

FORUM

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

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Katherine Voyles responds to Trent Lythgoe's reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint."

Trent Lythgoe winds up his bracing assessment of "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint" thus: "America today finds itself in a situation where none of the three parties in the civil-military relationship—the government, the military, and the public—want civilian oversight of the military."

I may agree with Lythgoe on the substance of this point, but I wonder whether this is his gloss on the findings of Susan Bryant, Brett Swaney, and Heidi Urban or whether this is what they themselves find. My sense is that it is his take on their work. I think this matters because I think that Lythgoe goes further than Bryant, Swaney, and Urban do in their piece. My own sense is that they stop short in their own analysis. I felt that this took the form of not going as deeply into the felt texture and lived experience as it could have done.

The real virtue of Lythgoe's reflection is how he stays anchored in the essentials of civ-mil discourse to account in a clear-eyed way for potential dangers. He lays out how the military, he notes the central role of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), isolates itself from the people it serves, which negatively affects civilian control. And he explores the dangers of damaged or diminished civilian control.

Lythgoe isn't content to rehash the widening gap in civ-mil relations, he's after what could happen because of that gulf. He notes, for instance, that the U.S. has never been subject to "a serious attempted *coup d'état*." "Yet" does not have to be explicitly written to be visceral. He's also attuned to the long-term damage that degraded civ-mil relations can have, most fundamentally in terms of an erosion of democratic norms.

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Though what concerns me is that a weakening attachment to the idea and workings of democracy itself might be expressed in a weakening attachment to civilian oversight.

His reflections on the role of the AVF in worsening civ-mil matters because he says that it is "also isolated it from the society it serves." He zeroes in on how this isolation is expressed in the conduct of war. But it's also worth noting that civ-mil relations work best when the military looks like the population it serves. The (or an) AVF is not fit for such a purpose.

Whether Lythgoe stretches beyond the bounds of the article itself seems important to me only insofar as what it indicates about the article that he felt the need to move outside of it. Gathering the views of military elites about their role with respect to the population they serve is a hugely important undertaking. And the article's overall findings about that are also hugely important. Lythgoe adds nuance and texture by drawing out some of the potential implications of those findings.

In working with Lythgoe's reflection I can't help but note that if we are talking about civ-mil relations it's probably because there is something broken in civ-mil relations.

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

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