The Military and Society: A Refresher

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What does it mean when the Vice President of the United States tells cadets in a historic speech at West Point that our military is "strongest when it fully reflects the people of America"?[1] Should 42 percent of those in uniform be obese or more than 13 percent be taking antidepressants?[2] Alternatively, maybe this means 50.5 percent of the force should be female, while American Indians would need to be dismissed because, at a little over 1 percent of the population, they serve in disproportionate numbers.[3]

Even if we concede that the Vice President was really only alluding to what she could see as she gazed out at the Long Gray Line, the point of a modern professional military is not to *reflect* the society from which it is drawn. Instead, we have a military to *protect* that society—all of us, along with our borders *and* our freedom on the seas, in the air, and across the global commons.

Ironically, if we had compulsory national service with a military option, all sorts of representational goals could have been achieved by now. Imagine, too, for a moment the more serious issues universal service would also address. Would it help restore civic identity? Yes. Tighten the links between civic responsibilities and civic rights? Yes. Get youth to invest sweat equity in their own country? Yes again.

But the U.S. has never had national service, and conscription hasn't been practiced in 50 years.[4] Few on the political Left or Right are even asking that women sign up for Selective Service. Instead, we have had an All-Volunteer Force since 1973, which has left it up to the services to try to attract the recruits that they need. "All-Volunteer" should raise two questions for "we the people":

- Whom *do* the services need?
- How might we assist since we are the military's ultimate beneficiaries?

To do justice to these two questions requires digging deeper than simply painting the military as too woke or not woke enough. Instead, we had better understand what makes the military's job unique, which in turn means reviewing the U.S.'s security requirements and appreciating what makes *them* unique.

By point of quick comparison, consider Ukraine—whose continued independence depends on us and our NATO partners. Or consider any one of those NATO partners. If the U.S. got into serious military trouble, which among them could rescue us? The answer is: none.

No ally or coalition of allies comes close to matching the U.S. in productivity, scale, or resource base. None has the logistical or expeditionary reach to render us meaningful immediate assistance. It is doubtful that any could gear up to offer sufficient eventual assistance, let alone resupply us effectively. We are too distant. We are also too militarily essential to *them*. Thus, we have only ourselves to rely on.

That makes us unique.

Add to this the fact that we are not neutral Switzerland or Lichtenstein. We are more like a Gulliver or a Goliath. We have been a force at large in the world since at least the 1890s (with our acquisition of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and temporarily Cuba). We are rich, commercially assertive, and like to promote democracy and capitalism abroad, all of which makes us a target. Indeed, we have more different kinds of adversaries right now than at any point in our history.

These range from peoples whose homelands we have helped upend to leaders whose regimes we have said should go.

Revenge is a multigenerational elixir, but *schadenfreude* can be equally motivating. Consequently, our primacy will continue to invite one-upmanship from aspiring powers. But plenty of lesser powers wouldn't mind seeing us taken down a notch or two either. Thus, for all of the legitimate concern about Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, what about Cuba and Syria—or jihadis and other violent sub-state actors? And shouldn't we also worry about climate-first environmentalists, especially as warnings of our impending ecological demise grow louder?

Coincident with the widening array of people gunning for us are the proliferating means at their disposal, from hypersonic missiles to balloon-borne electromagnetic pulses (EMPs) to weaponized viruses and beyond. Then there are our excessively porous borders, not to mention the 11,000,000 shipping containers offloaded into U.S. ports annually.[5] Or what about the millions of American passport holders who reside abroad.[6] Will they become future political hostages like Brittney Griner and Evan Gershkovich? Despite extensive hardening, our embassies can't even protect themselves effectively. If only they could, Washington wouldn't have to evacuate them as often as it does, most recently in Khartoum, Kyiv, and Kabul.[7]

In other words, protecting the U.S. and American interests is not just costly; it is extremely difficult, especially when you factor in how much of our daily business—and daily lives—we conduct online. We Americans have made ourselves dependent on networks and systems that can't be secured, to include the grids that power them. At the same time, we have opened ourselves up to methods of subversion that we can't always detect. And when we do finally forensically figure out what has occurred and the source is a unit in the People's Liberation Army or a cutout associated with the Kremlin, we do remarkably little (and often nothing) to prevent a recurrence.

Because the 21st century aim of subversion won't be to swallow us whole, but rather to weaken and sideline us, it won't matter to our adversaries how our domestic animosities play out. The only thing opponents need to ensure is that our mutual distrust continues to fester and intensify. COVID is the great shining example of how easy this can be. Public health responses to COVID, from the federal level down to local government and even school district levels, created so much chaos that it is doubtful public health officials will ever fully regain the public's trust. COVID's novelty, rapid spread, and virulence contributed to the chaos, but so did the absence of anyone in authority who could rise above the fray as the voice of consistent, calm reason.

Collective national security will similarly unravel without a credible overarching source of information to which all (or even most) Americans will accede in a crisis. I have long contended that this constitutes our greatest national security risk because, as Abraham Lincoln reminded Americans, "a house divided against itself cannot stand."[8] However, post-COVID, I would modify my contention: We don't just need a credible overarching source of information. We need credible explanations too. Officials have to be able to explain in plain unvarnished language how they are connecting policy dots and why the decisions they make are in "we the people's" security interests. Nor can their explanations consist of spin or soporifics. We need to hear adult explanations that are balanced, truthful, and free of political spin.

It seems telling that even before COVID, a growing number of Americans prepped—as in prepared for disaster—while ultra-wealthy tech moguls invested eye-popping sums of money to build themselves remote, fortified bunkers rather than lobby for community-wide or national civil defense. The prepper subtext was (and is) that government can't be counted on, society will fall apart, and we will all be left apocalyptically scrabbling for ourselves. Whatever the source of these convictions—classic American paranoia, prescience, or both—preppers' lack of faith in their fellow Americans and their desire to look out only for select family members and themselves speak volumes.

Lack of collective faith or confidence tracks with what military recruiters report when they try to account for recruitment challenges. One of the factors they cite is waning patriotism even in Red States with significant rural populations.[9] This accords with Jean Twenge's observations in *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America's Future*:

In a July 2021 poll, only 36% of 18- to 24-year-olds (all Gen Z) said they were "very" or "extremely" proud to be an American. In contrast, 86% of those 65 or older (Boomers and Silents) said they were proud to be American. John Della Volpe, the director of polling at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, spoke to hundreds of young people for his 2022 book, *Fight: How Gen Z Is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America*. When asked to describe the U.S., he found, young Americans in the mid-2010s used words like "diverse," "free," and "land of abundance." A few years later, Gen Z'ers instead said "dystopic," "broken," and "a bloody mess." When he asked Gen Z'ers about moments that made them proud to be Americans, "I got blank stares, or examples of random sporting events like the USA soccer team finally beating Ghana in a 2017 friendly match," he writes.[10]

Again, however, as the prepper phenomenon suggests, it isn't just youth who feel disaffected.

From a security standpoint, these disconnects—first within society, then between society and the military—aren't just concerning: They're imperiling. The U.S. government spends more money per capita on security than does any other major power. Yet Americans' anxieties are not allayed. Why not? Why can't senior military leaders reassure the public that our military *can* protect us? Or, if the military can't protect us, why can't military leaders level with Congress to explain what *is* required?

Violence, Combat, and the Military's Raison d'être

Although chivalry might be considered an outmoded concept, that is ultimately what we civilians expect from our military. We count on servicemen and women to safeguard us and our property, much as other first responders do—except for the added responsibilities related to the use of force that set the military apart.

The military's overriding purpose is to prepare and stay prepared to wield force. Maybe adversaries can be deterred without the use of actual violence, but deterrence requires that others know you both can and will use punishing force, which is why readiness needs to be maintained around the clock and why combat skills across all domains matter. What these skills consist of must necessarily vary by type of unit, but at base, physical fighting strength still matters and will always matter. This will hold even if (or when) it becomes possible to wage war exclusively through bytes and bots, since whoever is responsible for pushing the proverbial button will need to be physically protected, as will the entire digital architecture (or, at the very least, the one wire or device that tethers the technology to us).

There is a second reason why dagger-between-the-teeth/crawl-across-the-scorched-earth combat capabilities remain essential: Violence is the one form of human communication that requires no cross-cultural translation. Violence is *viscerally* compelling. It is also incomparably effective. The U.S. and NATO's preferred means of innovation might be technological, but just because the U.S. and NATO strive for precision and try to adhere to just war principles[11] does not mean that others do as well. Others, with different values and/or resource constraints, innovate quite differently. They innovate in terms of what they can do with and to other human beings—from using widows as suicide bombers to purposely orphaning children in order to turn them into child soldiers.

Nor is it as though old practices ever entirely disappear. Since the turn of the 21st century, we've seen piracy revived, villages gassed, hostages beheaded, and dams deliberately breached. Or what about rape and famine? Humans have proven both that there is no limit to the unconscionable things they will do *to* one another unless they are stopped and that the only way to stop them is through an equally unsparing but more targeted and overwhelming use of force.

Attrition

Wielding force is dangerous. So is training to wield force, never mind training to use force precisely and judiciously. Consequently, attrition is an enduring military problem. It is worth remembering that while illness, injury, and death are ever-present dangers during wartime, attrition occurs during peacetime too. Accidents happen during training and off-duty hours alike—all of which makes *interchangeability* a military necessity. What do I mean by *interchangeability*? The ability of one person to fill in for another quickly.

The need for interchangeability rarely receives the attention it deserves, but it is especially

germane in ground combat units, which need to be robust enough to accomplish their mission while still remaining small enough to function as an independent cohesive whole. Since no one can operate a .50 caliber machine gun *and* perform a battlefield intubation *and* operate a radio all at the same time, all squads, platoons, and teams have a fixed (as in clear, preestablished) division of labor. Soldiers and Marines specialize only once they are interchangeably proficient at critical "shoot, move, and communicate" skills. The unit can't survive unless everyone is equally physically capable of essential combat tasks. Attrition necessitates mutual, interchangeable reliability.

However, interchangeability doesn't just require that everyone be physically, mentally, and emotionally reliable. It also demands trust among those in the unit. Individuals have to be confident that those on their left and right, as well as those leading them, are proficient. This helps to explain the importance of standards. *Can* A carry B away from danger? *Can* C shoot as accurately as D and E? So long as standards remain as stringent as worst-case scenarios demand, they reassure all members that everyone in the unit *can* perform in expected ways. Thanks to standards, units are likewise able to absorb new members without undue disruption in the face of loss. Grim as this is to contemplate, nothing is more essential to ultimate success.

Being able to trust others reflexively is key for two reasons.

- When *in extremis*, no unit can afford to have members who have to second-guess one another because they see the world differently or prioritize differently. Instead, everyone has to be sure that they share a common mindset and will respond as expected, *especially* when everything falls apart.

- It is not enough just to know that others can haul, heave, climb, swim, and/or otherwise cover distance under heavy loads. Can they also keep their heads under pressure? This is no less vital.

In other words, similarity isn't a problem; divergence is. Divergence shreds dependability, which is why the criteria that matter are ability, attitude, and allegiance. They matter most because they matter to performance. Everything else that outsiders think they should be able to see, because they want to *see* diversity, is immaterial to what prevailing in combat requires.

Connecting the Dots

The contradictions between military necessity and societal desires, along with civilians' expectations *of* the military, should be self-evident. In the same ways that countries aren't equally interchangeable—no one is going to rescue the U.S. in a crisis; only we Americans can do that—people are not built or wired the same. Nor can they be made to be interchangeable. Some will always be better at some things than others are. But this does not mean that the military overall should not be more diverse than it is—in unit roles and responsibilities and in its division of labor.

Politicians and general officers love to proclaim that "our military is the strongest in the world." But simply saying so is not enough. Adversaries need both to fear us *and* to know we mean what we say. They need to count on our responding *regardless* of the means they use to inflict harm. Otherwise, we (and our allies) remain ripe for subversion, cyberattacks, EMPs, and other not exactly direct but nonetheless devastating body blows—a la COVID—which is why the one form of diversity the military *should* herald is the myriad ways in which it can strike back. This is the only display that matters to our adversaries. In fact, the more attention the services pay to skin tones and pronouns, the easier we make it for adversaries to use our differences *over* these differences against us.

Because the military will always need more combat power than ground forces alone can supply, one size cannot and should not fit all. The Air Force can't be the Navy, and the Navy is not the Marine Corps. Special Operations Forces might need a preponderance of Type A personalities, but too many Type As in tight quarters on a submarine would likely be a disaster. The only rule of thumb should be the attrition/interchangeability rule of thumb: Every effort should always be made to bolster reflexive trust, and changes that would undermine that trust should never be introduced. For instance, Space Guardians whose careers will be spent indoors should no more need to meet Airborne physical fitness standards than members of the 82nd Airborne Division should have to learn how

to repair satellite antennae in space. Nor should we want different units or branches to approach problem-solving similarly.

In fact, the military will fail if it has too much sameness across the board. Basically, diversity is militarily vital when it comes to varied capabilities across the total force; trying to manufacture it within units, on the other hand, jeopardizes the capabilities-based integrity that those *in* the unit need to know their unit has.

Given the need for a wide array of skill sets and aptitudes, the gazillion-dollar question then becomes: Which essentials do all members of the military need to share, and which should be unit-specific and specialty-specific? On the face of it, this might appear to be an easy question to answer. For instance, everyone in uniform should be emotionally stable, willing to work, and loyal to the U.S. They should also have an affinity for teamwork and a respect for hierarchy. Right now, however, the services can't be sure how deep-rooted any such sentiments are.

Of course, young people's attitudes are not their responsibility alone, but they do create challenges. Take hierarchy. The idea that someone deserves unearned deference just because they are older is an increasingly antiquated notion. Also, compared to previous generations, fewer young people today have been raised *having* to obey authority, yet the military remains a gerontocratic (age-based and experience-based) hierarchical institution. Rank is supposed to—nay, *has* to—cue obedience. Without obedience, chains of command can't function, and command, control, and coordination become impossible.

Since age has been integral to every society's division of labor from time immemorial, it isn't surprising that gerontocracy became the military's foundational organizing principle. To this day, it provides several advantages. For one, seniority makes throughput, as well as up-and-out, easy and does so by promising a fair shake to everyone. In addition, experience really does matter. There is a learning curve to being able to handle large numbers of people and complex situations adroitly. Rank, which is meant to serve as a proxy for ability and experience (and not just age), is integral to authority, while the only way for discipline to be internalized and transmuted into *self*-discipline is by compelling young people to do things they otherwise wouldn't want to do or don't think they can do. Authority enables this.

At the same time that the military has its needs—hierarchy and obedience—young people have built-in propensities too. For instance, young people are classically impatient. They especially dislike hypocrisy and unfairness. Yet for tens of thousands of years, youth have more or less been locked in, forced to wait their turn because those senior to them have controlled the levers of power and the keys to success. This helps to explain why all of us who are now chronologically "senior" deferred to our seniors once upon a time when we were young adults: Back then, we had no choice.

Recently, however, the tables turned.

Societal Sea Changes

For the first time in human history, adults today willingly and even routinely defer to youth. Not only do adults turn to their children (and younger employees) for tech help and advice, but as the term "peerent" implies, it seems that parents would rather be their kids' friends than their disciplinarians. Nor is this the only sociological shift underway that has profound implications for the military.

For instance, the idea of *a* career no longer rates the way it once did. In the business world, switching jobs or even quitting a career midstream is no longer stigmatized. In fact, no one seems to be expected to stick with anything if they don't want to; nor does follow-through rate as significantly as it once did. Even the relatively recent concept of "work–life balance" is being further tilted away from work so that enjoying life, with breaks for fun, increasingly takes precedence.

Well before the appearance of COVID, employers, teachers, coaches, and others who worked with young people were already voicing concern (or bewilderment) about underdeveloped work habits and social skills. The pandemic is blamed for having intensified these deficiencies, though again, young people can't be held accountable for how they were (or were not) raised. Instead, when society at large lacks clear standards, *it*—meaning we—bears responsibility for what we castigate as young people's lack of direction, confidence, reliability, grit, and so on.

At the same time, just a cursory look at the literature about generational differences makes it clear that previous generations not only *felt* more rooted,

but were collectively grounded. By this I mean that up through the mid-1990s, most young Americans were taught (or at least exposed to) similar things regardless of how or where they grew up, whether in rural or urban settings, in intact or single-parent households, and irrespective of ethnic or religious background. Schools transmitted canonical versions of American history and literature, and kids grew up sharing a common popular culture too. In contrast, from entertainment through education, everything has become more dissolute. Just consider the proliferation in private schools, parochial schools, charter schools, and home schools—never mind the variation this leads to across curricula.

To complicate matters even more, it is hard to think of any hobby, sport, or other activity that hasn't been made more difficult, competitive, or costly to access—with sports camps for elementary-aged children, as many different types of bicycle as there are surfaces, skateboards that cost between $40 and $200.[12] Even science can't be done with just a pencil, paper, and powers of observation anymore.

One impact of so much complexity and diffuseness is that what young people know (or don't know), what they know how to do (or not), what they have already been exposed to (or not), what they are capable of (or not), what they do or don't believe, what they expect from life, from adulthood, from one another, and so on are so widely divergent that the military can no longer count on any shared foundational understanding with regard to anything. This uneven preparation raises two urgent questions:

- Without a common base, what can the military use to instill commitment to a common purpose, which is so essential to mutual reliability, or cohesion, teamwork, and effectiveness?

- From what can, or should, it fashion a common, red-white-and-blue identity?

Here is where, counterintuitively, today's dissimilitude is not necessarily wholly negative. It may even represent an opportunity. After all, militaries have always needed to do some remediation. Could the U.S. military now help to re-even the playing field for recruits and future officers at accession? Could it use innovative teaching and training techniques not only to build a broader, firmer, shared foundation, but in such a way as to help young Americans better sort and bin themselves?

Tellingly, the military's most elite units usually do a better job of screening for who they think they need than even private industry's most exclusive firms do. They do so partly by recognizing that there is no more effective way to encourage people to select themselves out than to expose candidates to what will be expected of them on the job. In addition to being the fairest, most meritocratic, and most equitable approach to determining who does and doesn't belong where, assessment and selection via exposure grants individuals equal agency: Everyone can strive to do their best, or not.

While cost might be one objection to combining civic and education repair with granting young people the opportunity to mature their sense of themselves, the rejoinder is: What is the alternative? Not only do society's lapses need to be remediated somehow, but if the military doesn't do so at the outset of everyone's service, it can't short-circuit the mis-"fit" costs incurred when individuals end up where they don't belong—to include doing things they shouldn't, which is a growing problem.

In fact, talk to colonels in command of brigade-sized units today, and it is stunning to hear how much time they spend having to respond to and manage abuse allegations, domestic violence cases, drug problems, thefts, suicides, murder-suicides, and a range of other behavioral breakdowns—few of which are caused by military service. But because these problems manifest themselves while individuals are in uniform, they demand a military response. Among the significant collateral costs is time taken away from being able to check on training or get to know, let alone be able to mentor, promising young leaders. Even worse, this is driving out officers and senior non-commissioned officers who spent the past 20-plus years deploying back and forth to combat zones in Afghanistan and the Middle East and are choosing to retire rather than accept promotion because, as they put it, they do not want to be and have not been trained to be social workers.

A second potential objection to the military stepping into the breach to make up for society's shortfalls (especially since teaching anything has become so politically charged) is: What would the military teach? Of course, the military has long been in the teaching business; it has always taught skills.

But, little realized by the public, the military also provides more continuing education than any other employer in the country, especially to officers. As for relevant educational subjects, there should be nothing controversial about suggesting civics. For instance, what roles and responsibilities does the Constitution enumerate—especially since servicemembers swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution? What about roles and responsibilities *in* the military, between the military and other government agencies, between civilian and military leaders, or between the U.S. and other countries, and so on?

Or what about history, geography, and enough STEM[13] awareness to foster an appreciation for *how* things work, all of which could be woven into field training and other exercises? These topics matter because despite young people's facility with bits and bytes, knowledge and understanding cannot be acquired just by clicking through hyperlinks. They require content and context. Unfortunately, we have permitted (or even encouraged) too many young people to be overly dismissive of both, which is imperiling. Take history. Without a firm grounding in the chronology of events—*chronology*, which is the totally apolitical unreeling of time; *events*, one damned thing after another—it is impossible to contextualize the present accurately, never mind the past. It also becomes too easy to fall prey to whatever story *sounds* best, regardless of how inaccurate it is, especially since corroborating "proof" floats free (and frequently fact-free) online.

To the military's credit, critical thinking and analytical methods have come to be considered key components of professional military education. Even in my former department (defense analysis), our tagline was that we didn't teach students *what*, but *how to think*. However, methods do people little good if they don't possess a fundament of knowledge first. Worse, applying critical thinking skills can make people sound smarter than they are. Or perhaps a more diplomatic way to put this is that smart questions can make the asker sound impressive, but when it comes to answers, can he or she distinguish which are most accurate? Or what about discerning who's an expert?

Expertise introduces a particularly pressing challenge for today's military since it isn't possible for even the most senior leaders to be expert about Islamists *and* China, or Iran *and* North Korea, just as it isn't possible to be knowledgeable about underwater acoustics *and* aeronautics. If we look ahead, what will happen when generalist senior leaders have to be able to determine who is or isn't worth listening (or turning) to for advice and credible information in areas or regions about which they know little? Afghanistan and Iraq offer just a foretaste. With "fake it till you make it" salesmanship increasingly suffusing academe, research institutions, and think tanks, and not just broader society, senior leaders will be in even greater trouble.

This is why it is important to underscore that the only way to prevent relentless self-promotion from occluding real expertise is to recommit to high standards, facts-based analysis, and appreciation for performance-based merit. Or, as in combat, so in military preparation and preparation *of* the military. This must all be of a piece.

Not Like Any Other Institution

Although the military will always be buffeted by whatever is trending in society, the services have a much greater ability to resist contorting themselves to keep up than they seem to realize. The military also has more going for it than it seems to realize—provided its leaders remind legislators, civilian leaders, and the public that its overriding raison d'être is to protect us.

The military, we must remember, is not like any other institution or calling. Nor should it try to be. Instead, it can and should make more (much more) of opportunities that are available only to those who serve. Here I don't just refer to a steady paycheck and benefits, but also to purpose, belonging, identity, service, and getting to see the world—which have long been the classic standbys, along with the prospect of combat for those who sign up for the combat arms. Other standbys include structure, job security, and the prospect of a career, all of which are fast disappearing from civilian life.[14]

Thus, no matter how passé it might seem right now for someone to want to stay committed to *a* line of work, never mind *an* enterprise over the course of 20 or 30 years, this kind of security is bound to prove increasingly attractive as artificial intelligence (AI), market churn, and global volatility wipe out everyone else's first, second, and third attempts to forge a meaningful life. Moreover, that the military has always built so many jobs into a single career means that service is comprised of

variety and, even better, servicemembers get to do new things without having to figure out next steps on their own.

Even more immediately attractive, especially for those who are young, who don't yet have families, and who want to try new things, is getting to do things civilians don't get to do, whether with real weapons, cyberweapons, in planes, out of planes, from ships, under water, in space, etc.—or, to return to what sets the military apart, the prospect of daring and danger. Daring means being prepared to do what others can't in the face of danger, whether this is heading toward it, rescuing others from it, or fomenting it for adversaries.

As dated as it sounds, what defense requires in any guise is chivalry—the protection of civilians—and daring. Combat just happens to require both to an acute degree.

I mention combat again because it is critical to remember why we have a military—we have adversaries. Adversaries are why we need the military to excel at combat, which is the only thing that stands between us and harm. I mean this literally, because ultimately protection boils down to the *literal* saving, sparing, or taking of life.

While the primary reason we have a military is to prevail in combat, the corollary reason we have a military is to deter bad actors from threatening America. Since the advent of nuclear weapons, *deterring* conflict has struck most Americans as exceedingly important. Given the range of adversaries and life-altering threats we face today, deterrence is more important than ever. This alone should make us exceedingly mindful of what represents both the first line of deterrence and the last line of defense: namely, the integrity of the military itself.

Consequently, for self-protective reasons alone, we Americans should do what we can to prevent the services from adopting policies that alienate young people who want to volunteer but who increasingly hesitate because they fear that political agendas are taking precedence over the tough but meritocratic standards that enable them to trust authority and one another. If the services don't stand for—or stand up for—retaining rigor, it is hard to imagine what will then serve to hold the military together, especially in light of unrelenting partisan pressures or if the country should experience more partisan violence than it has thus far.

The military's most obvious source of strength is that it *doesn't* reflect society. It can't. It *has* to remain different to protect the rest of us.

Conclusion

One final observation: The officers I taught attributed bad policies, misguided decisions, and inane bureaucracy to leadership issues so often in class that I would inwardly roll my eyes: How could everything be a "leadership issue?!" But after more than two decades of watching everything they have had to contend with, I have come around to their point of view.

Leaders *are* the issue. By this I mean that if generals and admirals with three and four stars on their shoulders can't make clear how much of our future rides on combat and combat-support capabilities and what these need to consist of (as well as what they can't consist of, despite intensive lobbying done on behalf of unnecessary technology, platforms, and social reengineering), then they will be cheating young Americans out of the better future all leaders promise. Worse, if senior military leaders persist in being unwilling to speak truth to power—or speak truth *in* Washington—they will further diminish the value of the rank they wear, and that will be bad for all of us, civilian and military.

Endnotes

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