

FORUM

Response to Trent Lythgoe's Reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint"

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Trent Lythgoe articulates the value of civilian oversight of the military *en route* to highlighting the "canonization of military servicemembers to secular sainthood" as a troubling dynamic revealed in the article by Bryant et al. He cites the overwhelming trust Americans have in our military in contrast to distrust in political institutions as a significant impediment to effective civilian oversight. This forum is indebted to him for referencing Clausewitz's perspective that military operations are political activities to emphasize the strategic necessity of civilian oversight; this needs to be underscored in any conversation about civil-military relations. I am, however, left wondering if the idea that reverence for military service impedes civilian oversight is overstated.

Further research is required to better understand the phenomenon of the "secular saint." National patriotism did not take root overnight, and certainly one need not look far back in history to see a much different reality. While we could speculate about what has led to the current situation, it suffices to say that admiration for the military and distrust of political institutions, however justifiable or not each may be, is a collective way of thinking. This way of thinking seems to be informed by something more foundational to our individual identities than our attitudes to both the military and political institutions. As such, pointing to the attitude of military service members as a problem to solve to ensure civilian oversight is respected and desired is a field dressing.

Professional military education must continue to emphasize the strategic and political importance of civilian oversight. I could not agree more. However, we must appreciate the influence of cultural and religious traditions on

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our service members. While religious traditions are set apart in the lives of individuals, we cannot underestimate the role of nationalism. Growing distrust of political institutions in America reflects our ideas related to national identity and consciousness as Americans, as does the veneration of our military. Our traditions (or lack thereof) provide the normative moral framework that allow us to make important decisions, and such traditions comprise our understanding of what it means to be American. In an increasingly diverse America, however, sometimes it is easier to simply trust the person next to you in uniform. This is especially true if a person is unsure of who they are when they volunteer for military service and find a sense of personal identity for the first time in uniform. In my estimation, if service members do not have a developed sense of personal identity, it will be difficult to relate to the other parties of the civil-military relationship. If this estimate is accurate, learning more information about the surrounding world may not be as effective to reinforce the ideal of civilian oversight of the military as providing opportunities for individual service members to reflect on their identity as it relates to public service.

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

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