

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

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Despite a significant decline in the public’s regard for American institutions, the US military continues to be held in high esteem. Indeed, many in American society see the military as *the* exemplary national 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 historically has 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 United States military for its role in establishing the nation in revolution, preserving it against rebellion, and defending it from foreign aggression. In this essay, we argue that the rise in public confidence in the military reflects a combination of the ascendance of the latter (reverence for the military 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. We conclude with a brief discussion of the challenges inherent in copying the military’s perceived success in developing and encouraging public-mindedness.

In recent decades, Americans’ confidence in the military and in military leaders has risen. (See Figures 1 and 2, and Table 1, below.) This increasing trust and regard for the armed forces has been the notable exception to a general decline or stagnation in Americans’ regard for the nation’s 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 is it about the nation’s recent history that accounts for this divergence? It may be that in some way the nation is becoming more militaristic, but little evidence supports this view. Fewer and fewer Americans serve in the military—as of 2010, less than 1% of the labor force was active duty military personnel; adding the guard and reserve components raises the total to about 1.5%. (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. 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.”¹ Such was the gist of a recent *Time* cover story.² What about the defense industry? Are public sympathies being 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 economic ties to its armed services have become weaker in recent decades. So much for the simple answer.

¹ Speech at Duke University, September 29, 2010.

² “An Army Apart: 45,000 Troops Are Coming Home to a Country that Doesn’t Know Them”, *Time*, November 21, 2011

Note: The views expressed in this paper 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.

Figure 1: Gallup Poll, Percentage of Respondents Expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of Confidence in these Institutions

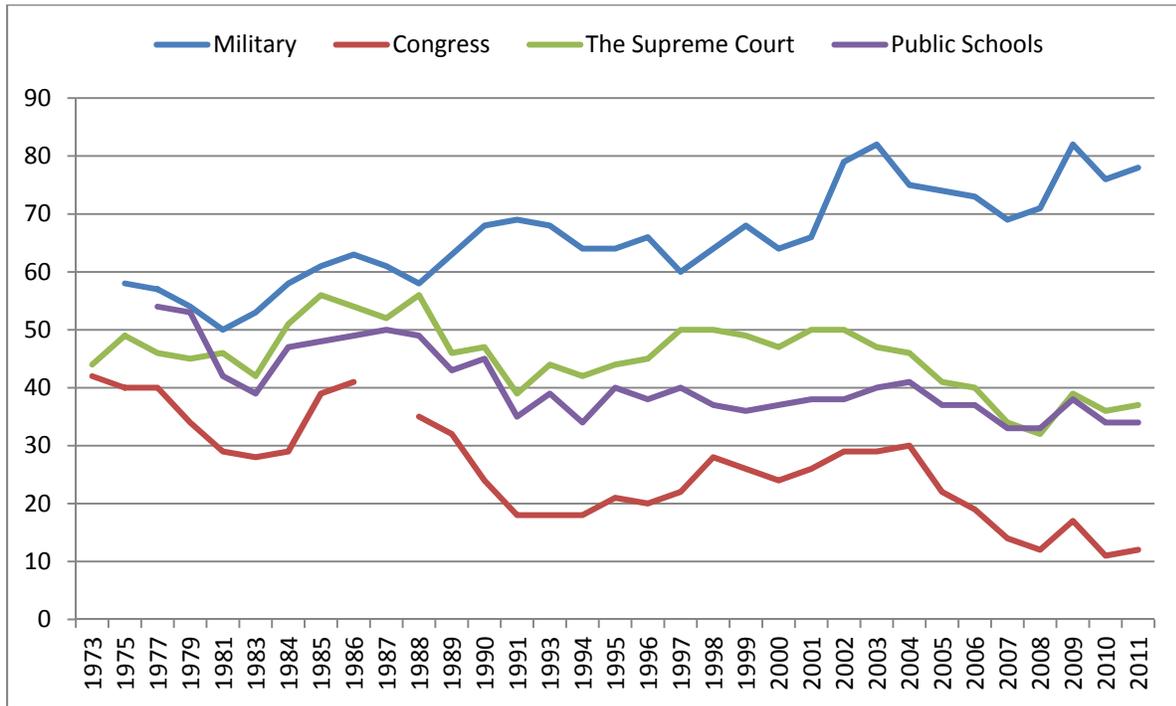


Figure 2: Harris Poll, Percentage of Respondents Expressing "a great deal" of Confidence in the "people in charge of running" these Institutions

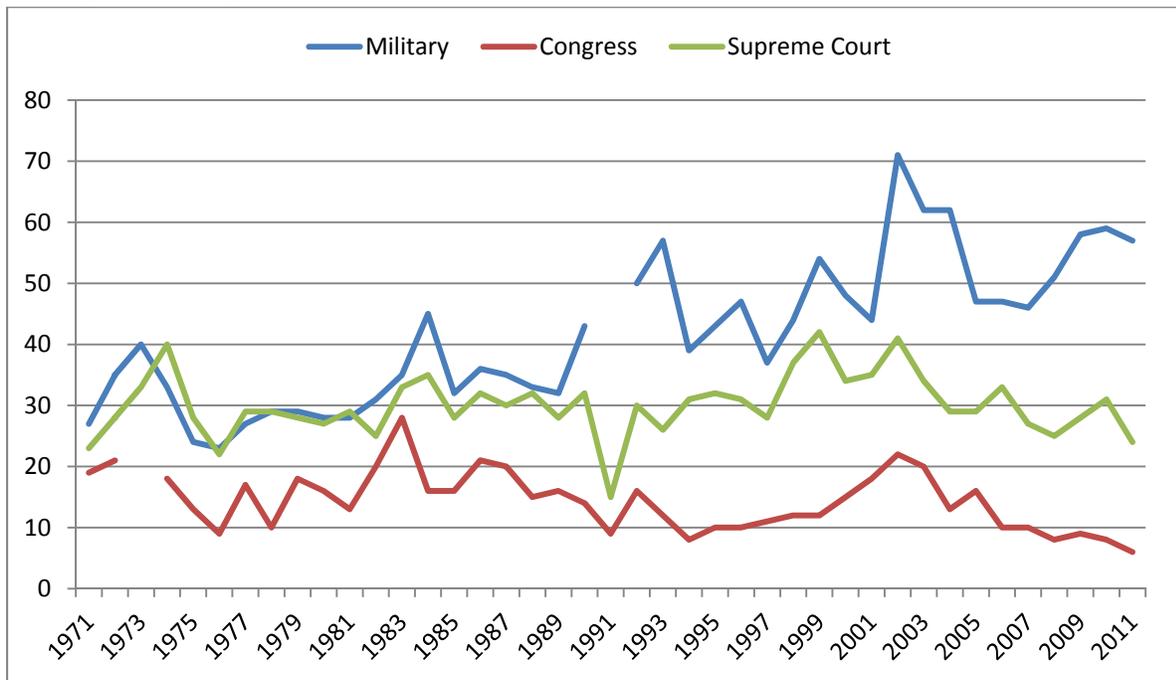
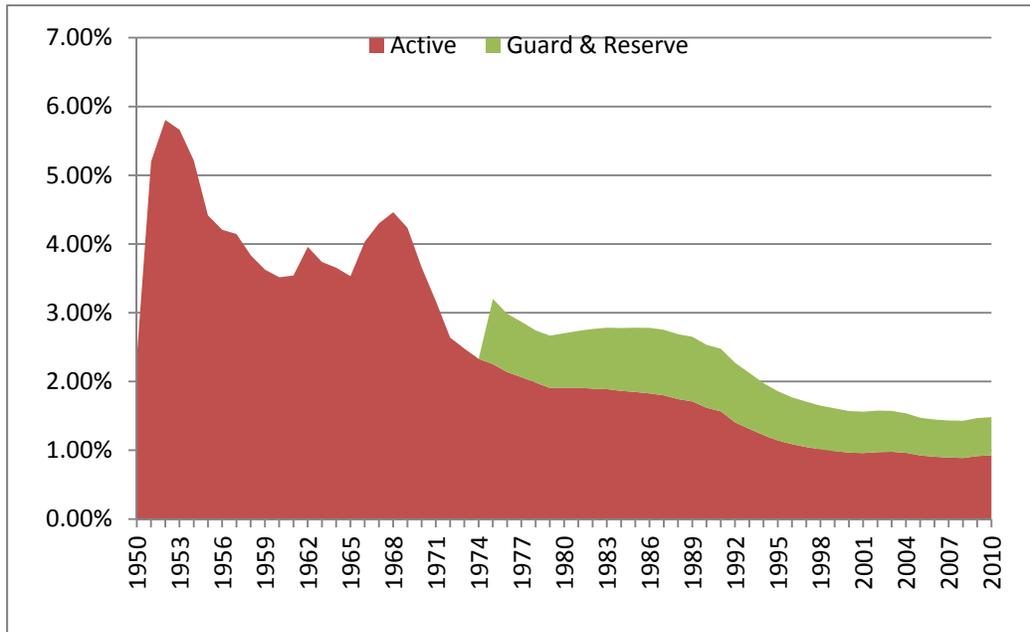


Table 1: Gallup, 20 Year Change in Percentage of Respondents Expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of Confidence in these Institutions

	1981	2011	Change
<i>The Church/Organized Religion</i>	64	48	-16
<i>The Military</i>	50	78	28
<i>US 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

Figure 3: Military as % of Labor Force (Data Courtesy of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Congressional Research Service)



The suspicion of military power is rooted in the revolutionary ideals of the 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 saw archetypes for what happens when too much is power entrusted to a charismatic leader of an army. Though they disagreed in many fundamental questions of government, agrarian democrats like Jefferson and federalists such as Hamilton and Madison shared the opinion that a standing army could endanger freedom. In a speech to the Constitutional Convention, Madison expressed this fear thus:

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.

Civilian control of the armed forces was laid out in Section 2, Article 2 of the Constitution. 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. Finally, the iterations of *posse comitatus* law offer more evidence of America's careful control of the military. However, aside from works of fiction or the paranoid fantasies of the political fringes, recent history has given Americans little cause for worry in this regard, and Americans' historical fears of a too-powerful military have faded somewhat. We see three forces driving this trend: the military has been shrinking in both absolute and relative terms; American military operations are almost exclusively conducted outside of the United States—occasions justifying (either through the Constitution or an act of Congress) the domestic use of federal troops just have not occurred with much regularity; and finally, the military has been largely absent from domestic politics and the controversies that accompany such activity.

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 three million in 1970, to two million in 1980, to slightly fewer than one-and-a-half million today. Relative to the U.S. population, this downsizing has been large: active duty military personnel accounted for 1.5% of the population in 1970, .9% in 1980, and just .48% in 2010.

Second, the U.S. military's role of national defense (meaning 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—such is the oath taken by the men and women of the armed services. The oath 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 glaring exception, except that their character (unconventional) and duration (too brief to allow an effective response) 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 1992.³

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 13 of the first 25, from George Washington to Theodore Roosevelt. Yet the current culture of the United States 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 completely apolitical model espoused by General George Marshall to the highly politicized maneuverings of General Douglas MacArthur, the current military leans strongly to the Marshall model.

³ 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.

Added to this, the political community is increasingly detached from the military. While numerous veterans (primarily from World War II) have sought and obtained the Presidency⁴, 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 was serving as the NATO commander prior to the 1952 election. In an odd coincidence the last men entering the military under the post-WWII draft were born in 1952 (conscripted in December, 1972).⁵ One is already hard-pressed to identify members of congress who serve a Department of Defense constituency. Of the nation's 541 Senators and Representatives, 118 have served or currently serve in the military (nine are serving in the National Guard or the Reserve), approximately 22% of the membership.⁶ Although this is considerably higher than the proportion of veterans in the general U.S. population, the congress is more male (83%) and older (average age: 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 in military experience in the congress, demonstrating how the post-conscription era population is aging and 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).⁷

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 and less relevant to the daily lives of the average citizen. It may be that a crucial element to preserving and increasing the public's 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 towards military power has to some extent receded in recent decades. At the time of its inception four decades ago, some observers worried that the all-volunteer military would emerge as a modern Praetorian Guard or a potent political menace. These fears have thus far been unfounded.

Of course, the degree of societal trust in the military has not always been at the high levels of today. The American people have a longstanding respect for the principles of duty and sacrifice embodied by the nation's armed forces, and a belief that the conduct of war has a rightful place in establishing and

⁴ President Truman served in WWI. Nominees Wendell Willkie (Army) Adlai Stevenson (Navy) enlisted during the First World War but the war ended before they saw action. Presidents Kennedy, Nixon, Ford and George H.W. Bush served in WWII, and President Johnson served briefly in the Pacific. President Carter entered the United States Naval Academy in 1943 and served in the post-WWII Navy. Democratic nominees George McGovern (WWII), Al Gore (Vietnam) and John Kerry (Vietnam) saw combat, and Michael Dukakis served in the peacetime Army. Republican nominees Bob Dole (WWII) 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.

⁵ *Selective Service System, History and Records* (sss.gov)

⁶ Note that a very small proportion of members of the congress have children in the military.

⁷ Jennifer Manning, "Membership in the 112th Congress: a Profile", Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2011. <http://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/R41647.pdf>

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 20th and 21st centuries. Indeed, from the viewpoint of the American people, the great lesson of the 20th century was that American military power accompanied by the spread of Anglo-Saxon models of government and economy wrought widespread peace and prosperity. Yet this triumph 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% of respondents had "a great deal of confidence" in the military's leadership; five years later, just 27% of respondents felt that way. 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, below.) What is notable is that only the military has recovered the confidence that it lost.⁸

Table 2: Harris Index of Confidence, Percentage of Respondents Expressing "a great deal" of Confidence in the "people in charge of running" these Institutions (red indicates decline from prior survey)⁹

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

*Average of nearest adjacent data, since no response was provided for 1991.

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 shows 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.¹⁰ How can we understand this change? Upon what does the trust of society depend?

⁸ The decline in public confidence in labor leadership has been small, but that is from a low baseline (just 22%).

⁹ Harris, *Index of Confidence*, May 18, 2011.

<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/780/Default.aspx>

¹⁰ Gallup confidence polls support this result, though because they aggregate two responses in the historical tables ("a great deal" and "quite a lot"), the data shows less variance and is somewhat less informative. See Figure 1, above. Gallup, *Confidence in Institutions*, June 9-12, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

As discussed above, part of this ascendance 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 surely incomplete. Institutions also derive public support from other factors: namely, competence, and a concern for society's best interest. This raises two questions. First, has the military become more competent since the Vietnam War? Second, has it become more public-minded in that time? To the first question, we defer to the analysis and opinions of others. Suffice it to say that the military's performance in operations from Grenada to the recent Libyan campaign has cemented its reputation as the world's most formidable fighting force. It has struggled on occasion, but it has also demonstrated remarkable resilience and strength in recovering from these setbacks.

That society respects competence is unsurprising. It is equally important to note that society expects institutions to serve a greater good, not merely the institution's interests. 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 the 2011 Gallup poll results, 78% of Americans expressed a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military; 64% said the same for small business and 56% of Americans were confident in the police. In contrast, the Congress (12%), the Presidency (35%), and big business (19%) 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 latter case, 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. Most significantly, 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 epitome of 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—Andrew Carnegie, Bill Gates, the fictional heroes of Horatio Alger stories, et al. 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 to the same coin: there is no justice in rewarding success if there are no consequences to failure. In their book, *The Meritocracy Myth*,¹¹ Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller argue that the American dream rests upon the belief that America is the land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their own merit takes them. Individuals get out of the system what they put into it and getting ahead is based on individual merit, which is a combination of factors including innate abilities, working hard, having the right attitude, and having high

¹¹ Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*, 2nd ed., (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

moral character. McNamee and Miller go on to point out, however, that there are social forces in America that suppress or negate the effects of merit in the race to get ahead in American society. Such social forces include inheritance, social and cultural advantages, unequal educational opportunity, the decline of self-employment, and discrimination in all of its forms. Yet the military is seen as relatively free of these sources of injustice.

The military places soldiers in a culture where 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 socio-economic and cultural differences, and express zero tolerance 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—competence is recognized and rewarded, training and educational resources are provided, etc. Simultaneously, incompetence and failure have consequences. 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. Thus, selflessness, merit and accountability at the institutional level generate higher levels of trust in American society.

The military's embodiment of these principles has led some to seek broader lessons from the example of 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 an example 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, encouraging 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-WWII era, 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 fade.¹²

Still, the return of the draft seems a remote possibility. But there are other ways in which Americans seek to leverage the virtues of the military in promoting good citizenship, searching for ways to translate

¹² Charles Moskos and Paul Glastris, "Now Do You Believe We Need A Draft?" *Washington Monthly*, November 2001.

the values engendered through military training, education, and leader development to communities throughout the country. Retired military officers have been summoned to lead troubled school districts in places such as Washington DC, Seattle, Huntsville, and Wake County, NC. There has been a surge in popularity in rehabilitating wayward juveniles in teen boot camps and junior ROTC detachments have multiplied in schools across the nation in hopes of instilling the values of self-discipline and leadership. Additionally, public school military academies have now emerged in response to the yearning for renewed citizenship. In Chicago—where over 10,000 high school students now wear a uniform to class—retired Army officer and current principal of the Chicago Marine Academy, Paul Stroh, 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.”¹³

Turning to the military model for the education of America’s youth has not been without 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 continues to endure.

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 willing to set aside their self-interest in pursuit of the greater good? Or to expose themselves to the consequences of their decisions (including the potential loss of life) when a different career choice offers a path less fraught with danger? Is it the stripping away of the individual identity with a stressing of 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 soldiers are Americans, first, and an acceptance of the contradictions inherent to American society—the tension between self-interest and individualism, and commitment to and sacrifice for the common good.

Instead of stamping out all vestiges of American individualism in its members, the US 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 that:

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 their

¹³ Paul Stroh as interviewed in “Chicago’s Military Academies Raise Education Debate,” *PBS Newshour*, December 26, 2007.

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.¹⁴

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, namely, that its maintenance requires collective action. People during that period operated under the realization that citizens who acted to further the interests of society ultimately served their own self-interest through the betterment of the society in which they lived. This could only happen if they subjected themselves to a collective authority of civic and political groups.

Some have lamented the decline of the civic society Tocqueville saw (notably Robert Putnam in the aptly titled *Bowling Alone*), but the American military continues to retain the individualism essential to being an American while also emphasizing the principle of “self-interest well understood”. It comes about through the values and practices of the culture. In Tocqueville's words, “[Self interest well understood] forms a multitude of citizens who are regulated, temperate, moderate, farsighted, masters of themselves; and if it does not lead directly to virtue through will, it brings them near to it *insensibly through habits*.”¹⁵ This “insensible” inculcation of the right sort of self interest is culture. Uniforms, salutes, discipline, and hierarchy encourage this principle, but as noted social psychologist Edgar Schein points out, these are just cultural *reinforcing* mechanisms—practices such as the use of uniforms, enforced discipline, haircuts, jargon, etc. that are visible to outsiders, and therefore likely to be seen as the roots of the organizational culture.¹⁶ They tell us that some sort of culture is present, but they don't tell us how it got there or what it does. Schein posits that cultures are established through the use of primary embedding mechanisms and secondary reinforcing mechanisms. Just as a farmer plants a seed, then fertilizes and waters it, embedding mechanisms take root through appropriate reinforcing mechanisms. In this sense, embedding mechanisms are the *sine qua non* of creating and changing organizational culture. Take the reinforcement away, and there's a chance the culture could “take” to the extant resources of the organization. Take away the embedding mechanism, and you find yourself watering and fertilizing weeds. Embedding mechanisms may come about through an emergent process, or they may be a function of deliberate choice by organizational leaders. Yet few meaningful cultural shifts are wrought without the vigorous involvement of key leaders.

In fiction and film, military leaders are often caricatures: either a barking drill sergeant or a megalomaniac general. In reality, military leaders are of more substance, albeit much less glamorous. They are paradoxical: in many ways similar to the people they serve, immediately recognizable as fellow travelers in our greater society; yet also different in crucial respects. 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. The process of passing on the culture begins the first day a new member is

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2000), pages 502-503.

¹⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, page 502. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ 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), Chapter 13.

introduced to the military via the drill sergeant. Despite the rough exterior, the drill sergeant, and more generally the non-commissioned officer corps, epitomize the two characteristics of what make the military a well-regarded American institution—competence and selflessness. Note the predominance of these two themes in the Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) Creed that is recited with pride by every sergeant in the Army:

No one is more professional than I.

I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of soldiers. As a Noncommissioned Officer, I realize that I am a member of a time honored corps, which is known as "The Backbone of the Army". I am proud of the Corps of Noncommissioned Officers and will at all times conduct myself so as to bring credit upon the Corps, the Military Service and my country regardless of the situation in which I find myself. I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit, or personal safety.

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. I will strive to remain tactically and technically proficient. I am aware of my role as a Noncommissioned Officer. I will fulfill my responsibilities inherent in that role. 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. I will communicate consistently with my soldiers and never leave them uninformed. I will be fair and impartial when recommending both rewards and punishment.

Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine. I will earn their respect and confidence as well as that of my soldiers. I will be loyal to those with whom I serve; seniors, peers, and subordinates alike. I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders. I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage. I will not forget, nor will I allow my comrades to forget that we are professionals, Noncommissioned Officers, leaders!

For many new soldiers, the non-commissioned officer 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 amounts of time working with soldiers at the expense of family and personal time, and are utterly devoted to the Army and soldiers. 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. It is the constant exposure to these role models that the principle of self-interest well understood is unconsciously passed down from one generation to the next in the military.

The culture of self-interest well understood is also embedded through the actions and attitudes of military leaders at the highest levels. Unlike other institutions, the US military is led at the highest levels by leaders outside the profession. 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 ultimately the decision of

the civilian political leadership that determines the strategic direction of the military. For the good of the nation, military leaders are subordinated 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 United States 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, the sailor, the marine, and the airman, the Nation says, "Give me your liberty, and I will give you freedom." The men and women 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 them 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. Socio-economic differences are erased. Personnel of similar rank receive similar housing, health care, and compensation. They shop in the same company department and grocery stores (the post exchange, or PX, and the commissary). Discrimination is minimized with 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 US 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. Soldiers are encouraged to strive for personal advancement, but always within the context of others—whether the others are a buddy, the unit, or the profession. This juxtaposition of the individual with the obligation towards 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.

For a soldier to promise to never leave a fallen comrade—even if that means endangering themselves 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.

Yet the Soldier’s Creed is merely an artifact of Army culture. We find an organization’s true values and beliefs not in creeds or published proclamations, but instead 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.¹⁷

Recipients of the Medal of Honor are so respected by other members of the 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% 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.)

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

¹⁷ *Military Awards*, Army Regulation 600-8-22, (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2011), p. 53.

				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.

In a time of such cynicism toward public institutions, American society continues to hold the US 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 apparent 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 encourage the principles of citizenship to America's young people. Yet the symbols of military culture—discipline, uniforms, ceremony, etc.— 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 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 to the profession.