



FROM CITIZEN SOLDIER

TO SECULAR SAINT:

THE SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

OF MILITARY EXCEPTIONALISM

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For nearly 40 years, the American public has placed extraordinary trust and confidence in the military, celebrating heroism and service in diverse venues ranging from religious services to theme parks to sporting events. Survey after survey has shown that Americans revere their military, at least superficially. How members of the military feel about their own service, sacrifices, and relationship to the rest of society has been an open question. To help explore these questions, we surveyed more than 1,200 midgrade to senior military officers and West Point cadets between 2017 and 2020 regarding their political views, their sacrifices, and their pride in service. In addition to confirming past research indicating that servicemembers are increasingly isolated and have a growing sense of exceptionalism, our results also indicate that the attitudes of military elites who are in the minority in terms of race, gender, and political views vary considerably at times from their majority peers, raising questions about the degree of inclusivity within the ranks today.

The 2020 Gallup Poll measuring the American public's confidence in institutions reported what many in the military already know — that Americans have an enduring trust in the armed forces.¹ In fact, 72 percent of those surveyed indicated they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the military. This trend goes back decades: The military has either been the top-ranked institution or has tied for the top in every year of the poll since 1986 and is the only major institution that inspires higher levels of confidence today than it did in

1980.² That is a rather remarkable run considering that, for nearly two decades, America has been involved in protracted wars where victory has been fleeting and difficult to define. Moreover, less than 0.5 percent of the U.S. population currently serves in the armed forces.³

Since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a profusion of literature exploring this extraordinary level of support for the military, both in terms of its implications for U.S. governmental decision-making and how the “non-serving” public views and interacts with those who have chosen to join the armed

1 Megan Brennan, “Amid Pandemic, Confidence in Key U.S. Institutions Surges,” *Gallup*, Aug. 12, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/317135/amid-pandemic-confidence-key-institutions-surges.aspx>.

2 Brennan, “Amid Pandemic, Confidence in Key U.S. Institutions Surges.” See also, James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” *The Atlantic* (January/February 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516/>.

3 “Demographics of the U.S. Military,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 13, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/demographics-us-military>.



forces.⁴ However, remarkably little scholarship has examined how military personnel perceive their own service as well as society at large and what the implications of these views are for civil-military relations, the country's conception of citizenship and service, and the ideal of the citizen-soldier. Through surveying over 1,200 military elites at different stages in their careers, this article aims to do just that: to explore how military officers today view not only their own service and sacrifice but the American public who, by all accounts, trusts them unflinchingly.⁵

As of this writing, the United States is 19 years into the current wars — wars that have been entirely fought by volunteers who represent less than 1 percent of the overall population. Although expensive, the All-Volunteer Force, which will turn 50 in 2023, remains preferable to those who serve as well as to those who don't.⁶ This preference is a relatively recent development. The last time a Gallup poll found a majority of Americans in favor of a draft was 1981.⁷ For most of U.S. history, the idealized, and even mythologized, model of military service has been the citizen-soldier. Whether embodied by the "minute-man" or the spirit of the "Greatest Generation," the American preference has traditionally been for the ordinary citizen who takes up arms when called upon rather than the professional warrior.⁸ After nearly two decades of persistent conflict, that citizen-soldier ideal has become nostalgic to the point of quaintness. In its place has

risen a professional "warrior caste" largely living separately from a society that does not share in the burden of military service.⁹ The result is that today's servicemembers are less well known and their individual sacrifices seem to mean less to the public. And yet, they are more superficially revered than America's citizen-soldiers were.¹⁰

But what have been the effects of this shift to a warrior caste model, both on the public and on the "warriors" themselves? This article, and our survey, were undertaken to improve our understanding of how America's servicemembers view their own service and sacrifice. Specifically, our study examines some of the consequences associated with the All-Volunteer Force after nearly 20 years of prolonged war, and our survey was designed to elicit military elite opinion on some aspects of each of these consequences. The section that follows is not intended to be an exhaustive review of these consequences but instead focuses on three themes related to shifting to the All-Volunteer Force: increased isolation, unequal burden-sharing, and sentiments of exceptionalism.

Isolation, Unequal Burden-Sharing, and the Specter of Exceptionalism

Fighting and winning the nation's wars has become the purview of a small cadre of highly trained professionals, with both sides of the divide

4 From October 1991 through June 2001, on average, 65 percent of Americans reported a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military. Since June 2002, the average confidence level in the military has been 75 percent. See Brennan, "Amid Pandemic, Confidence in Key U.S. Institutions Surges." For other recent examinations of public confidence in the military, see Jim Golby and Peter Feaver, "Thank You For Your Lip Service? Social Pressure to Support the Troops," *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 14, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/thank-you-for-your-lip-service-social-pressure-to-support-the-troops/>; David T. Burbach, "Partisan Dimensions of Confidence in the U.S. Military, 1973–2016," *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 2 (April 2019): 211–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X17747205>; Jim Golby and Peter Feaver, "The Determinants of Public Confidence in the Military," Paper Presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, Aug. 29, 2019; and Heidi Urben and Jim Golby, "A Matter of Trust: Five Pitfalls that Could Squander the American Public's Confidence in the Military," in *Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War*, ed. Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Mauer (New York: Oxford Press, 2020), 135–46.

5 We follow the definition of military elites first used in Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn's Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS) survey, also referred to as "up and coming military officers." The TISS sample also included U.S. Military Academy cadets and war college students. See Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 6–7. Additional survey demographics from our survey can be found in Appendix A and the survey instrument is included in Appendix B. Both are available in the online version of this article at <https://tnsr.org/2021/02/from-citizen-soldier-to-secular-saint-the-societal-implications-of-military-exceptionalism/>.

6 Amy Schafer, "Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste and the All-Volunteer Force," Center for a New American Security, May 8, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/generations-of-war>; and Steven M. Kosiak, "Is the U.S. Military Getting Smaller and Older? And How Much Should We Care?" Center for a New American Security, March 14, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/is-the-u-s-military-getting-smaller-and-older>.

7 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Vast Majority of Americans Opposed to Reinstating Military Draft," *Gallup News Service*, Sept. 7, 2007, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/28642/vast-majority-americans-opposed-reinstating-military-draft.aspx>.

8 Ricardo A. Herrera, *For Liberty and the Republic: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1775–1861* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), viii–x; and Phil Klay, "The Citizen-Soldier: Moral Risk and the Modern Military," The Brookings Institute, May 24, 2016, <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2016/the-citizen-soldier.html>.

9 Eliot A. Cohen, "Twilight of the Citizen Soldier," *Parameters* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 23, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol31/iss2/5/>.

10 This idea that one can be revered but that an individual life means less because the person volunteered came to a head in 2017 with President Donald Trump's alleged remarks that a Green Beret who had died in Niger "knew what he had signed up for." See Mark Landler and Yamiche Alcindor, "Trump's Condolence Call to Widow Ignites an Imbroglio," *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/us/politics/trump-widow-johnson-call.html>.

preferring the current arrangement for different reasons. Even if this were not true, the practical impediments associated with going back to the citizen-soldier system appear insurmountable.¹¹ The shift from a drafted armed forces to an all-volunteer force has had a number of consequences, especially in the 20 years of war that have followed the attack of September 11. Specifically, it has led to increased isolation for U.S. servicemembers, to military members shouldering the brunt of the burden of war, and to a feeling among society — and the military — that those who serve are somehow exceptional or set apart — that they are, in a sense, secular saints. Our survey was designed to explore these consequences of the All-Volunteer Force, which we discuss below.

Increased Isolation

One consequence of moving to an all-volunteer force is that those who serve in the military are increasingly segregated from the rest of society. Today, less than 0.5 percent of the population has served in the current wars. This lack of shared experience between most Americans and those serving has led to the increased isolation of America's armed forces, a topic that continues to dominate discussions about the civil-military gap.¹² Amy Schafer has pointed out that, for those under 30, there has been a sharp decline in familiarity with the military as measured by knowing someone in uniform.¹³ Kori Schake and Jim Mattis note the high number of individuals who responded “Don't Know” or “No Opinion” in response to questions about the military in their 2013 YouGov survey for

their book, *Warriors and Citizens*. This hesitancy to answer questions on military matters is likely rooted in respondents' unfamiliarity with the armed forces.¹⁴ Compounding this cloistering effect, recent studies show that those who choose to join the military are more likely to come from families with a history of multi-generational service, an indication that we are seeing the emergence of an American “warrior caste.”¹⁵ Additionally, military recruiting is disproportionately reliant upon recruits from rural areas, the South, and areas that host large military installations, with the Northeast underrepresented, giving this caste phenomenon a rural and regional flavor.¹⁶ Taken together, these factors tend to both separate and isolate military communities from civilian ones, to the detriment of civil-military relations.¹⁷

Unequal Burden-Sharing

A second consequence of the All-Volunteer Force is that the burden of being at war for nearly 19 years has fallen disproportionately upon a small segment of the American population. Charles Moskos coined the term “patriotism lite” to explain the broader public's response to this uneven burden-sharing.¹⁸ It involves giving vocal public support to the troops as a substitute for making broader sacrifice in a time of war. This is most commonly manifested in what some have branded as the “thank-you-for-your-service” phenomenon.¹⁹ What has emerged is a new bargain between servicemembers and civilians, one in which military service is no longer a component of one's civic responsibility. These observations are supported by a 2015 Harvard

11 Beyond the seeming impossibility of getting legislation to reinstitute a draft through Congress, a draft would also be impossible to operate without lowering the current enlistment standards. Today, more than two-thirds of service-age Americans (ages 17 to 24) are unfit for military service. Even more troubling, the underlying problems (education, criminality, and obesity) preventing military service in the majority are growing worse rather than getting better. A draft would mean that standards for enlistment would have to be lowered, with all of the concomitant implications for readiness and training. Thus, there is a logic and a preference for the professional military to continue as it is currently conceived, even though the implications have not been fully examined by the citizenry. Miriam Jordan, “Recruits' Ineligibility Tests the Military,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/recruits-ineligibility-tests-the-military-1403909945>.

12 Mark Thompson, “The Other 1%,” *Time*, Nov. 21, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2099152,00.html>; and Hugh Liebert and Jim Golby, “Midlife Crisis? The All-Volunteer Force at 40,” *Armed Forces and Society* 43, no. 1 (January 2017): 115–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16641430>.

13 Schafer, *Generations of War*.

14 Kori Schake and Jim Mattis, eds., *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 2016), 289–90.

15 Schafer, *Generations of War*. See also Schake and Mattis, *Warriors & Citizens*; Charly Panzino, “Warrior Caste: Is a Public Disconnect Hurting Military Recruiting Efforts?” *Military Times*, Jan. 18, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/01/19/warrior-caste-is-a-public-disconnect-hurting-military-recruiting-efforts/>; and Susan Bryant and Brett Swaney, “Deconstructing the ‘Warrior Caste’: The Beliefs and Backgrounds of Senior Military Elites,” Institute for National Strategic Studies, July 5, 2017, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1428887/deconstructing-the-warrior-caste-the-beliefs-and-backgrounds-of-senior-military/>.

16 In 2018, South Carolina, Florida, Hawaii, Georgia, and Alabama were the top five recruiting states, after controlling for population size. See Council on Foreign Relations, “Demographics of the U.S. Military”; and Rosa Brooks, “Civil-Military Paradoxes,” in *Warriors and Citizens*, 33–39.

17 Liebert and Golby, “Midlife Crisis?”

18 Charles Moskos, “Feel that Draft?” *Chicago Tribune*, June 8, 2005, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2005-06-08-0506080018-story.html>.

19 Matt Richtel, “Please Don't Thank Me for My Service,” *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/sunday-review/please-dont-thank-me-for-my-service.html>.



Institute of Politics poll that found that while many youths supported sending ground troops back into Iraq to fight the Islamic State, very few would consider serving in the military themselves.²⁰

James Fallows, writing in the *Atlantic* in 2015, pointedly called out a public attitude of reverence toward, but disengagement from, the military and highlighted the unequal burden placed on so few. At the time, he wrote that America had been at war for over a decade but as a public it had not.²¹ It is not only about the unequal burden of service, however, as Schake and Mattis rightly point out. It is also about the burden of grief. The public is largely unaffected by the casualties of war, and there are few public rituals that pull the military and society together in times of great pain.²² What historically was a common experience of loss and sacrifice is now an isolating, perhaps even alienating, experience for military servicemembers. This may contribute to a feeling among servicemembers that efforts to demonstrate appreciation by the public are hollow tokenism and only further sequester the military from society.²³

Sentiments of Exceptionalism

A third consequence of the All-Volunteer Force is a sense of superiority or exceptionalism within the ranks. In his acceptance speech after being awarded West Point's Thayer Award in 2011, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates cautioned young cadets about the "growing disconnect between military and society, not by average Americans, but on the uniformed side of the equation."²⁴ In his speech, Gates recalled a hallway display in the Pentagon

showcasing the Army's values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. He was struck by the fact that the display introduced the list by saying that these values "distinguish American soldiers from American society."²⁵ It was peculiar, he thought, to suggest that these attributes were not valued by Americans in general, or that somehow these attributes were unique to the military. It has become normal for politicians and Americans to honor soldiers for their sacrifice, heroism, and patriotism and to imply that military members are more virtuous than other Americans.²⁶ In a 2018 YouGov poll, for example, 50 percent of Americans stated that all members of the military are heroes, regardless of their experience.²⁷

Trust and confidence in the military is expressed in a tendency to elevate the soldier to the status of a national icon or even a secular saint.²⁸ Today's volunteer servicemember occupies the peculiar position of a secular saint in contemporary society, fulfilling Samuel Huntington's observation that the choice to join the military is in "pursuit of a higher calling in service to society."²⁹ The Catholic conception of sainthood is a seemingly strange, but ultimately appropriate, analogy for the position the military holds in contemporary American society.³⁰ Rather than ordinary, saints are, by definition, extraordinary. Sainthood is also associated with the idea of submission to and, if necessary, martyrdom in the service of, God. The saint is in no way sinless, but rather is set apart from society and is the "conqueror ... who conquers him/herself."³¹ Similarly, the servicemember-cum-secular saint is different and apart from the average citizen. These soldier-saints have all sworn an oath to "support

20 "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes Toward Politics and Public Service, 28th Edition," Harvard University Institute of Politics, Fall 2015, https://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/pictures/151208_Harvard_IOP_Fall_2015_Topline.pdf.

21 Fallows, "The Tragedy of the American Military." Rosa Brooks has also described this phenomenon as "enthusiasm and ignorance." Brooks, "Civil-Military Paradoxes," 22.

22 Kori Schake and Jim Mattis, "A Great Divergence?" in *Warriors & Citizens*, 9.

23 Schake and Mattis, "A Great Divergence?"

24 Robert M. Gates, "Thayer Award Remarks," Speech at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY, Oct. 6, 2011, <https://www.westpointaog.org/page.aspx?pid=4843>.

25 Gates, "Thayer Award Remarks."

26 Ronald R. Krebs, Robert Ralston, and Aaron Rapport, "Americans' Blind Faith in the Military Is Dangerous," *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 3, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/03/americans-blind-faith-in-the-military-is-dangerous-civilian-oversight-deference-mcraven-trump/>.

27 John Vandiver, "Half of Americans Surveyed Say All Servicemembers Are Heroes," *Stars and Stripes*, Sept. 27, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/half-of-americans-surveyed-say-all-servicemembers-are-heroes-1.549349>. Of note, when the same question was asked in Germany and the United Kingdom, only 15 percent of Germans and 32 percent of Britons responded that all those serving in their armed forces should be described as heroes. See also Matthew Smith, "Are the Troops Heroes? Americans, Britons and Germans Feel Very Differently," *YouGov*, Sept. 26, 2018, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/09/25/are-troops-heroes-americans-britons-and-germans-fe>.

28 Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23.

29 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 8.

30 Rosa Brooks has also noted the elevation of military service into the realm of the "sacred." See Rosa Brooks, "Serving in the Military Doesn't Make You Special," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 10, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-brooks-military-sacred-20160810-snap-story.html>.

31 Peter Kreeft, "What Is a Saint?" Catholic Education Resource Center, accessed Jan. 12, 2021, <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/what-is-a-saint.html>.



and defend” the U.S. Constitution, with their lives if necessary, and be obedient even if it conflicts with their personal judgment or physical safety.

With such high levels of trust — even deference — being given to a segment of society that is increasingly isolated, chronically unrepresentative, and shouldering the burdens of America’s protracted conflicts, many civil-military relations observers have warned about the implications for the military. Lt. Gen. (Ret.) David Barno suggests that isolation in the face of an adoring nation risks fostering a “closed culture of superiority and aloofness” within the military.³² There is a fine line between feeling a sense of isolation and a more pernicious strain of elitism. Scholars have pointed out that this isolation combined with military members’ frequently higher levels of education or technical training and physical fitness can contribute to the idea that the military is not only separate from society but is perhaps a superior class.³³

This isn’t the first time that these dynamics have been the subject of concern. In their watershed survey of military elites nearly two decades ago, Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn found that 77 percent of military leaders agreed with the notion that civilian society would be made better off by adopting more of the military’s values and customs.³⁴ In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, a 2003 *Military Times* poll also revealed that two thirds of its active duty subscribers thought military members had higher moral standards than the nation they served. More than 60 percent called the country’s moral standards only “fair” or “poor.”³⁵ Immense public trust, even veneration, for the military feeds this sense of superiority. As Kohn observed, caution, skepticism, and even a bit of mistrust is healthy for the relationship between senior military and civilian elites. However, military officers who feel contempt for their elected or appointed leaders — or even the voters who put them there — are unlikely

to advise senior civilian leaders wisely or readily subject themselves to civilian accountability.³⁶

Methodology and Findings

Given the public’s high levels of trust and confidence in the military, the acute burden borne by an isolated segment of society during America’s recent wars, and concerns about a growing sense of exceptionalism within the ranks, we decided to explore these themes as part of a broader survey we conducted of military elites. We conducted a voluntary, online survey in seven waves from December 2017 through March 2020. Our participants were 1,218 military officers enrolled in the various colleges within the National Defense University and the Army War College and cadets at the U.S. Military Academy.³⁷ To gain insight into generational differences among the respondents, we surveyed those just beginning their careers as officers and those who are approaching the ranks of senior officers. The survey sample by no means reflects the military at large, let alone the entire officer corps, nor is it meant to. Rather it is meant to be representative of military elites — those “up and comers” likely to be tapped for advancement through promotion and selection for exclusive military schooling.³⁸ While we only focus on a handful of questions from the survey in this article, the full survey instrument can be found in Appendix B.³⁹

We asked these officers and cadets a series of questions aimed at exploring how they view their service in the armed forces and how they feel the American public views that service, specifically looking at the three themes discussed in the previous section. We asked participants the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the American public understands the sacrifices that members of the military make,

32 Thomas E. Ricks, “Dave Barno’s Top 10 Tasks for General Dempsey, the New Army Chief of Staff,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 21, 2011, <https://foreign-policy.com/2011/01/21/dave-barnos-top-10-tasks-for-general-dempsey-the-new-army-chief-of-staff/>.

33 Schafer, *Generations of War*.

34 Feaver and Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians*, 55.

35 Gordon Trowbridge, “2003 Military Times Poll — We Asked. You Answered,” *Marine Corps Times*, Dec. 29, 2003, <http://webarchive.loc.gov/all/20040111094402/http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/story.php?f=1-292925-2513919.php>.

36 Richard H. Kohn, “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,” *Naval War College Review* 55, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 35, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss3/2/>.

37 Most military officers that we surveyed were senior officers (O5s and O6s) attending senior service college at the National War College and Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy in the National Defense University at Fort McNair in Washington, DC, and the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. However, the sample from the National Defense University also included a small subsample of midgrade officers attending the Joint Forces Staff College, specifically the Joint and Combined Warfighting School. While the subsample within the National Defense University included officers from each of the military services, this survey’s sample is predominantly an Army sample. Cadets at the U.S. Military Academy who we surveyed were drawn from the core course on American politics — a class typically taken by sophomores.

38 Feaver and Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians*, 6–7.

39 The survey instrument is included in Appendix B, which can be found in the online version of this article, <https://tns.org/2021/02/from-citizen-soldier-to-secular-saint-the-societal-implications-of-military-exceptionalism/>.

Table 1: How Military Elites Perceive the Public's Attitudes Regarding the Military's Sacrifice (Percent Who Selected "strongly agree" or "agree" with Regard to Each Statement)

	"The American public understands the sacrifices members of the military make today."	"The American public is grateful for the sacrifices members of the military make today."
TOTAL (n = 1,218)	26.68	63.05
West Point Cadets	29.98	55.28
Military Officers (O4-O6)	23.51	70.53
Democrats	28.63	61.57
Independents	26.45	65.29
Republicans	26.89	63.74
Liberals	31.80	64.98
Moderates	24.43	59.66
Conservatives	26.19	64.25
Men	25.63	64.76
Women	31.80	55.30
Whites	26.53	64.74
African Americans/Blacks	27.37	56.84
Hispanics	25.40	55.55
Asian-Americans	34.48	67.24
From A Military Family	26.42	63.86
Not From A Military Family	27.03	62.00
Combat Veterans	23.59	68.97
Non-Combat Veterans	29.60	56.85

and found that only 27 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. However, a majority of respondents agreed that the American public is generally grateful for these sacrifices (see Table 1). These findings reinforce what many observers, including Fallows and Rosa Brooks, have suggested about how the American public views its armed forces after nearly 18 years of war — with reverence but disengagement.⁴⁰ They also help con-

firm that servicemembers are feeling increasingly isolated from society in that they feel that no-one can quite understand what members of the military have gone through during wartime except others who have worn the uniform.

Notably, mid-to-senior grade officers (71 percent) are more likely to think that the public is grateful for their service than West Point cadets (55 percent), while slightly more combat veterans

40 Fallows, "The Tragedy of the American Military"; and Brooks, "Civil-Military Paradoxes."

Table 2: Degree to which Military Elites Think the Military Should Not Be Criticized and Is Superior to Society (Percent who selected “strongly agree” or “agree” with Regard to Each Statement.)

	“People who haven’t served in the military generally shouldn’t question or criticize the military.”	“Military culture is generally superior to the rest of society today.”
TOTAL (n = 1,218)	19.87	24.55
West Point Cadets	29.82	21.94
Military Officers (O4-O6)	11.27	27.05
Democrats	17.65	15.29
Independents	18.18	17.77
Republicans	22.29	30.61
Liberals	17.97	16.13
Moderates	17.90	19.89
Conservatives	22.50	29.89
Men	17.82	25.73
Women	32.26	18.89
Whites	18.71	26.98
African Americans/Blacks	28.42	13.68
Hispanics	20.63	19.05
Asian-Americans	31.03	10.34
From A Military Family	19.59	26.42
Not From A Military Family	21.36	22.12
Combat Veterans	12.52	26.50
Non-Combat Veterans	27.72	22.99

(69 percent) think the public is grateful compared to those who have not been in combat (57 percent).⁴¹ It is likely that military officers who have made the sacrifice inherent in deploying to combat zones tend to think the public does indeed acknowledge and appreciate such sacrifices, because they have experienced the public’s gratitude first hand. From the proliferation of care packages for deployed troops, to elaborate welcome home cer-

emonies at sporting events, servicemembers who fought the post-9/11 wars have been the beneficiaries of Americans’ gratitude.

We also wanted to examine to what extent military elites have not only begun to believe their own press and take the public’s praise for them for granted, but whether they think they are, in fact, superior to the society that they have pledged to defend. To probe for these sentiments of military

41 It should follow that the subsamples of West Point cadets and those who have not deployed in combat should generally mirror one another, just as mid-to-senior grade officers and combat deployment veterans are strongly correlated. Of the 597 West Point cadets who completed the survey, six were prior service veterans with combat deployment experience. Of the sample of 621 mid-to-senior grade officers, 545 were combat deployment veterans.

Table 3: Military Elites' Attitudes on Whether the Military Should Reflect Society (Percent Who Selected "strongly agree" or "agree" with Regard to Each Statement)

	"It is good for the U.S. military to look like and reflect society."
TOTAL (n = 1,218)	67.41
West Point Cadets	63.48
Military Officers (O4-O6)	71.18
Democrats	78.82
Independents	67.77
Republicans	64.04
Liberals	81.57
Moderates	69.60
Conservatives	61.48
Men	65.07
Women	78.34
Whites	66.55
African Americans/Blacks	69.47
Hispanics	69.84
Asian-Americans	79.31
From A Military Family	64.04
Not From A Military Family	69.19
Combat Veterans	70.96
Non-Combat Veterans	64.25

exceptionalism, we asked if respondents agreed with the notion that those who have not served in the military generally should not question or criticize the military. This question was prompted, in part, by White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders declaring to a reporter in October 2017 that it would be "highly inappropriate" to question or debate a four-star general, referencing then-White House Chief of Staff Gen. (Ret.) John Kelly.⁴² We wanted to know if military elites

harbored similar sentiments — that the only people who were fair game to question them were those who have served in uniform themselves.

Fewer than a quarter of respondents agreed with the statement that those who have not served in uniform should not question or criticize the military, although nearly three times more West Point cadets (30 percent) agreed than their more senior military officer counterparts (11 percent). Similarly, those who have not deployed were also more

42 Josh Wagner, "White House Press Secretary: It's 'Highly Inappropriate' to Question a 4-Star Marine General," *Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/10/20/white-house-press-secretary-its-highly-inappropriate-to-question-a-4-star-marine-general/?utm_term=.1194fb976635.



Table 4: Military Elites' Pride in Service and Likelihood to Recommend Young People Join (Percent Who Selected "strongly agree" or "agree" with Regard to Each Statement)

	"The American public understands the sacrifices members of the military make today."	"The American public is grateful for the sacrifices members of the military make today."
TOTAL (n = 1,218)	90.97	73.40
West Point Cadets	84.59	66.50
Military Officers (O4-O6)	97.10	80.03
Democrats	88.24	66.67
Independents	83.88	62.81
Republicans	95.10	80.98
Liberals	90.32	67.74
Moderates	85.23	65.63
Conservatives	94.30	79.51
Men	91.09	73.87
Women	90.32	71.43
Whites	92.63	76.87
African Americans/Blacks	78.95	55.79
Hispanics	92.06	74.60
Asian-Americans	87.93	63.79
From A Military Family	90.86	76.20
Not From A Military Family	91.12	69.75
Combat Veterans	97.10	80.22
Non-Combat Veterans	85.35	67.40

apt to agree than combat veterans. This point is instructive: Those with the least amount of time and experience in the profession are more apt to think that those serving should be immune from questioning and criticism from outsiders. This could suggest that the longer one is exposed to the professional norms associated with being a military officer, the more likely one is to support oversight or criticism of the institution. In many ways, this finding is encouraging. We should want military elites to reject the idea that they should be immune from outside questioning. To do otherwise would be counter to the very principle of

the military's subordination to civilian authority.

Of note, while a slightly larger percentage of conservatives and Republicans agreed that those who have not served should not criticize the military than liberals and Democrats, the differences were not statistically significant. One surprising finding in Table 2 is also worth noting. Approximately 32 percent of female respondents agreed with the statement that those who have not served in uniform should not question members of the military, compared to just 18 percent of men. In our sample, 65 percent of female respondents were West Point cadets. The higher level of support among women

on this survey question largely correlates with the higher level of support among West Point cadets in general (30 percent) and male West Point cadets (28 percent). Approximately 23 percent of female mid-to-senior grade officers agreed with this statement, compared to just 10 percent of male mid-to-senior grade officers.

Another way to investigate whether military servicemembers see themselves as exceptional is to ask whether or not officers find the culture of the military to be superior to the rest of society. Roughly a quarter of those surveyed agreed with this sentiment, but with some striking differences among subgroups. Senior officers were slightly more likely than West Point cadets to indicate that they thought military culture was superior, but the difference was small. There were, however, more notable differences in responses based on ideology, party identification, race, and gender. Conservatives and Republicans were nearly twice as likely to agree that the military is superior to civilian society as liberals and Democrats, and whites were twice as likely as African Americans to hold this view. Men were also slightly more likely than women to agree that military culture was better than civilian society. Thus, it would appear that military elites' political views and identity matter in how they conceptualize military service and society. It should not be surprising that the experiences of minority elites vary considerably from those who are in the majority, and that those different experiences might influence minority views of the military and society at large. Elites who self identify as liberals, Democrats, or African Americans — all of whom are minorities in the officer corps — may not find military culture to be as idyllic as conservatives, Republicans, men, or whites do.⁴³ It is unclear whether this is also true for women, given that they were more likely than men to agree that military members should not be questioned by civilians, but less likely to agree that military culture is superior to civilian society.

When we asked respondents the normative question of whether or not the military should reflect society, we found higher support for this among mid-to-senior grade officers (71 percent) than among West Point cadets (63 percent). However,

we found a divergence based on key identity variables such as political ideology, party affiliation, and gender (see Table 3). For example, 82 percent of liberals felt that the military should reflect society, compared to just 61 percent of conservatives, with a similar split observed along party lines — 79 percent of Democrats compared to 64 percent of Republicans. Likewise, 78 percent of women think that the military should reflect society, compared to 65 percent of men.

These findings further indicate that identity is an important factor for military elites when they reflect upon their service. Servicemembers who are underrepresented in the military think that the military should look more like society, whereas those who are in the majority in the military feel less strongly about achieving that goal. This is more than just a theoretical debate. The findings carry real implications about elites' support for various policies today, such as promotion board procedures, gender integration into combat roles, efforts to increase the number of African American officers in combat arms branches in the Army, or the debate on transgender individuals serving in the military.⁴⁴

Lastly, we asked respondents about their pride in service and the likelihood that they would encourage young people close to them to join the military today. At first blush, the findings appear encouraging, with a strong majority of respondents reporting both pride in service and a willingness to encourage others to join the military (see Table 4). When comparing responses among subgroups, however, differences begin to emerge. Almost all of the midgrade to senior officers surveyed (97 percent) reported higher levels of pride in service compared to cadets who were just starting their careers (85 percent). Combat veterans displayed higher levels of pride than those who have not deployed. Mid-to-senior grade officers and those who had deployed were also more likely to encourage others to join (80 percent) than those who have just joined themselves and those who have not deployed (67 percent). Responses did not vary by gender, with men and women reporting similar levels of pride in service and willingness to encourage young people to join the military. However, when the results are broken down

43 In our survey, 20 percent of respondents identified as a Democrat and 18 percent identified as a liberal. Blacks or African Americans constituted eight percent of our survey sample, and women made up 18 percent of our sample.

44 On June 18, 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper announced the establishment of a new Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion in the Military, aimed at eliminating racial bias and increasing diversity within the ranks, especially in the officer corps. Additionally, on June 26, 2020, the U.S. Army announced that it will no longer include official photographs or any information that identifies a soldier's race, ethnicity, or gender in promotion selection boards. Both moves came in response to Black Lives Matter protests in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing and the concomitant reactions in the U.S. military about systemic bias and racism. Dan Lamothe, "Pentagon Chief Announces New Steps to Improve Fairness for Service Members of Color," *Washington Post*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/06/18/pentagon-chief-announces-new-steps-improve-fairness-service-members-color/>; and Nancy A. Youssef, "To Combat Racial Bias, Army Is Dropping Photos from Some Soldier Records," *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-combat-racial-bias-army-is-dropping-photos-from-some-soldier-records-11593102600>.



based on political views, partisanship, and race, the findings tell a different story.

Liberals and Democrats were slightly less likely to report pride in their service and a willingness to encourage others to serve compared to conservatives and Republicans. More starkly, white servicemembers were significantly more likely to report pride in service and encourage others to join the military than African American servicemembers. In fact, only 56 percent of African American respondents surveyed indicated they would recommend that a young person close to them join the military today. No other measured subgroup reported such a low likelihood to recommend service. Even more noteworthy, only 38 percent of African American West Point cadets indicated they would encourage someone close to them to join the military, compared to 77 percent of African American midgrade and senior officers. More than half of African American cadets surveyed (52 percent) were neutral on the matter. Ten percent indicated they would not recommend that a young person join the military, compared to 5 percent of white cadets who would not.

While admittedly a small subsample, it is alarming that so few African American cadets who are just beginning their military careers indicated that they would likely encourage other young people to join the military, especially since 62 percent of African American cadets reported that a member of their immediate family served in the military, indicating some degree of familiarity with military service. African American cadets are a minority at West Point and historically have been underrepresented there, although recent years have noted higher minority enrollment levels.⁴⁵ Regardless, their hesitancy to recommend that other young people join is striking, particularly given that more senior African American officers were more apt to encourage young people to join. Clearly, more research is required, as these findings raise questions about the degree of inclusivity within the ranks today and why minority elites tend to view their experience in the military less positively than their majority elite peers seem to.⁴⁶ Two recent reports that document the extent of racial discrimination within the ranks further underscore the need for more research and attention to the matter. A 2017

Department of Defense report found that a third of African American servicemembers indicated that they had experienced racial discrimination or harassment during a 12-month period. Similarly, a 2020 Reuters study found that uniformed members of the military rarely file formal Equal Opportunity complaints for racial discrimination, suggesting they do not trust the system.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted some of the less visible implications of the All-Volunteer Force. Our findings show that while most military elites in uniform today feel the American public appreciates their service, they also think that the public fails to understand the sacrifices members of the military make. Perhaps this is an understandable byproduct of unequal burden-sharing during nearly two decades of war. Additionally, only 43 percent of military elites disagreed that military culture is generally superior to the rest of American society, raising not only concerns of disconnectedness among the officer corps but also a tendency toward feelings of exceptionalism.

Much of the civil-military relations scholarship over the past two decades has centered on the civil-military gap — the divide between those who serve and the rest of society. Our findings certainly reinforce the notion that such a gap continues to exist. However, our study also found evidence of a troubling new gap — one among military elites themselves. After nearly two decades of fighting wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, our survey data shows that military elites' feelings of superiority over the rest of society are more prevalent among conservatives, Republicans, whites, and men (at least in certain measures) than among liberals, Democrats, women, and African Americans. And, while military elites in general tend to display high levels of pride in service, it is not uniformly so, with liberals, Democrats, and African Americans reporting lower levels of pride and being less inclined to encourage young people to join the military today. This may be due to the fact that the experiences of these minority military elites may vary considerably from their majority peers, raising

45 Of the 1,190 cadets who reported in to West Point's class of 2023 in the summer of 2019, 180 (15 percent) were African American. Jenni Fink, "West Point's Newest Class Has More Minority Cadets than Last Year," *Newsweek*, July 1, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/west-point-class-2023-minority-cadets-1446958>.

46 David Barno and Nora Bensahel articulate the challenge facing the U.S. military well. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "Reflections on the Curse of Racism in the U.S. Military," *War on the Rocks*, June 30, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/reflections-on-the-curse-of-racism-in-the-u-s-military/>; Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: Long-Withheld Pentagon Survey Shows Widespread Racial Discrimination, Harassment," *Reuters*, Jan. 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-military-civilrights-exclusive/exclusive-long-withheld-pentagon-survey-shows-widespread-racial-discrimination-harassment-idUSKBN29J1N1>; and Phil Stewart, M.B. Pell, and Joshua Schneyer, "U.S. Troops Battling Racism Report High Barrier to Justice," *Reuters*, Sept. 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-military-civilrights/>.

questions about the degree of inclusivity — or even outright discrimination or harassment — within the ranks. To be fair, it is unclear how widely such attitudes toward taking pride in service and being willing to recommend that others join are held across the military. Our survey sample only included officers and cadets, who account for only a narrow slice of the armed forces. We do not know if the more numerous enlisted ranks hold similar views and if their views vary by ideology, party, race, and gender. Future research involving a large-scale, random sample could shed more light on the extent to which a divide exists between majority and minority groups in the military. Such a study should be commissioned now.

Regardless, these findings should give senior military leaders and their civilian superiors pause. Part of the allure of the citizen-soldier of the past was that service seemed to trump politics. People from diverse backgrounds found common ground through shared sacrifice, or what Cohen termed “the idea of military service as the great leveler.”⁴⁷ Today, however, both uniformed and non-uniformed

leaders should come to terms with a worrisome side effect in the professionalized fighting force — that servicemembers’ ideology and politics may shape their conception of service.

This is not the first time that scholars have uncovered evidence of differing attitudes and experiences among political minorities in the military. Previous research has found that a higher percentage of Army officers who described themselves as Democrats reported feeling uncomfortable expressing their political views with their co-workers compared to officers who identified as Republicans. Likewise, a greater proportion of Democrats indicated that other officers had encouraged them to vote a particular way than Republican officers.⁴⁸ What makes our findings in this study notable, however, is that these differences between majority and minority opinions on normative aspects related to the military profession stretch beyond party affiliation into ideology, race, and gender and may impact how elites conceptualize their service and view the rest of American society.

Given these findings, we offer two modest

recommendations. First, the services should aim to study not only who serves in the military and why, but who *does not* serve and why. The answer to this question should help focus recruitment efforts, as well as retention efforts, to ensure a military — especially an officer corps — that better reflects society. Such efforts would also complement and enable the military to better act upon the findings of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service, which recommended strengthening and expanding education pathways for military service, expanding opportunities for

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youth to explore service, and strengthening military recruiting and marketing.⁴⁹

Military recruiting is a tough business. Given the already small slice of young Americans who meet the necessary standards for service, an obvious tendency can exist to “fish where the fish are.” And while military service as a family business rightly offers much to be proud of, it, too, adds to military elites’ sense of isolation from the society that they are sworn to defend. Making a serious effort to expand recruitment, especially of elites, outside the military’s traditional bastions of support may help to increase the officer corps’ representativeness and reduce its isolation and the tendency of servicemembers to have a sense of exceptionalism.⁵⁰ The military has a greater ability to affect retention than recruitment. Given the concerns raised here regarding minority groups, the services should pay greater care and attention to why such minorities choose to leave the military.

Second, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should lead the services in a major effort to better incorporate the study of civil-military relations and the norm of non-partisanship into professional

47 Cohen, “Twilight of the Citizen Soldier.”

48 Heidi A. Urben, “Wearing Politics on Their Sleeves? Levels of Political Activism of Active Duty Army Officers,” *Armed Forces and Society* 40, no. 3 (July 2014): 580, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12467774>.

49 *Inspired to Serve: The Final Report of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service*, National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service, (March 2020), 33–40, <https://www.inspire2serve.gov/sites/default/files/final-report/Final%20Report.pdf>.

50 We are by no means the first to make such an argument. As an example, see Kathy Roth-Douquet, “America’s Elite Needs to Get Back in Uniform,” *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 25, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/25/military-service-warrior-caste-united-states/>.



military education, which is sorely needed. Leaders should also reinforce why selfless service is such a critical component of professionalism, especially within the officer corps. Each branch of the military has a rich tradition of inculcating the concept of servant leadership, but it is largely taught with an eye toward being a servant leader with regard to one's own subordinates.⁵¹ Fostering a similar focus on the values of humility and selfless service toward the country and its citizens may help to combat the growing sense of superiority among those who serve today.

For many serving in the military, King Leonidas and the vastly outnumbered Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae, popularized in the film *300*, offer an idealized vision of military service. Released just as the surge in Iraq was commencing in 2007, the film, as described in a *Los Angeles Times* review, "celebrate[s] a warrior cult that prizes physical fitness, discipline, and bravery. The numbers are small, but the hearts are stout. The cult is part of the society it protects but yet is separate, even alienated from it."⁵² The story of the Spartans at Thermopylae is not only favored by the rank and file — both the former chief of staff of the Army and former commandant of the Marine Corps had Steven Pressfield's novel on the same topic, *Gates of Fire*, on their official reading lists.⁵³ While the story of bravery and unbreakable solidarity in the face of overwhelming odds is a natural choice to inspire young servicemembers, it also carries with it the undeniable theme of a warrior caste separate from, if not superior to, the rest of society.⁵⁴

We suggest that another historical figure of mythologized proportions, but one arguably more accessible to U.S. audiences, be given the same amount of attention and admiration from senior military leaders and the officer corps today — George Washington. The first commander in chief's Newburgh Address to a group of several hundred Continental Army officers who were ready to mutiny over a lack of pay in 1783 not only thwarted a possible coup but encapsulates servant leadership

and subordination to civilian authority.⁵⁵ While Washington's nine-page speech was a measured, dispassionate response to a growing frenzy within the officer corps, it was his seemingly offhand comment that truly disarmed the crowd: "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for, I have grown not only gray, but almost blind in the service of my country."⁵⁶ In the ultimate gesture of humility, Washington reminded his fellow officers of the greater cause they served. After nearly two decades of war, and as the elite of the U.S. military find themselves more isolated, more burdened, less representative of society, but more revered than ever before, senior military leaders would be well advised to turn to the country's original secular saint for inspiration. 

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51 Tom Kolditz, "Why the Military Produces Great Leaders," *Harvard Business Review*, Feb. 6, 2009, <https://hbr.org/2009/02/why-the-military-produces-grea>.

52 Tony Perry and Robert W. Welkos, "The Few, the Proud Among Fans of '300,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2007, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-mar-14-et-spartans14-story.html>.

53 "The U.S. Army Chief of Staff's Professional Reading List," U.S. Army Center of Military History, accessed Jan. 12, 2021, <https://history.army.mil/html/books/105/105-1-1/index.html>; and "Revision of the Commandant's Professional Reading List," U.S. Marine Corps, March 4, 2019, <https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/1773787/revision-of-the-commandants-professional-reading-list/>.

54 Jim Gourley, "Welcome to Spartanburg!: The Dangers of this Growing American Military Obsession," *Foreign Policy*, April 22, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/04/22/welcome-to-spartanburg-the-dangers-of-this-growing-american-military-obsession/>.

55 George Washington, "Newburgh Address: George Washington to Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783," Mount Vernon (website), accessed Jan. 12, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-sources-2/article/newburgh-address-george-washington-to-officers-of-the-army-march-15-1783/>.

56 Washington, "Newburgh Address." See also Richard H. Kohn, "The Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy: America and the Coup d'Etat," *William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (April 1970): 187–220, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1918650>.

This article reflects the personal views of the authors. It does not represent the views of the U.S. Army, National Defense University, or Department of Defense.

Acknowledgements: *The authors wish to thank Dr. Peter D. Feaver, the panelists at the 2019 Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, and the anonymous Texas National Security Review reviewers for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript. We also are grateful to the National Defense University, U.S. Military Academy, and U.S. Army War College, especially Col. Suzanne Nielsen and Lt. Col. Heidi Demarest, and Dr. Marybeth Ulrich for facilitating this survey research.*

Image: Department of Defense, Patrick Kelley