

4. Rehabilitation of the image of the military and the militarization of the police

At the same time, placing the military into the realm of the sacred paradoxically turns it into the ultimate partisan prize. The military is the only public institution still trusted by a large majority of Americans, which is why both parties now routinely seek endorsements not only from generals but also from veterans and military families, hoping the military's consecrated aura will blind us to the tawdriness of campaign season attack ads and sound bites.¹

In American popular culture, from Bill Mauldin to Sgt. Bilko to *M*A*S*H*, it had been ok to make light fun of the military. This has become more difficult since 9/11. The reverence of "Thank you for your service" has become de rigueur. After the Vietnam War and before 9/11, there was *M*A*S*H* (adapted from the 1970 movie, 1972-83), which used Korea and army medics as a safe backdrop to comment on Vietnam. The dramatic *China Beach* (1988-91) showed the perspective of a war nurse in Vietnam, and did not shy away from the problems of the war. But over time, the military in popular culture has become increasingly sacralized and criticism of American military policy has been reframed as an attack on ordinary soldiers.

The evaluation of the military according to the Gallup Poll is one way to gauge the improvement of the military's image since the end of the Vietnam War.² From 1975-84, the percent of the public either "thinking a great deal of or liking the [military] a lot" ranged from the mid to high 50s. In June 2016, that figure had risen to 73% of the public; since 9/11 it sometimes rose into the 80s. The only institution even close in public approval is small business (68%). By comparison, the percent of the public approval of Congress had sunk from 42% to 9%; approval of church and religion had fallen to 41% from the mid-60s in the post-war period.

For the image of the military to be rehabilitated, first the military in Vietnam had to be normalized. In his first inaugural, Ronald Reagan initiated the process by elegiacally linking unnamed battles in Vietnam to earlier sanctified sites:

Beyond those monuments to heroism is the Potomac River, and on the far shore the sloping hills of Arlington National Cemetery with its row on row of simple white markers bearing crosses or Stars of David. They add up to only a tiny fraction of the price that has been paid for our freedom.

Each one of those markers is a monument to the kinds of hero I spoke of earlier. Their lives ended in places called Belleau Wood, The Argonne, Omaha Beach, Salerno and halfway around the world on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Pork Chop Hill, the Chosin Reservoir, and in a hundred rice paddies and jungles of a place called Vietnam.³

Barack Obama used almost the same language, this time providing an actual Vietnam battle name, in his first inaugural a quarter of a century later: "For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh."⁴

¹ <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-brooks-military-sacred-20160810-snap-story.html>

² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

³ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/reagan1.asp

⁴ <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres68.html>

The 1980s witnessed a spate of belated welcome home parades for Vietnam vets—a New York City parade featured 25,000 veteran marchers in front of a reported one million spectators-- as well the construction of hundreds of memorials around the country (including the controversial Memorial Wall in Washington DC). As Christian Appy notes, “by the 1980s, mainstream culture and politics promoted the idea that the deepest shame connected to the Vietnam War was not the war itself, but America’s failure to embrace its veterans.”⁵

By the time Bush I launched the first Gulf War, even protestors felt the need to circumscribe their opposition by clarifying that they supported the troops whatever they felt about the war. Viet Thanh Nguyen has pointed out the ways in which this perspective undercuts an authentic antiwar position:

“Oppose the War, but Support the Troops: The slogan implicitly evokes the memory among many Americans that they did not support the troops during the war in Vietnam and calls on them now to support the troops fighting in current wars. In doing so the slogan also suppresses troubling questions. Perhaps one could support the troops if one only opposed the war on issues of foreign policy, or if one simply did not agree with the expenditure of American treasury on military adventurism. But if one opposed a war because it killed innocent people, then how could one support the troops who inflicted the damage? Do they not bear moral responsibility for killing? Might they not bear some political responsibility for a war they implicitly supported through their votes, their attitudes, and their actions? The question of responsibility is particularly pressing for an all-volunteer army... The slogan’s refusal to judge soldiers also implies a refusal to judge the civilians. What lies behind the slogan is not only support for the troops but the absolution of the same civilians who utter the slogan. If the hands of the troops are clean, so are the hands of these civilians. As for the American dead, they have not died for nothing after all. ...The story of supporting the troops affirms an American identity invested in the justice of American wars and the innocence of American intentions. This identity is the true “Vietnam Syndrome,” the selective memory of a country that imagines itself as a perpetual innocent.”⁶

Hollywood also played a key role in refurbishing the image of the military. A turning point was *Top Gun* (1986) an updating of the notion that the military turns boys into men. In a key subplot, the hero, Maverick, learns that his father had been a heroic naval pilot during the war, not the troublemaker he had been led to believe. Navy and Air Force recruitment zoomed—sometime from recruiters in the theaters—and *Top Gun* became the highest grossing movie of the year. To obtain access to naval aircraft and personnel, the producers granted script approval to the Navy.

Hollywood has a long-standing relationship with the military. The connection was cemented with the 1927 film *Wings*. It featured over 3,000 infantrymen as extras, and included U.S. Air Force military pilots and planes. The film starred Clara Bow, the original “it” girl, as the love interest two men fight over, enlisting in an effort to become combat pilots to win her affection. It won the very first Oscar for Best Picture.

⁵ Appy, p. 241.

⁶ Nguyen, pp.48-50

H. Machtinger

By 1989, Hollywood had upped the ante with the Defense Department's Film and Television Liaison Office led by Phil Strub, who oversaw efforts to seek United States military assistance on various movie projects, such as providing the F-22 Raptors and other vehicles used in the Transformers film trilogy. His name has appeared in the "producers wish to thank" list in more than 50 films, including *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *Ironman, ... The Perfect Storm* (2000) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), as well as the TV shows "*Bones*" (2015-17) and *24* (2001-10)"⁷ On the other hand, it should be pointed out, other movies that did not fully glorify military life either refused Pentagon script approval or were turned down by the military included *Platoon* (1986), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Three Kings* (1999), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Crimson Tide* (1995), *G.I Jane* (1997), *Windtalkers* (2002), and *In the Valley of Elah* (2007)."

The CIA also got into the act. The CIA had been under attack during and after the war. Revelation about CIA activities in Vietnam (including the notorious Phoenix program), Watergate, and evidence of domestic spying had put the CIA on the defensive. Making matters worse were critical memoirs by former CIA agents Victor Marchetti and Philip Agee.⁸

In 1977, after this systematic media manipulation was publicly exposed by congressional investigations, the CIA created an Office of Public Affairs that was tasked with guiding press coverage of intelligence matters in a more transparent fashion... The flag-waving Tom Clancy franchise became a centerpiece of CIA propaganda in the 1990s, with a succession of actors (Alec Baldwin, Harrison Ford, and finally Ben Affleck) starring in films like *Patriot Games*, *Clear and Present Danger*, and *The Sum of All Fears*, which pit the daring agent Jack Ryan against an array of enemies, from terrorists to South American drug lords.⁹

Long-time CIA operative Chase Brandon (Tommie Lee Jones's cousin) was the CIA's first entertainment liaison officer, working in the entertainment industry for over a decade from 1996 onwards. He helped change the tone of Hollywood movies from Vietnam-era takedowns like *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). Brandon more than any other individual helped set up a permanent CIA network within Hollywood and the rest of the industry. The CIA developed relationships with stars of the magnitude of Affleck, Harrison Ford, and Robert De Niro. Other CIA-influenced movies included *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Bourne Identity* (2002) *The Recruit* (2008), and most effectively *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *Argo* (2012). Among its many interventions on TV were *Alias* (2001-6), *24* (2001-10), *Person of Interest* (2011-now), and *Homeland* (2011-present). The CIA's interest was not only to present a positive view of the CIA but even in movies with a jaded perspective, to over-emphasize the threats to the US and promote the CIA's extraordinary skills and technology.

Despite the CIA's failure to prevent 9/11 and its faulty intelligence about the 2003 Iraq war, this profusion of positive media in a fearful climate proved protective of its image. When

⁷ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/7/29/hollywood-and-the-pentagonrelationshipofmutualexploitation.html>

⁸ Agee, Philip (1975). *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*. Penguin and Marchetti, Victor; Marks, John D. (1974). *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*. New York: Knopf.

⁹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/07/operation-tinseltown-how-the-cia-manipulates-hollywood/491138/>

H. Machtinger

the CIA engaged in torture under the leadership of George W. Bush, there was *24* to demonstrate its efficacy, *Zero Dark Thirty* to pretend it helped capture Osama Bin Laden, and *Argo* to provide a happy ending to the Iran hostage crisis.

Trump's dismissal of CIA intelligence about Russian hacking is a break from CIA idolatry and resonates with his dismissal of American exceptionalism (see Point 1). He has no problem tearing down establishment institutions to which he can portray himself as the antidote to their corruption, the unique vehicle to make America great. The tortured history of the CIA allows an opening to assimilate long-time criticisms of the CIA into his Right populist agenda. In a power struggle it remains to be seen whether the long-standing national security state can bring him to heel or will be transformed into his personal fiefdom. His appointments so far indicate a tilt toward the most hard-core elements of the myriad national security agencies that have proliferated since 9/11.

One supposed characteristic of a non-authoritarian democracy is the sharp distinction between the army, which fights external enemies, and the police, which maintains domestic order. This distinction, never as clear as advertised, has broken down in the last 20 years, as society and the police have become increasingly militarized.

The weaponry and advanced technology with which this country has been fighting its never-ending (and remarkably unsuccessful) conflicts abroad -- from Predator drones to the Stingray that mimics a cell phone tower and so gets nearby phones to connect to it -- began migrating home, as America's borders and police forces were militarized. The police have been supplied with weaponry and other equipment directly off the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, while veterans from those wars have joined the growing set of SWAT teams, the domestic version of special-ops teams, that are now a must-have for police departments nationwide.

... The National Security Agency created a global surveillance apparatus so all-encompassing that it left the fantasies of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century in the dust.¹⁰

The 1033 Program was created during the Bill Clinton administration by the 1997 National Defense Authorization Act as part of the U.S. Government's Defense Logistics Agency Disposition Services (DLA) to transfer excess military equipment to civilian law enforcement agencies. As of 2014, 8,000 local law enforcement agencies participated in the reutilization program that has transferred \$5.1 billion in military hardware from the Department of Defense to local American law enforcement agencies since 1997. Soon after the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri police shooting of Michael Brown and the militarized response to protestors, there was some interest in Congress to reform the Pentagon's 1033 Program. Congressional action never materialized, but the Obama administration followed through, banning the transfer of at least some types of military weapons to local police.

Donald Trump, unsurprisingly, wants to undo Obama's policy. Police union members in Ohio quizzed Donald Trump about protective gear, saying President Obama has unfairly banned the practice of sales of surplus military equipment to police department. Trump

¹⁰ See

http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176224/tomgram%3A_william_astore%2C_all_the_president%27s_generals/

H. Machtinger

says he would resume such sales, saying, “Yes, I would. I think it’s ridiculous” to keep this equipment from the police.¹¹

There has also been an ominous expansion of military-style SWAT teams. SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) teams are law enforcement units, which use specialized or military equipment and tactics in the United States. Initially created in the 1960s to control protests or deal with violent confrontations with criminals, the number and usage of SWAT teams multiplied in the 1980s and 1990s during the so-called War on Drugs and later in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. As of 2005, SWAT teams were deployed 50,000 times every year, almost 80% of the time to serve search warrants, most often for drugs. SWAT teams are increasingly equipped with military-type hardware and trained to deploy against threats of terrorism, for crowd control, and in situations deemed beyond the capabilities of ordinary law enforcement.

What is the rationale for this hyper-militarized society? Hawkish groups like the Committee on

The director of MIT’s Security Studies Program, Harvey Saplosky, refers to ...what he terms “You Never Know(ism)”: You Never Knowism is the guiding ethos of U.S. national security. National security planning documents are rife with it. They evoke a world of swirling uncertainty and rising complexity, a time of unprecedented change, where predictions are impossible but dangers great. They claim that the simple Soviet threat has been replaced by more various and irrational ones, which require capabilities-based planning—building military forces with no particular foe in mind.

... The dirty secret of American national security politics is that we are safe. Americans might be the most secure people in history. But we worry. We are told that our enemies may be organizing our destruction in pockets of disorder, which are growing. We are taught that the world is chaotic, awash in civil war and terrorism, which could strike us “any place, with virtually any weapon.” We hear that our satellites are ripe for attack, that pirates prey on our shipping, that Iran’s nuclear weapons portend disaster, and that China is a growing threat. At base, however, most arguments claiming America’s insecurity rely on implausible scenarios. The futures these arguments fear are not probable but possible. It is possibility that justifies the defenses they advocate.

According to data compiled by the U.S. government’s Office of Management and Budget, ...(fiscal years 1999 through 2008) of sequentially rising arms spending, measured in inflation-adjusted expenditures, is now longer than that of the Vietnam era (six years of real rising outlays) and Korea (four years). In relative terms, real Department of Defense outlays in the Vietnam era rose by 35.7 percent during 1963–68, while during 1999–2006 real outlays soared by 56 percent..¹²

¹¹ <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/trump-eager-return-military-equipment-police-departments>

¹² <http://monthlyreview.org/2007/06/01/from-military-keynesianism-to-global-neoliberal-militarism/>

H. Machtinger

Under Obama the military budget, at first continued to rise and then fell slightly, still totaling much as the next 7 or 8 nations combined.¹³

Trump, in typical provocateur mode, tweeted in December 2016 that the US “must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes” and added that he is fine with the country taking part in an “arms race” if it puts the U.S. in a stronger position against foreign adversaries. “Let it be an arms race ... we will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all.”¹⁴ This seemed to mark a break with Obama’s proclaimed non-proliferation strategy, but Trump’s acolytes later claimed that what he was advocating was in line with Obama’s calls for modernizing the nuclear arsenal. In any case, it is clear that a Trump Administration has no interest in demilitarization but will almost certainly escalate the ongoing militarization. This is clearly indicated in his cabinet appointments of what William Astore calls the elevation of tough-talking, but “losing generals”—as distinct from Washington, Grant, or Eisenhower-- like James “Mad Dog” Mattis, Michael Flynn, and John Kelly.¹⁵ Big talk is once more the substitute for actual deeds.

¹³ <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/jan/13/barack-obama/obama-us-spends-more-military-next-8-nations-combi/>

¹⁴ <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-nuclear-arms-race-russia-232944>

¹⁵ See

http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176224/tomgram%3A_william_astore%2C_all_the_president%27s_generals/