

FORUM

Response to Katherine Voyles's Reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint"

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Jordan Henrick responds to Katherine Voyles's reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint."

In her reflection on the article by Bryant et al., Katherine Voyles underscores the idea of reverence for military service posited by the original authors. Voyles extends the argument, highlighting findings from the article that point to the separateness experienced by military elites. She keenly notes that surveys measuring the strength of statements regarding civil-military relations aimed at capturing how military service members see themselves as separate does not provide insight into how this separateness manifests. Voyles writes, "it is precisely in these affective registers that people would choose whether to suture themselves to each other or sunder themselves from one another." She then goes on to point to our symbolic imagination as key to understanding civil-military relations.

I share Voyles's sentiment that we can learn much about American culture by reflecting on the flag as a symbol. The American flag is meant to signify valor, purity, justice, and equality as uniquely American values, and certainly the principles of liberty and freedom are at the forefront of one's mind when the banner waves. I acknowledge some will be quick to point out a lack of freedom casts a long shadow on American history; this response is warranted. My only reply is to note the flag still serves as a symbol for freedom in many places around the world despite the affective responses of many within the nation in which liberty has not been universally realized. A symbol does not always reflect what it is meant to signify. This begs the question, what is significant about the American flag for individual Americans? Voyles shared her concerns about military elites relishing their exceptional status and Americans in general being self-satisfied by their veneration of the military.

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Her worries are valid. However, I am more troubled by the source of these sentiments, and I suspect there is a connection with the symbolic reality of the American flag.

American culture has been synonymous with liberal individualism; democracy established on the principle of popular sovereignty has been the bedrock of the United States of America from the outset. A growing number of books and articles are critical of the liberal individualism with which we have grown accustomed. Patrick Deneen even makes the case in his book *Why Liberalism Failed* that liberal individualism is unsustainable because the dogged pursuit of liberty undermines the very traditions required for its flourishing.¹ I am concerned our conversations about the civil-military divide may be too shallow if we are focused on simply ways to bridge the gap. What if like our relationship to the American flag, the widening civil-military divide is symbolic of a greater emerging problem? If true, further research focused on the civil-military divide could elucidate ways forward toward a healthier and more unified America. This possibility gives me hope.

Voyles's reflection can be read [here](#).

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¹ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).