

FORUM

Reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint"

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Katherine Voyles 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 Jordan Henricks and Trent Lythgoe.

"From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint: The Societal Implications of Military Exceptionalism" by Susan Bryant, Brett Swaney, and Heidi Urben is an important addition to the growing literature on the civil-military divide in the United States. At its heart is survey data drawn from military elites—defined as "1,218 military officers enrolled in the various colleges within the National Defense University, Army War College and cadets at the U.S. Military Academy."¹ Respondents see the military and its members as increasingly isolated, shouldering an unequal burden, and characterized by sentiments of exceptionalism. In what follows, I trace how the authors come to this conclusion before thinking through some of its implications.

What makes their insights so crucial is that Bryant, Swaney, and Urben center the voices, perspectives, and experiences of military elites instead of surveying what Americans think about the military and its elites. Civilian perceptions of those who serve is well-worn ground even if what those views mean is open to interpretation. Broadly speaking, that research demonstrates that even in an era when Americans distrust institutions, the military remains trusted, even if it is diminishing. Americans trust the military, the thinking in this line of inquiry goes, because they know so very little about it.

What those who serve think about themselves in relation to those they serve is not nearly so well known as the lines of thinking I sketched above. This is true even though work by Naunihal Singh in *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Coups* on what separates the smaller number of successful coups from the larger number of attempted coups suggests that military elites play an important, if not defining, role.² Bryant, Swaney, and Urben flesh out

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¹ Susan Bryant, Brett Swaney, and Heidi Urben, "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint: The Societal Implications of Military Exceptionalism," *Texas National Security Review* 4.2 (2021): 15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/13199>.

² Naunihal Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Coups* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

a picture of the increasingly complex and fraught relationship between the U.S. military and everyday Americans, but their findings also matter to wider issues about the role of military elites across the globe.

American military elites see themselves as set apart. Bryant, Swaney, and Urben evocatively capture this dynamic in the figure of the saint. By bringing the figure of the saint into discussion about civil-military relations they are part of group of thinkers who at one and the same time stay tied to Samuel Huntington's field-defining work and are pushing beyond it. They write: "The Catholic conception of sainthood is a seemingly strange, but ultimately appropriate, analogy for the position the military holds in contemporary society."³ Huntington's conception of the citizen-soldier emphasizes the role professionalism plays in adjudicating the civil-military paradox: that a military powerful enough to protect the people it serves could also turn against them. Bryant, Swaney, and Urben reveal that vision as immanent and earth-bound by evoking the soldier-saint.

Their use of the figure of the soldier-saint is both oddly overdetermined and underrealized. It bares too much meaning—is overdetermined—in the sense that both the trope of the saint and of the soldier are full to overfull with significance. But the image of the soldier-saint is strangely empty within their article because what they think it signifies and why it matters aren't fully fleshed out. The soldier-saint is certainly evocative of a kind of withdrawal, but other images and other figures—the romanticized woman in the tower and the equally romanticized man who returns to nature—could also signal retirement, what it is about the saint that does this work is not clear to me.

Military elites as a group may see themselves as set apart from other Americans, but they do not speak with one voice. Bryant, Swaney, and Urben show that even among military elites, their views around their relationship to those they serve vary. About this variation they write: "it would appear that military elites' political views and identity matter in how they conceptualize military service and society."⁴ And they provide some finer-grained analysis of that issue: "Servicemembers who are underrepresented in the military think that the military should look like society, whereas those who are in the majority in the military feel less strongly about achieving this goal."⁵ This kind of detail is helpful in parsing other parts of the survey and certainly speaks into some of the big ideas around civ-mil relations, in particular the notion that civ-mil relations are healthiest when the military looks like the population it serves.

3 Bryant, Swaney, and Urben, "From Citizen Soldier," 14.

4 Bryant, Swaney, and Urben, "From Citizen Soldier," 20.

5 Bryant, Swaney, and Urben, "From Citizen Soldier," 20.

I wonder, though, whether the survey and analysis have the power to convey what it is like to live through a time when military elites see themselves as set apart. The fact of a growing civ-mil divide is not new or news. But what it is like to experience that divide and how that divide shows up both really matter. James Fallows's article in *The Atlantic* "The Tragedy of the American Military" is so admirable because it pays close attention to the reciprocal relationship between American culture and civ-mil relations; he references how popular television shows and movies provide some of the look and feel of those relations. Fallows memorably sums up the public's attitude today about the military as "reverent but disengaged."⁶ Through this formulation it feels like he and Peter Feaver riff on one another; Feaver is famous for noting that the public's support of the military is "high but hollow." Americans love the military and love servicemembers on the basis that they know very vanishingly few servicemembers and know virtually nothing about the military itself.

Bryant, Swaney, and Urben are so interesting because they do not confine themselves to ideas around professionalism or civilian control of the military that have been baked into discussions of civ-mil relations since Huntington. The look and feel of this form of the civ-mil divide—what it's like across our shared daily lives doesn't really seem to interest them. Although they do venture into that territory when they write: "From the proliferation of care packages for deployed troops, to elaborate welcome home ceremonies at sporting events, service members who have fought the post-9/11 wars have been the beneficiaries of Americans' gratitude."⁷ This may be the closest they come to putting some texture on the shared experiences of both civilians and military members.

Two questions emerge: How do military elites feel about and demonstrate this separation from their fellow Americans? And how is this divide expressed within American culture today?

Understanding the look and feel of the separateness experienced by military elites matters enormously because, at least in my thinking, it is through these expressions of isolation that the implications for civ-mil relations come into fuller view.

Bryant, Swaney, and Urben ask respondents to indicate the strength of their agreement with statements including: "The American public understands the sacrifices members of the military make today," "The American public is grateful for the sacrifices members of the military make today," and "Military

⁶ James Fallow, "The Tragedy of the American Military," *The Atlantic*, January/February 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516/>.

⁷ Bryant, Swaney, and Urben, "From Citizen Soldier," 17.

culture is generally superior to the rest of society today.”⁸ It is certainly helpful to know how strongly elites hold these sentiments. But measuring that strength is not the same as measuring what it is like for elites, and for those whom they serve, to see themselves as set apart. How that separateness manifests is not captured in this work. The thoughts and emotions evoked by this gulf are not accounted for in this telling. Does gratitude flow because Americans recognize sacrifice? Or is that a matter of intense anger and frustration that sacrifice is necessary at all? Is it a point of pride that military culture is superior? Or a source of sadness? More to the point, it would seem that it is precisely in these affective registers that people would choose whether to suture themselves to each other or sunder themselves from one another.

Signs and symbols matter enormously in this respect. How they are deployed and interpreted has immense power to bind or sever people from each other. So it is that I wonder about how this divide plays out in American culture. Does the unceasing proliferation of flag paraphernalia—from plates and napkins to tee-shirts and swim trunks and everything in between—bring us together across that chasm or widen it? The flag itself is supposed to signify national unity. But as an image of a symbol, especially one that is bought and sold, a commercial item would seem a hollow thing indeed. And yet the person who buys and wears in public a flag tee shirt does so because it means something to them and it’s important to them that people around them understand that. The meaning itself, though, seems up for grabs. In so many cases, the rich proliferation of meanings is good, but not necessarily in this instance.

For my own part, I worry deeply in two directions at once. I worry about military elites relishing—perhaps a strong word, but perhaps warranted—their exceptional status. And I worry that Americans are self-satisfied—again perhaps a strong word, but perhaps warranted—by their veneration of the military.

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

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

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⁸ Bryant, Swaney, and Urban, "From Citizen Soldier," 16-17.