed and waned since colonial times, but become a growing concern since the draft was abolished in 1973 in favor of an All-Volunteer Force. The military and civil cultures have diverged to the point that they barely intersect anymore, which many observers consider unhealthy for both. A related theme is the hallowed American principle of civil supremacy. General Matthew B. Ridgway voiced the military's proper deference when he said, "The soldier is in the statesman's junior partner." It was statesman Theodore Roosevelt who expressed the heretical view that "The diplomat is the servant, not master, of the soldier." We should take pride in the truly amazing fact that a military coup has never been a serious threat to our republic (even when some civilians urged George Washington and George McClellan to make one) and that insubordination such as Douglas MacArthur's has been very rare. But there is no question that tensions have always existed between politicians and the uniformed brass, especially at times when the armed forces were demoralized because the government starved them of resources or made impossible demands on them.

A third theme is simply that ambivalence about war which is displayed by American citizens. As philosopher George Santayana put it, "To delight in war is meritorious in the

soldier, dangerous in the captain, and criminal in the statesman." Throughout most of our history Americans honored their veterans and boasted--until Vietnam--of never having lost a war. Moreover, most Americans liked to believe that their nation's record in war was Providential, a sign of divine favor, and proof that our causes were just. And yet, on the other hand, few Americans wanted to believe their country was eager to fight or was responsible for the outbreak of war. On the contrary, Americans imagined themselves a peace-loving people. Were they just fooling themselves, as Patton would have it? Let's do a quick survey with those popular self-images in mind, and see what it suggests.

We discover at once that a certain duality toward war was present at the creation of the thirteen colonies. I spied it, quite literally, a few years ago when my family took advantage of a warm winter day to promenade along Kelly Drive in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park on the north bank of the Schuylkill River. At one point we passed a series of circular monuments featuring representative colonists who founded America. The central monument included two dominating figures half-facing each other. One was a stereotypical Quaker in his broad-brimmed hat and coat. He held in his hand a book, presumably the Bible. The other was a stereotypical Puritan in his peaked, buckled hat and Calvinist garb. He held in his hand . . . a musket!

The Puritans hit American soil, not wanting to fight Indians or anyone else, but absolutely ready to do so if necessary for defense or expansion, especially against the hated French Catholics up in Quebec. As we know, the Puritans waged bitter, successful war on the violent Pequot tribe as early as 1637, and a Native American coalition led by Metacom, or King Philip, in 1675. After 1688, when Parliament ousted the Stuart kings and established the Protestant Whig ascendancy, New Englanders cheered John Churchill's crusade to crush the French and Spanish empires and conquer all North America. Thus began the long series of French and Indian Wars that colonists later claimed they were dragged into, but in fact all supported except for the pacifist Quakers.

The so-called Cavalier planters and indentured servants who settled the Chesapeake Bay and Carolinas were just as eager to fight for defense and empire. Indeed, their most famous son, Colonel Washington, would even be blamed for sparking the climactic French and Indian War when he ambushed an enemy column on the frontier in 1754. And as for the hundreds of thousands of Scots-Irish who fanned out across the Appalachians, for them feuding and war were simply their way of life. To be sure, the people who invented America sought economic opportunity and civil and religious liberty. But except for the Quakers and German Mennonites, Americans always reacted with fury against anyone who dared interfere with, or place limits upon, their pursuit of happiness. At such times they instinctively reached for their muskets with a deadly earnestness born of impatience.

Nothing better illustrates the centrality of the military to the American identity than the role played by the Continental Army. From 1775 to 1783 Washington's threadbare, unpaid, often hungry band of volunteers was

the United States for all practical purposes, because the Army was the only national institution besides an impotent, feckless committee called Congress. Washington's genius was less as a tactician than as a paragon of a republican general, exhorting reluctant troops, refusing to live off the land despite hardship, deferring to politicians he held in contempt, accepting no pay, and above all resigning his commission after victory rather than succumbing to the temptations of a Caesar or Napoleon. So indispensable was Washington and the sort of army he fashioned that soon after independence the Federalist movement arose to promote a new Constitution in order to make Washington the chief magistrate and forge a strong central government and credible military.

Revolutionary War veterans composed a large bloc of the delegates at Philadelphia, and the first 29 of the 85 Federalist papers argued for ratification of the Constitution on the grounds of defense and foreign policy. John Jay wrote that the United States had proved their existence by having waged war as a nation, vanquished their enemies as a nation, and made foreign treaties as a nation. He wrote that government's primary responsibility was to protect the people from foreign invasion and influence. He reminded readers of the proximity of the British and Spanish empires, the likelihood of future rivalry with the French, and thus implicitly scorned any notion that the U.S. could fancy itself isolated. Indeed, he insisted nothing would invite war so much as for the 13 states to fall into feeble disunion.

Alexander Hamilton likewise demolished the conceit known today as "Democratic Peace Theory," to wit, that self-governing peoples are by nature peaceful and do not make war on other republics. Hamilton cited the long list of wars waged by republican Sparta, Athens, Carthage, and Rome in ancient times, and Venice, the Dutch Republic, and Parliamentary England in modern times, concluding "There have been, if I may so express it, almost as many popular as royal wars." Hamilton asked by what fallacy Americans believed they were somehow exempt from "the imperfections, weaknesses, and evils incident to society in every shape."

But the fact that Americans were not immune to aggression or folly hardly meant they should dispense with a standing military altogether, as the Anti-Federalists contended. Indeed, wrote Hamilton, a prohibition against raising armed forces in peacetime "would exhibit the most extraordinary spectacle which the world has yet seen--that of a nation incapacitated by its own Constitution to prepare for defense until it was actually invaded!" Federalists were even more adamant about the need for a permanent Navy lest American commerce be made a prey even in peacetime and America's coasts be exposed in wartime. Yes, there was always the danger that a standing military might be used in the manner of Redcoats to oppress the people. But the Framers minimized that risk by checking and balancing the powers to raise and command armed forces, declare wars, and ratify treaties. Above all, Federalists remained adamant that the identity and survival of the Union depended on its power to make war.

In the 1790s their Democratic Republican rivals professed to reject that. But after they captured the presidency in 1801, they quickly learned otherwise. To be sure, Thomas Jefferson slashed military spending, relied on militias, and decommissioned John Adams' proud frigates in favor of gunboats. But Jefferson was enough of a scientist to realize the Army needed an expert corps of engineers. It was he who founded the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1802. And it was Jefferson's protege James Madison who led the U.S. into its first discretionary war in 1812 and emerged from it a strong proponent of the professional military and federal arsenals.

There followed an era of relative peace. Except for conflicts attending Indian Removal and the Texans' private war for independence, Americans did not wage serious war again until the Mexican Conflict in 1846. Over those decades Andrew Jackson placed his own ambiguous stamp on the military. As a Scots-Irish frontier chieftain Jackson literally picked fights whenever he could. In 1817 he invaded Spanish Florida in the first of a series of preemptive strikes that have speckled American history. But as a politician Jackson, like Jefferson, claimed that militias sufficed to defend the nation only to learn otherwise in the White House. When his supporters in Congress threatened to close West Point, Jackson called it the finest school in America. Jackson presided over a modest expansion of the frontier army, especially its excellent mounted dragoons and Corps of Topographical Engineers. Not least, Jackson realized that nothing so guarded America's honor abroad than a strong Navy. Finally, when Jackson's protege James K. Polk waged the Mexican War, the professional Army and Navy distinguished themselves while the citizen militias performed miserably. That war established once and for all the reputations of West Point and the new Naval Academy at Annapolis.

But Mexico did not purge America of the myth of the citizen-soldier. On the contrary, Congress clung to its habit of slashing defense budgets in peacetime, with the result that when the South seceded in 1861, the nation again went to war unready and on the cheap. Again West Point graduates filled most of the top ranks, but otherwise the Civil War replicated the nation-in-arms model of volunteers fighting for hearth and home. After Appomattox, and especially after the Grand Army of the Republic and Sons of the Confederacy burnished their respective myths by the 1880s, Americans forgot the initial amateurishness of Civil War recruits, the panicky flights of whole units, the incompetent campaigns and botched maneuvers, preferring to remember the heroism of their citizen-soldiers and the ultimate glory and tragedy.

Those memories were reinforced by the events of the next hundred years, during which the U.S. became a world power. To be sure, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the federal government grew steadily in size and purview, while commerce and imperialism persuaded Admirals, then Congress, then Presidents to build a modern steel Navy sustained by America's first military-industrial complex. The Army and especially Marines expanded during decades when Teddy Roosevelt, Taft, and Woodrow Wilson intervened repeatedly in the Caribbean and

Pacific. But when big wars broke out--the Spanish War in 1898, both world wars, and the Cold War conflicts in Korea and Vietnam--it was once again volunteer and conscripted civilians who filled the ranks of instant armies and navies. Then, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pattern was broken--for better or worse--by two paradigm shifts that punctured, probably forever, the realities and the myths of the military and war in America. The first was the transition from a merely industrial era of warfare to the postindustrial era known as the "revolution in military affairs." Industrial age war placed a premium on huge, indifferently trained armies of infantrymen (cannon fodder, if you will), and on mass production of relatively low-tech weapons such as rifles, machine guns, tanks, ships, and airplanes whose sheer numbers wore down an enemy. Post-industrial war, by contrast, places a premium on relatively small, highly-trained and very mobile strike forces armed with high-tech weapons of unprecedented lethality and accuracy, guided by integrated computer systems linked to orbiting satellites. President Nixon may have abolished the draft in order to drain the passion from anti-war protests, but his shift to fully professional armed forces coincided with the progress of technology.

The second paradigm shift was the simultaneous advent of the protracted conflict and limited war. From 1946 to 1991 the American people were asked to support a long twilight struggle to contain or roll back the Communist menace led by the Soviet Union without triggering a third world war. And when that Cold War turned hot, as in Korea, Americans were asked to fight and die with no expectation of early or total victory. Protracted conflict and limited war made expensive, frustrating demands on our nation to which it was not accustomed. If forced to fight, Americans want to kick maximum butt and come home. The Cold War and War on Terror don't give Americans what they want, while at the same time they require a professional, high-tech military in which the citizen-soldier has no place. The U.S. today is defended by the post-modern equivalents of Roman legionnaires and centurions, which is another reason pundits write of the American Republic giving way to American Empire, and either cheer or deplore that prospect.

This pocket biography suggests three more pregnant themes for the weekend. First, the American way of war,

to employ historian Russell Weigley's apt term; second, the changes in the American way of war caused by technological and geopolitical shifts; and third, the difficulty American culture has in accepting reality or adjusting to changes in reality. At heart, we are still a nation of Minuteman Patriots, peaceful until aroused, and then a righteous nation-in-arms. Just recall the spirit we felt on 9/11, weeping, fearing, but rising as one, full of spit and vinegar, ready to sacrifice, and hot for vengeance and justice. But in truth, that Minuteman culture was already rendered partly a myth the moment in 1775 when Washington took command of the militias outside of Boston and started whipping them into an army. That culture remained partly mythical throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the pioneer trails west and overseas were blazed by the professional soldiers and sailors. And it became mostly mythical over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the U.S. standing military achieved unparalleled technical sophistication, and the nature and locus of security threats shifted from conventional war to nuclear war to guerilla war to terrorist war. Accordingly, the Pentagon decided it no longer needed or wanted the citizen-soldier. And yet, strangely, the American public has become less tolerant of protracted conflict, and less tolerant of American casualties, than it was during eras when tens of thousands of citizen soldiers became casualties! Indeed, it seems Americans today are even less tolerant of enemy and collateral civilian casualties than ever before. Who mourned at the time for the hundreds of thousands of Japanese and German civilians incinerated by the Army Air Forces? After all, attrition--the wearing down of enemies by superior firepower--had been the American way of war really ever since the War of 1812. But now, more sensitive, or perhaps less confident, Americans ponder what makes them feel more uncomfortable: a short march to Baghdad in which just 200 Americans die as compared to 20,000 Iraqis, or a long insurgency in which 3,000 Americans die as compared to 300,000 Iraqis?

In conclusion, let me return to the conundrum born of Patton's claim that Americans love a fight and Americans' insistence they are really a peace-loving people. It occurred to me the way to parse that puzzle is through a simple chart that juxtaposes the foreign and domestic sources of America's major wars.

Conflict	Foreign Provocations	American War Party	Dissenters
War of Independence 1775-83	Intolerable Acts, Boston Massacre, Lexington Green	Patriots led by Sam & John Adams, Patrick Henry, John Randolph, Tom Paine, etc.	Quakers, Tories
War of 1812 1812-15	<i>USS Chesapeake</i> affair, Impressment of Sailors, Alleged British Incitement of Indian Hostilities	Congressional “War Hawks” led by Clay and Calhoun and cheered by John Adams, et al.	New England, Federalists
Mexican War 1846-48	Santa Anna orders troops across Rio Grande; they allegedly shed “American blood on American soil”	Texans backed by most Jacksonians led by President Polk	Whigs, including Abe Lincoln
War Between the States 1861-65	Southern secession, seizure of Federal property, and assault on Fort Sumter	Abolitionists and Radical New England Republicans, plus Southern Fire-Eaters	Border States, Southern Whigs, Douglas Democrats
Spanish American War 1898	Cuban atrocities, destruction of <i>U.S.S. Maine</i>	Jingoist press led by Hearst, naval promoters led by TR; evangelical clergy	Anti-Imperialists incl. Mugwumps, pacifists, labor unions, and moralists
The Great War 1917-18	Unrestricted submarine warfare, Zimmermann telegram	Nationalists led by TR plus Liberal Internationalists and evangelicals led by Wilson	Unilateralists, anti-crusaders, Germans & Irish
World War II 1941-45	Pearl Harbor, German submarine warfare and declaration of war	Liberal Internationalists, Communist sympathizers, Atlanticists, British <i>Intrepid</i> propaganda ring	America Firsters backed by 80% of public opinion
Korean Police Action 1950-53	Kim Il-Sung’s invasion of South Korea encouraged by Stalin	“Rollback” Cold Warriors allegedly led by Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze & supported by Pentagon	Henry Wallace Progressives and fellow travelers
Vietnam Conflict 1964-75	Hanoi’s support of Vietcong insurgents and alleged attack on U.S. ships in Gulf of Tonkin	JFK’s “best and brightest,” Pentagon avatars of counterinsurgency, LBJ by inertia and Joint Chiefs of Staff by dereliction	Fulbright skeptics and the youth rebellion led by the New Left
First Iraq War 1991	Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, seizure of oil reserves	After the fact, G.H.W. Bush, most Republicans, AIPAC lobby, and the Saudis	Most Democrats and some concerned military analysts
Second Iraq War 2003-??	Al Qaeda assaults on 9/11, triggering war on terrorists and the states that support them	Neoconservatives patronized by Cheney, Rumsfeld, and ultimately G.W. Bush	Paleoconservatives, Realists, old New Leftists, Neo-Liberals, plus Americaphobes

What we discover in this breakdown of our nation’s wars is not one, but three surprisingly valid generalizations. Yes, just as Americans have liked to believe, the United States has been thrust into conflict by some real or apparent foreign assault. That fact also helps to explain America’s tendency to enter wars woefully ill-prepared or else attempt to wage wars on the cheap, a phenomenon my colleague Harvey Sicherman calls “cheap hawkery.”<sup>1</sup> But there is also good reason to entertain the observation made by several that Americans’ real tendency is less to avoid wars than to reconcile fighting with their peaceful self-image by maneuvering, provoking, or through weakness inviting their opponents into firing the first shot!

Finally, in the run-up to almost every major war the historian discovers that the United States, far from displaying a consensus for peace, contained an overt or covert War Party actively promoting belligerency. Am I suggesting that some conspiracy theory can explain America’s wars? Not at all. I simply observe that from the hot-headed Bostonians of the 1770s to the neoconservatives of our era, War Parties have been a staple of American politics and foreign relations.

Do Americans love a fight, as Patton insisted? In the end it does not matter because it seems we are destined to fight whether we like it or not. A certain Ivy Day plaque at the University of Pennsylvania expressed that resignation with pathos. In the years before the structural engineers discovered the ivy was harming the integrity of its buildings’ sandstone and brick walls, Penn invited every

<sup>1</sup> Harvey Sicherman, “Cheap Hawks, Cheap Doves, and the Pursuit of Strategy,” *Orbis*, Fall 2005.

graduating class to plant a sprig of ivy and affix a plaque to some building on campus. The ivy is gone, but the plaques remain, and one day while walking to class my eye was caught by a plaque on the student union. Its

inscription read *Vivere militari est*--To live is to fight. I immediately checked for the date and sure enough, it was signed "The Class of 1945."

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