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Americans and Their Military, Drifting Apart

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STANFORD, Calif. — AFTER fighting two wars in nearly 12 years, the United States military is at a turning point. So are the American people. The armed forces must rethink their mission. Though the nation has entered an era of fiscal constraint, and though President Obama last week effectively declared an end to the “global war on terror” that began on Sept. 11, 2001, the military remains determined to increase the gap between its war-fighting capabilities and those of any potential enemies. But the greatest challenge to our military is not from a foreign enemy — it’s the widening gap between the American people and their armed forces.

Three developments in recent decades have widened this chasm. First and most basic was the decision in 1973, at the end of combat operations in Vietnam, to depart from the tradition of the citizen-soldier by ending conscription and establishing a large, professional, all-volunteer force to maintain the global commitments we have assumed since World War II. In 1776, Samuel Adams warned of the dangers inherent in such an arrangement: “A standing Army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the Liberties of the People. Soldiers are apt to consider themselves as a Body distinct from the rest of the Citizens.”

For nearly two generations, no American has been obligated to join up, and few do. Less than 0.5 percent of the population serves in the armed forces, compared with more than 12 percent during World War II. Even fewer of the privileged and powerful shoulder arms. In 1975, 70 percent of members of Congress had some military service; today, just 20 percent do, and only a handful of their children are in uniform.

In sharp contrast, so many officers have sons and daughters serving that they speak, with pride and anxiety, about war as a “family business.” Here are the makings of a self-perpetuating military caste, sharply segregated from the larger society and with its enlisted ranks disproportionately recruited from the disadvantaged. History suggests that such scenarios don’t end well.

Second, technology has helped insulate civilians from the military. World War II consumed nearly half of America’s economic output. But in recent decades, information and navigation technologies have vastly amplified the individual warrior’s firepower, allowing for a much more compact and less costly military. Today’s Pentagon budget accounts for less than 5 percent of gross domestic product and less than 20 percent of the federal budget — down from 45 percent of federal expenditures at the height of the Vietnam War. Such reliance on technology can breed indifference and complacency about the use of force. The advent of remotely piloted aircraft is one logical outcome. Reliance on drones economizes on both manpower and money, but is fraught with moral and legal complexities, as Mr. Obama acknowledged last week, in shifting responsibility for the drone program to the military from the C.I.A.

Third, and perhaps most troubling, the military's role has expanded far beyond the traditional battlefield. In Iraq and Afghanistan, commanders orchestrated, alongside their combat missions, "nation-building" initiatives like infrastructure projects and promotion of the rule of law and of women's rights. The potential for conflict in cyberspace, where military and civilian collaboration is essential, makes a further blurring of missions likely.

Together, these developments present a disturbingly novel spectacle: a maximally powerful force operating with a minimum of citizen engagement and comprehension. Technology and popular culture have intersected to perverse effect. While Vietnam brought home the wrenching realities of war via television, today's wars make extensive use of computers and robots, giving some civilians the decidedly false impression that the grind and horror of combat are things of the past. The media offer us images of drone pilots, thousands of miles from the fray, coolly and safely dispatching enemies in their electronic cross hairs. Hollywood depicts superhuman teams of Special Operations forces snuffing out their adversaries with clinical precision.

The Congressional Research Service has documented 144 military deployments in the 40 years since adoption of the all-voluntary force in 1973, compared with 19 in the 27-year period of the Selective Service draft following World War II — an increase in reliance on military force traceable in no small part to the distance that has come to separate the civil and military sectors. The modern force presents presidents with a moral hazard, making it easier for them to resort to arms with little concern for the economic consequences or political accountability. Meanwhile, Americans are happy to thank the volunteer soldiers who make it possible for them not to serve, and deem it is somehow unpatriotic to call their armed forces to task when things go awry.

THE all-volunteer force may be the most lethal and professional force in history, but it makes a mockery of George Washington's maxim: "When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen." Somehow, soldier and citizen must once again be brought to stand side by side.

Let's start with a draft lottery. Americans neither need nor want a vast conscript force, but a lottery that populated part of the ranks with draftees would reintroduce the notion of service as civic obligation. The lottery could be activated when volunteer recruitments fell short, and weighted to select the best-educated and most highly skilled Americans, providing an incentive for the most privileged among us to pay greater heed to military matters. The Pentagon could also restore the so-called Total Force Doctrine, which shaped the early years of the all-volunteer force but was later dismantled. It called for a large-scale call-up of the Reserves and National Guard at the start of any large, long deployment. Because these standby forces tend to contain older men and women, rooted in their communities, their mobilization would serve as a brake on going to war because it would disrupt their communities (as even the belated and smaller-scale call-up of some units for Iraq and Afghanistan did) in ways that sending only the standing Army does not.

Congress must also take on a larger role in war-making. Its last formal declarations of war were during World War II. It's high time to revisit the recommendation, made in 2008 by the bipartisan [National War Powers Commission](#), to replace the 1973 War Powers Act, which requires notification of Congress *after* the

president orders military action, with a mandate that the president consult with Congress *before* resorting to force. This would circumscribe presidential power, but it would confer greater legitimacy on military interventions and better shield the president from getting all the blame when the going got tough.

Congress should also insist that wars be paid for in real time. Levying special taxes, rather than borrowing, to finance “special appropriations” would compel the body politic to bear the fiscal burden — and encourage citizens to consider war-making a political choice they were involved in, not a fait accompli they must accept.

Other measures to strengthen citizen engagement with the military should include decreased reliance on contractors for noncombat tasks, so that the true size of the force would be more transparent; integrating veteran and civilian hospitals and rehabilitation facilities, which would let civilians see war’s wounded firsthand; and shrinking self-contained residential neighborhoods on domestic military bases, so that more service members could pray, play and educate their children alongside their fellow Americans. Schools, the media and organs of popular culture also have a duty to help promote civic vigilance.

The civilian-military divide erodes the sense of duty that is critical to the health of our democratic republic, where the most important office is that of the citizen. While the armed forces retool for the future, citizens cannot be mere spectators. As Adams said about military power: “A wise and prudent people will always have a watchful and a jealous eye over it.”

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