

FORUM

Reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint"

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Chaplain Henricks examines the state of civil-military relations and the role of chaplains by reflecting on Bryant, Swaney, and Urben, "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint" in dialogue with Katherine Voyles and Trent Lythgoe.

Susan Bryant, Brett Swaney, and Heidi Urben employ the term "secular saint" to highlight consequences associated with the volunteer military of the United States. Their research highlights increased isolation, unequal burden-sharing, and sentiments of exceptionalism as themes associated with the growing civil-military divide. They recommend the services both study trends related to those who do not volunteer to serve – an insightful recommendation to steer clear of survivorship bias – and incorporate civil-military relations and the norm of non-partisanship into professional military education (PME). These are solid recommendations, which I fully endorse with one caveat – individual service members must have an already developed sense of their own personal identity related to politics to normalize non-partisanship associated with military service. In my experiences serving as a military chaplain, I have found military service members may have a heightened awareness of their vocational identity as service members but do not have a greater sense of personal identity than an average American. If non-partisanship is to be the norm for service members, civilian and military leaders must encourage and create opportunities for service members to understand and develop their personal identity.

You might be thinking that political partisanship need not be as complex as personal identity; it's simply overt political party affiliation. Research shows that partisanship is more complicated. Non-partisanship is not merely critical thinking about important policy issues. Partisanship, especially in the United States, reflects affective polarization associated with political identity, i.e., the tendency of people identifying with a particular group to view fellow partisans positively and opposing partisans negatively.¹ Political partisanship

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¹ Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 691.

reflects one's personal identity. After all, the original article is about the transformation of service member identity "from citizen soldier to secular saint" in the context of shifting dynamics within the broader culture.

An individual's commitment to a political party, ideology, or agenda is an expression of his or her values and beliefs reflective of individual worldview.² Discussions of political candidates and issues being discussed at local and national levels elicit emotional responses.³ Issues pertaining to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the basis for conversations about which a person is not apt to be indifferent. After all, American voters often make decisions about important issues in politics based on religious convictions. The idea of non-partisanship is generally referenced as an appeal to military service members maintaining an apolitical presence in the public eye. While admirable, this idea does not account for the affective nature of policy issues. Service members are told partisanship is bad and voting is important, but it is impossible to turn off emotion, especially when rooted in ideological convictions. Affective responses to controversial political conversations should be expected, and the primary mitigating factor will not be awareness of cognitive processes but awareness of personal identity.

I can attest that PME courses already emphasize the importance of critical thinking as a facet of leadership and provide helpful information about biases and fallacies often employed in everyday conversation. Critical thinking cannot help an individual overcome the effects of affective polarization without increased self-awareness. Partisanship is a signal of an individual's values and worldview.⁴ As such, partisanship reflects individual personal identity. Military doctrine publications and training emphasize the value of self-awareness, but like other skills requiring tacit knowledge, self-awareness cannot be taught in the classroom. Military leaders must rely on formative experiential processes to develop self-awareness, and such processes will not override prior inculcation. PME courses can provide detailed instruction about non-partisanship, but the culture and traditions in which an individual's personal identity are shaped and formed will ultimately outweigh classroom instruction for better or worse. To normalize non-partisanship, the military must appreciate the formative role of religious and cultural traditions in the development of personal identity and individual worldview. Military chaplains are often asked to conduct moral leadership training. These types

² The term "worldview" is used in attempt to move beyond a traditional focus on religious traditions to a more inclusive conceptual framework that seeks to articulate how we understand the ways humans make sense of their existence. See Ann Taves, "From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies," *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2019): 137-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681124>.

³ Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origin and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 132.

⁴ Shanto Iyengar et al., "Affective Polarization," 136.

of initiatives that help individuals identify core values and assess integrity gaps between beliefs and behaviors should be considered foundational to bring about increased self-awareness and moral development.

Norbert Elias, the late German sociologist, researched culture's influence on individuals. Elias showed civilizing processes (e.g., table manners) drastically impact human behavior and transform acceptable conduct within society.⁵ Civilizing processes can contribute to the norm of non-partisanship for citizen soldiers. In other words, it is routinely practiced behaviors that have the power to inculcate individuals with non-partisan values. In his book *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel Huntington, quoted in the original article about the choice to join the military being a higher calling, makes the case for the professionalization of the military and argues conditions have been set to view military service as a profession and a vocation. However, just as military service members are asked to steward the profession of arms, they are also expected to remain engaged as citizens in the policy formation process. Senior military leaders are also often requested to have a strategic role in the policy-making process.⁶

Service members will likely remain as partisan as their civilian counterparts without strong awareness of their own personal identity. A lack of self-awareness often causes a person to make assumptions about the beliefs and values of others. When I do not appreciate the unique socio-cultural context and experiences that have shaped and formed me, I will likely fail to appreciate a similar reality for those around me. It is not a bad idea to include civil-military relations and the norm of non-partisanship into PME, but efforts to assist service members in articulating their worldviews and lifeways can be expected to bring about more significant changes in partisan behavior among service members. Initiatives to guide service members toward integrating behaviors with sincerely held beliefs and organizational values will not happen in classrooms but in communities. Military chaplains are uniquely positioned to respond to the problem of partisanship within the ranks of service members. A person's ultimate concern, moral compass, and appreciation of diversity reflect individual worldview. When service members develop a deeper sense of their own personal identity, whether they are regarded as citizen soldiers or secular saints, integrity can be normalized and non-partisanship realized.

Voyles's response to Henricks's reflection can be read [here](#).
Lythgoe's response to Henricks's reflection can be read [here](#).

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⁵ See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000).

⁶ Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Military Officers: Political without Partisanship," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 99, no. 3 (2015): 99.



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