

FORUM

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

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Katherine Voyles' insightful reflection urges us to go beyond the data by asking how servicemembers *feel* about their secular sainthood. We should listen to her.

She asks, "How do military elites feel about and demonstrate this separation from their fellow Americans?" Later, she worries about "military elites *relishing*...their exceptional status" (emphasis mine). Indeed, knowing whether military elites relish, worry, or feel some other way about military exceptionalism would grant us keen insight into their professional values and, by extension, the health of the military's professional ethos.

I wholeheartedly endorse Voyles's call to explore these ideas, examining not just elites (generals and admirals), but all servicemembers. Senior officers spend decades in the rank-and-file before making flag rank. If senior officers are to lead with strong professional values, the military must inculcate those values throughout officers' careers. Officers who spend twenty-five years focused exclusively on tactical and technical skills are unlikely to become senior leaders able to navigate the political and social complexities of civil-military relations.

Moreover, examining rank-and-file attitudes toward exceptionalism will help us better understand how these attitudes emerge in elites. People who join the military have diverse attitudes. But those attitudes become less diverse among higher-ranking, longer-serving servicemembers—likely because of socialization, acculturation, and selection pressures (who gets promoted, chooses to leave the military, or is forced to leave).

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Additionally, Voyles' commentary raises important questions about the study of civil-military relations. Political scientists (like me) using quantitative methods have dominated the field. Voyles points out that although quantitative data points us civil-military scholarship in interesting directions, we need a richer, more nuanced account of the findings.

One final point: Voyles' commentary has me rethinking the assumptions I make in my reflection. For example, I write, "nearly 25 percent [of military service members] believe military culture is superior to society. It is difficult to imagine these service members recognizing the importance of oversight, let alone willingly accepting it." But Voyles writes, "Is it a point of pride that military culture is superior? Or a source of sadness?" I assumed that Service members who see the military as exceptional relished (her word) their exceptionalism. I hadn't considered a different reaction. Now, I have much to think about.

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

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