

MUST U.S. MILITARY CULTURE REFORM?

by John Hillen

Change is characteristic of military culture because of the many influences that constantly affect the values, behavior, and beliefs that together define it.¹ The proper question for debate is therefore not whether American military culture will change but rather *how* it should change in response to such pressures. To be more precise: What are the central tasks of the military? What legitimacy does it draw from founding documents and national laws? How does it reflect the culture of the society it serves? The answers to these questions form the context in which military culture evolves.

At the present time, a confluence of powerful and diverse imperatives is at work. Contemporary social mores and the end of the Cold War have combined to change the military's roles and missions, budgeting, organization, legal foundation, and internal disciplinary code, even as it is pushed and pulled according to political advocates' judgments as to the extent to which it should or should not reflect American society in general. (Table 1 illustrates the most important of these, listed in comparison to those of the Cold War era.) Yet within what General Douglas MacArthur once called "a welter of change and development," certain constants always apply lest U.S. military culture: (1) no longer effectively provide for the common defense; (2) lose the institutional "soul" rooted, as Don Snider suggests, in "warfighting"; or (3) accommodate demands for social change at the expense of the military's functional or legal imperatives.²

This panel examined all these pressures, and this report will explore all the challenges likely to shape American military culture in the future. But for several reasons the main focus here will be the social imperatives. That is because functional pressures, as

Williamson Murray demonstrates, can be generally understood through historical or strategic analysis, and are adapted to in "the light of day"—in clear cognizance of the strategic environment in which major policy decisions are taken. To be sure, policy decisions driving functional imperatives are always hotly debated, but all parties share a common determination to maximize U.S. security. Similarly, Congress may alter the legal imperatives of military culture at times, but it does so in order to provide better for the common defense. Social imperatives, conversely, can be profoundly "anti-functional" because they are not derived from security needs and can even at times be entirely divorced from them. Moreover, the imposition of certain social imperatives can undermine the ability of the military to carry out the tasks that alone justify its existence. At the same time, it must be said that armed forces in the service of a democracy must reflect to some degree the culture of the society they are sworn to defend. Therein lies the critical nexus of the debate. Exactly how does a military protect the professional culture necessary to perform its missions in the unnatural stresses of war within the legal prerogatives of its government, and yet remain responsive to and reflective of the civilian culture it serves?

Functional Imperatives

Edgar Schein, the eminent MIT organizational psychologist, states that "culture is what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems of survival in an external environment and its problems of internal integration." The result of this process can ultimately be seen in the "three fundamental levels at which culture manifests itself: observable artifacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions."³ It is useful in a discussion of changing military culture to focus on values, given the vogue in government and corporate worlds in the 1990s to define an organization's "core values." Military culture, or cultures, cannot be centered on values invented in the abstract.⁴ All of the conference's contributors noted how the values underpinning the world's military cultures evolved throughout history in response to the needs of men attempting to succeed in combat, that is, as a result of occupational necessity. Quite simply, soldiers need codes of conduct, values, methods, procedures, and organizations characterized by what we might quaintly term the "military virtues,"

³Edgar H. Schein, "Organizational Culture," *American Psychologist*, Feb. 1990, p. 111.

⁴See Don M. Snider's essay "An Uninformed Debate on Military Culture" in this volume.

¹This essay originally appeared in *Orbis*, Winter 1999, and arose from the Foreign Policy Research Institute conference "The End of American Military Culture," Philadelphia, Pa., July 15–16, 1998.

²See Nora Kinzer Stewart's fascinating sociological analysis of the dichotomy between the Argentine and British military cultures operating in the 1982 Falklands War, *Mates and Muchachos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands/Malvinas War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1991).

Table 1
Changing Pressures on Military Culture

	Cold War Military	Post-Cold War Military
FUNCTIONAL IMPERATIVES		
• Strategic Focus	• Major wars; emphasis on Soviet threat	• All manner of operations, especially peacekeeping; no overarching threat
• Financial resources	• Large (1960-90 average 7 percent of GDP)	• Small (by 2002, projected at less than 3 percent of GDP)
• Personnel structure	• Large conscript/professional force, emphasizing ground troops	• Small professional force, far fewer ground troops
• Technological orientation	• Emphasis on ground operations, heavy firepower	• Emphasis on air and space operations, precision, computerization
• Institutional icon	• "Heroic" warrior (infantryman, fighter pilot)	• Peacekeeper, hacker, information manager?
LEGAL IMPERATIVES		
• Documents defining and legitimizing roles	• Constitution, statutes (Posse Comitatus Act)	• Constitution, statutes (Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act)
• Legal code governing military personnel	• Uniformed Code of Military Justice, etc., as changed by Congress or the Supreme Court	• Uniformed Code of Military Justice, etc., as "reshaped" by Executive Order
SOCIAL IMPERATIVES		
• Women in combat	• Rigid combat exclusion	• Almost all military specialties opened
• Homosexuals in military	• Not tolerated	• "Don't ask, don't tell"
• Gender-integrated basic training	• Air Force only (after 1974)	• Army, Navy, and Air Force
• Interaction between civilian and military cultures	• Cultures not as distinct; little pressure for complete uniformity	• Gap widens; pressure increases to bring military in line with civilian culture

including Duty, Honor, Patriotism, Courage, Discipline, Commitment, Strength, Integrity, Trust, and Resolve. While many other social, legal, psychological, and historical factors influenced the development of particular military cultures, for the most part the values of the military have been shaped by the unique requirements of its workplace, and the best test of a given military culture was whether its recruits could train and fight effectively, especially when they first came under fire.

It follows, therefore, that if you change the principal task for which the military prepares, you are bound to change the culture. Snider tells us rightly that "warfighting still determines the central beliefs, values, and complex symbolic formations that define military culture," raising the question of how our services might change if warfighting is no longer the primary mission. But in fact, the U.S. military throughout its history has been involved in many more Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) than in war itself.⁵ Granted, many of these MOOTW had the general characteristics of war (as the old soldier's dictum goes, "there is no such thing as a low-intensity conflict if you're the guy on the ground"), but the post-Cold War shift in U.S. policy toward preparing for peacekeeping missions such as in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, and Rwanda will challenge a traditional military culture rooted in the heroic efforts of past wars.⁶ Even the much ballyhooed "war on terrorism" shares more characteristics with law enforcement than traditional war. In this respect, the manifest cultural change in the Israeli Defense Force from that of 1948-82 (focused on external wars to defend the state) versus 1988-98 (focused on internal policing of the *intifada* and other security challenges within the state) is instructive.

The Kelly Flinn affair of 1997 and other sexual scandals revealed that many Americans seemed neither to understand nor to appreciate how and why military culture was special. Editorials and opinion columns ridiculed the military ethos as an archaic manifestation of a patriarchal institution. Civilian elites (including the conservative Senate majority leader) seemed not to grasp that the military is the way it is because of what it does and where and under what circumstances it does it. As Schein has noted, what you do forms who you are, what you value, and in what you

⁵There are over 250 instances of the use of U.S. armed forces abroad since 1798 and only five declared wars. Congressional Research Service Report no. 96-119F, "Instances of Use of U.S. Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-1995," Feb. 6, 1996.

⁶Panelist Deborah Avant competently explores many of these issues in *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

believe, and in Lieutenant Flinn's case the "what you do" entailed the dropping of bombs and missiles, possibly nuclear, in time of war. Despite the gravity of her profession, many letter writers to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* appeared mystified that the U.S. Air Force would make a crime of widely accepted societal trespasses such as adultery, lying, and disobeying orders. This phenomenon represents the convergence of changing functional and social imperatives that challenge military culture today.

A second powerful functional imperative that determines military culture is the resources devoted to national defense. In 1998 the U.S. military establishment was funded at the lowest levels (as a percentage of both gross domestic product and the federal budget) since before Pearl Harbor. Social security, Medicare, other entitlement programs, and interest on the national debt all have a higher priority in the federal budget. Once the premier instrument of the state, the military has shrunk so considerably that in some ways its culture may revert to that of the small frontier forces of the nineteenth century. Moreover, personnel policy aims at just such a small professional force. Between 1940 and 1973 personnel policy was based on a large conscript force, and between 1973 and 1991 on a fairly large professional force. But the post-Cold War shrinkage not only alters U.S. military culture on its own account, it exacerbates the friction born of the new social imperatives.

Thirdly, the way in which a military is organized and conducts its missions has a profound influence on culture. Williamson Murray noted that traditionally the United States "has had its own military style" that emphasizes logistics, overwhelming superiority, and the application of technology to problems that other states might approach differently. In particular, technology has been a singularly seductive approach for the United States since the advent of the industrial age, and this cultural trait is even more prevalent today, not least due to the military's shrinking personnel base.⁷

It is helpful to understand this in the context of the institutional icon, that figure who seems to represent the beating heart of military culture. In the early industrial age, it was the infantryman or the fighter pilot—the heroic leader. In the nuclear age, with total war unthinkable, some military sociologists predicted a shift away from the heroic leader and toward the "modern military

⁷See also Williamson Murray, "Computers In, Clausewitz Out," *National Interest*, Summer 1997, pp. 57–69.

manager." Morris Janowitz, in his seminal work *The Professional Soldier*, wrote that the complex and largely bureaucratic nature of warfare in the nuclear age would require a sophisticated knowledge of strategic deterrence, military, industrial, and economic alliances, and political warfare designed to avoid absolute conflict. Janowitz saw a narrowing skill differential between military and civilian elites and noted that a complex and bureaucratic nuclear-age military would display an increasingly "civilian character."⁸ But Janowitz's icon of the sophisticated manager was so tarnished by Robert McNamara's "whiz kids" and the failure of their systems-analysis approach in the jungles of Vietnam that the army and marines, especially, spent the 1970s and 1980s initiating programs to reinductate "the warrior spirit" into their services' cultures.⁹

Who or what will be the institutional icon of the twenty-first century American military? Author James Adams, one of many who have written on the military implications of the digital age, sees the computer wizard as the new icon. He writes in his book *The Next World War* that "in the new world, the soldier will be the young geek in uniform who can insert a virus into Teheran's electricity supply to plunge the city into darkness."¹⁰ As the "revolution in military affairs" seems to replace troops, tanks, ships, and planes with computers, unmanned aircraft, and satellites in the calculations of strategists, what Eliot Cohen has called "the geek-to-warrior ratio" will rise dramatically. Similarly, in the peacekeeping missions that have occupied America's military in the past few years, the most sought-after military specialists have been military policemen and civil-affairs officers, formerly peripheral players in supporting the institutional icons of the past. Rapid change in all these functional arenas—strategy, policy, resources, organization, and technology—will profoundly affect military culture.

Legal Imperatives

Though not discussed at length during the conference, legal imperatives are critical to military culture in that they establish the legitimacy for the existence and missions of the armed forces. Legal imperatives are rooted principally in the Constitution and

⁸Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960), pp. 21–78.

⁹James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); and Thomas Ricks, *Making the Corps* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), chap. 4.

¹⁰James Adams, *The Next World War: Computers Are the Weapons and the Front Line is Everywhere* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), p. 14.

various U.S. statutes that spell out the roles and missions of the military, as well as the separate legal codes by which the military governs itself. While the Constitution changes little, U.S. statutes concerning military missions have recently been amended. For instance, in the aftermath of the Gulf War, with global military threats much reduced, a movement arose on Capitol Hill, led by Senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) among others, to have the active-duty military assist in such domestic activities as the “war on drugs,” civil order (as regular troops did during the Los Angeles riots of 1992), patrolling the border, and disaster relief. Some of these activities were in direct contravention of the Posse Comitatus Act that prohibits regular armed forces from assisting in civilian law enforcement. Momentum to amend that act began when Congress passed the Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act in 1981 to allow the military a much greater role in drug interdiction.

Nunn justified his proposals to use the military more in domestic missions by stating that the nation needed to take advantage of “the hardworking, disciplined men and women” of the armed forces. Similarly, Republican presidential candidates Robert Dole, Lamar Alexander, and Patrick Buchanan proposed in 1996 to use the military to seal porous U.S. borders and assist civilian agencies in drug interdiction. These proposals threatened in many ways the core function of the military, which in Huntington’s words is “successful armed combat.” Further attempts to amend legal imperatives face two challenges. First, they could well be counterproductive. The military is “hardworking and disciplined” precisely because it prepares with an uncommon sense of urgency for battlefield tasks that require those very attributes. If you remove the task, you remove the need for the culture underpinning those missions. There is a reason civilian law-enforcement agencies do not have the culture of the military—it is because of what they do (or, more precisely, what they do not do). Using the military to correct the failings of other institutions would cause military culture to atrophy, denying politicians the very instrument they hoped to use for domestic tasks.¹¹ More dangerous perhaps, as Charles Dunlap writes, is the possibility that the changing of legal imperatives toward domestic missions will undermine the civil-military balance and thrust the armed forces

into internal affairs in a corrosive way.¹²

Legal imperatives affecting military culture have also been under challenge as a result of the recent sexual episodes. In 1997–98, the secretary of defense convened a panel to investigate whether legal provisions concerning adultery and other offenses covered by the Uniformed Code of Military Justice should be revised in “recognition that, at least in some ways—the military world should not really be so different from the civilian.”¹³ The impetus for these sorts of legal proposals is discussed below. What should be recognized here is that the legal imperatives shaping what the military does and how it does it are subject to change and amendment through political intervention that may be very short-sighted.

Social Imperatives

Three distinct types of social imperatives have an impact on military culture. First, there are pressures from small but vocal constituencies seeking to use the military as a vehicle for social change, or even what Charles Moskos and others have called “social experimentation.” Some observers believe that these activists seek not only to further their agendas via the military, but to destroy its prevailing culture in the process.¹⁴ One is reminded of the gleeful pronouncement of Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.) during the Tailhook investigation that the troubles of the navy represented “the sound of a culture cracking.” Secondly, there are those military and public officials who abet the activists in the belief that functional imperatives have so changed the nature of war that the military can and perhaps should accommodate seemingly contradictory social imperatives. Other “accommodators” simply believe that many of the vestiges of military culture are overly authoritarian, masculine, or otherwise out of step with the times. Thirdly, some reformers stress social imperatives on the military in the belief that any severe gap between civilian and military culture bodes ill for a democracy. They would push the military to adopt contemporary values, patterns of behavior, and social mores on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation so as to close the gap. While the panel spent much time discussing all these issues, the last is the most recent and

¹²See Charles Dunlap, “The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012,” *Parameters*, Winter 1992–93, pp. 2–20.

¹³Steven Lee Myers, “Military Weighing Changes in Policy towards Adultery,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1998.

¹⁴James Webb, “The War on the Military Culture,” *Weekly Standard*, Jan. 20, 1997.

¹¹See John Hillen, “Don’t Misuse the Armed Forces,” *Investor’s Business Daily*, Feb. 28, 1996.

most potentially far reaching, and it is to that heated topic that this paper devotes the greatest attention.

The “Agenda Pushers”

The military, being a “top-down” institution driven by authoritarian dictates, is viewed by many as an ideal vehicle for imposing social change. President Truman recognized this when he fully integrated the armed forces in 1948 while much of the United States was still locked in a pattern of legal, systemic racial discrimination. The social imperatives pressuring the military today also derive from demands for equal opportunity—in this case, for women and homosexuals. Many of their advocates make no secret of their radical politics and aggressive agendas. Dr. Madeleine Morris, a Duke University law professor officially advising former secretary of the army Togo West on gender issues, wrote a 130-page law review article putting forward an “ungendered vision” of the military based in part on the model of Communist Party cells and proposed a plan for dismantling the “masculinist military construct” that encourages a “proclivity for rape.”¹⁵ This sort of unsubstantiated deconstructionist agitprop is taken seriously in much of the academic world and in activist circles, but had not previously penetrated the sober world of military policymaking.

By 1994, however, the equal opportunity agenda, informed by “analysis” such as that from Dr. Morris, had begun to have an impact on policy. Within eighteen months of President Clinton’s election, several steps were taken that seriously challenged traditional military culture. In January 1994 Secretary of Defense Les Aspin announced that he was lifting long-standing exclusion rules and opening some 15,000 to 20,000 combat and near-combat positions to women.¹⁶ By that time Clinton had acted on his long-standing campaign pledge to eliminate the prohibition against avowed homosexuals in the armed services. This controversial move was resisted by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell, among others, and resulted in the enigmatic and legally ambiguous “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise. Finally, although it had been tried and deemed to have failed in the 1980s, the army and navy reintroduced sexually integrated basic training. A series of embarrassing and highly publicized incidents soon occurred,

¹⁵Elaine Donnelly, “Social Fiction in the Ungendered Military,” *Washington Times*, Apr. 7, 1997.

¹⁶See Eric Schmitt, “Aspin Moves to Open Many Military Jobs to Women,” *New York Times*, Jan. 14, 1994.

sparking a national scandal worthy of investigation by two blue-ribbon congressional panels in 1997 and 1998.¹⁷

While the military conference panel discussed these issues at length, some participants took the position that the equal-opportunity changes thrust on the military do not constitute the greater problem. To them, the pressing worry is that the military might accommodate these changes by compromising its standards and the cultural values it thought necessary to meet its functional challenges. In other words, the cultural angst experienced by the military in accommodating these imperatives was somewhat self-inflicted.

The “Accommodators”

If women in combat, homosexuals in the military, or coeducational basic training damage traditional military culture, that damage would most likely be manifested in lesser cohesion in combat units (traditionally based on small-group dynamics among males), privacy concerns, and increased incidences of sexual misbehavior. As Mackubin Owens has written, these phenomena represent friction in the classic Clausewitzian sense. Both he and Don Snider note that military culture is formed precisely to overcome friction, especially in times of greatest stress.¹⁸ However, the sources of friction normally cited in critiques of these social experiments are the double standards, reduced standards, less rigorous training, indiscipline, and reduced readiness derived from the need to accommodate females in the ranks. For instance, the report of the Commission on Gender Integrated Training led by former senator Nancy Kassebaum Baker focused most of its criticisms of gender-integrated basic training on the latter category of problems. That being the case, the panel suspected that the disingenuous way in which the military was accommodating the social imperatives was more problematic than the imperatives themselves. For instance, the army has known for a decade that women tend to quit basic training at a rate almost twice that of men. But rather than accepting that as the price of maintaining high standards in a demanding environment, the army lowered its standards so as to “gender-norm” the numbers. Panel members provided numerous other examples of this sort of appeasement, drawn from the Kassebaum

¹⁷See James Anderson, “Boot Camp or Summer Camp? Restoring Rigorous Standards to Basic Training,” *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, no. 1147 (Nov. 6, 1997).

¹⁸See Mackubin Thomas Owens, “It’s Time to Face the Gender Paradox,” *Naval Institute Proceedings*, July 1998, pp. 43–49.

Baker commission and other official studies.¹⁹

Clearly the pressure on the military to make these social experiments “work” reveals that the U.S. military and America’s political system are not mature enough to handle “gender and sexual orientation issues” honestly and in ways that are fair to the institution as well as the individuals involved. Political and military leaders seem convinced that American society, and therefore its military, must inevitably progress on a path leading to a social order in which gender is physically and behaviorally irrelevant, in which sex and sexual orientation have no impact, and in which teenagers view each other according to a benign and respectful androgyny. This new orthodoxy is a purely social construct without any functional imperative and was justified, in the words of accommodationist Les Aspin, simply because it “is the right thing to do.”²⁰ Three years after Aspin’s decisions, when independent commissions and numerous reports found the military compromised and suffering from the way in which these changes were imposed, the majority of uniformed and political leaders continue to support social imperatives at the clear expense of functional ones and resort to Orwellian phraseology in their attempts to defend their new regime against the truth.²¹ While many uniformed leaders showed great courage in their battlefield exploits to turn back the nation’s enemies, they seem petrified before activists who might accuse them of “turning back the clock.”

To say that the battlefield imposes its own timeless logic, including a viciously impartial meritocracy, would seem to be a simple enough proposition. But in times of peace it can be overwhelmed by social imperatives pressed by activists with a larger agenda, which accommodators in turn accept as “the will of the people.”²² Thus, a recent statement from the army’s leadership that “any proposal that calls for gender segregation of both trainees and cadre violates the very foundation of the Army” led one incredulous observer to ask, “Which foundation is that? Winning wars for our nation; the will to win; ‘Duty, Honor, Country’; ‘There is no substitute for victory’? What specific foundation was the Army leadership referring to?”²³

¹⁹Elaine Donnelly, Testimony to the House National Security Subcommittee on Personnel, Mar. 17, 1998 (<http://www.house.gov/hasc/testimony/105thcongress/3-17-98donnelly.htm>).

²⁰Schmitt, “Aspin Moves.”

²¹Rowan Scarborough, “Did the Army Tell House to Buzz Off?” *Washington Times*, Aug. 31, 1998.

²²In fact, all these recent changes were imposed by executive order, not congressional statutes.

²³Col. (ret.) Michael D. Mahler, “Has the Army Lost Its Way?” *Army*, May 1998, p. 57.

The “Close the Gappers”

In the past few years, it has become accepted and widely reported that a gap is growing between American society and the U.S. military. For the most part, however, these warnings pertained to those official relationships between political leaders making defense policy and uniformed military leaders in the Pentagon.²⁴ The civil-military gap as then portrayed was manifest only within the government, and mostly at its highest levels. However, since 1996, the focus of concern over this gap has broadened, and public conversation has recently magnified the gap into a “nearly unbridgeable cultural divide” between American society in general and the U.S. military establishment.²⁵ Dire warnings over the consequences of this gap have caused many policymakers automatically to assume that its very existence is fundamentally unhealthy in a democracy. Hence, their alarmist cries to close the gap.²⁶ Civilian defense officials such as Secretary of Defense William Cohen have made “reconnecting the military to society” a top priority, and prominent veterans such as Senator John McCain have publicly worried about a professional U.S. military estranged from society.²⁷

Whether politically motivated by the “agenda pushers” or not, there is now an inexorable momentum to close the gap between the military and society without clearly identifying the nature of the gap, the extent to which it might in fact be healthy and desirable, or how such a gap might be narrowed. So instead of reasoned study and judgment, we witness a series of *a priori* assumptions to the effect that there is a fundamental, corrosive gap between the military and society, and that no democracy can tolerate a military whose culture does not mirror that of civil society. Moreover, it goes without saying that under the new dispensation, if society or the military must move to accommodate the cultural norms of the other, it will be the military that is pressured to lower its standards, not society to raise civilian behavior. Finally, since no criteria establishing an “acceptable” gap have been articulated, the military will likely be under pressure to close the gap entirely, what-

²⁴See, for instance, Richard Kohn, “Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations,” *National Interest*, Spring 1994, pp. 3–17, and the responses to his essay in the following issue of that journal.

²⁵James Kitfield, “Standing Apart,” *National Journal*, June 13, 1998, pp. 1350–58. See also Thomas Ricks, “The Widening Gap Between the Military and Society,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1997, pp. 66–78.

²⁶See Congressman Ike Skelton, “Close the Gap between Military and Civilian America,” *Association of the United States Army News*, July 1996, p. 7.

²⁷Kitfield, “Standing Apart,” pp. 1355, 1357.

ever ruin this may visit on the culture, ethos, and value system that justify its existence.

A gap between civilian and military culture does exist. It always has and always will so long as American society remains as it has been since 1865: a relatively unthreatened polity focused almost exclusively on the “pursuit of happiness” while its military is responsible for acting outside America’s borders to preserve that basic condition.²⁸ The cultural gap between the two entities is not necessarily dangerous to American democracy in and of itself, but can and should exist so the military can accommodate both the society it protects and the battlefield on which it must perform. On the one hand, closing the gap for the sole sake of accommodating social imperatives can only betray the military’s ability to meet the uncompromising needs of its mission. On the other hand, the gap can become problematic for civil-military relations if the military swings in the other direction and answers solely to the battlefield without being cognizant of and responsive to the mores and values of society at large.

To many observers, the values and social mores of 1990s America—narcissistic, morally relativist, self-indulgent, hedonistic, consumerist, individualistic, victim-centered, nihilistic, and soft—seem hopelessly at odds with those of traditional military culture.²⁹ Critics ranging from Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to pollster Daniel Yankelovich have warned of what William Bennett calls a “palpable culture decline” and “marked shift in the public’s beliefs, attitudes, and priorities.”³⁰ Even Garry Trudeau’s characters in the comic strip *Doonesbury* poke fun at the nihilism of *Seinfeld*, saying the television show was “the last gasp of a self-centered, dysfunctional, arrested generation choking on the banal, irony-soaked detritus of its own popular culture . . . not that there’s anything wrong with that.”³¹

Clearly, American society today finds classic military values increasingly foreign. The Marine Corps instituted an extra week of recruit training focused on values precisely because the “raw

²⁸See Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995) for an interesting extrapolation of this phenomenon. As writer Ralph Peters has said, in the twenty-first century America is likely to be “fat, smart, and happy” while its soldiers police the fringes of its empire to keep the conflicts that have plagued Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East as far from public concern as possible (comment to conference audience, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., April 1998).

²⁹See especially Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint* (New York: Warner Books, 1993); and Robert Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

³⁰William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 9.

³¹Garry Trudeau, *Doonesbury*, Universal Press Synchronate, Apr. 29, 1998.

product” the corps was getting from society was of a different (read: lower) standard insofar as values were concerned.³² The gap is a recurring theme in the recent book *Making the Corps*, by conference panelist Thomas Ricks.³³ As Ricks notes throughout his story of Marine Corps basic training, the values of contemporary society are the opposite of those needed to succeed in the unequivocal business of war: “Parris Island is the first place many of them encounter absolute and impersonal standards of right and wrong, of success and failure.” The cultural juxtaposition of values in American society at large versus those in the Marine Corps manifests itself almost every day in the training of Ricks’s platoon. One drill instructor, a former gang member from Los Angeles, testifies that “the Marine Corps taught me values—not just words. Honor, courage, commitment. Fidelity. Integrity. Not just using them, but actually practicing them. Out in the civilian world, those words don’t even get mentioned. I’ll say, ‘Integrity,’ and they’ll say ‘What kind of shit you talking? You done got brainwashed in the Marine Corps.’”

Do these and similar vignettes prove an “unbridgeable cultural divide”? Ricks believes that in a democratic society it is dangerous for a professional military to differ sharply from the society it defends, since a military that holds civil society in contempt might cease to behave as its servant. Former assistant secretary of the army Sarah Lister publicly called the marines “extremists” for standing out so differently from society. But where Ricks intimates that it would be better for society to adopt some Marine Corps values, Lister clearly wants the marines to move toward civilian values.

Gap-closing, however, is a false game. We should accept the fact that military and society can coexist and complement each other despite different values. For, elite opinion and advocacy groups notwithstanding, the American people as a whole appreciate traditional military culture.³⁴ To the extent that there is a worrisome gap between civilian and military cultures, it is one of shared experience, understanding, and appreciation—especially among elite segments of American society and the military. The House of Representatives had 320 veterans in 1970, but fewer than 130 in 1994. Moreover, in 1997, for the first time ever, nei-

³²See John Hillen, “Teaching Values to Beavis and Butthead,” *Navy Times*, Dec. 15, 1997.

³³All of the following quotes are from Ricks, *Making the Corps*.

³⁴John Hillen, “They’ll Leave the Farm Once They’ve Seen Parris,” *American Enterprise*, May/June 1998, pp. 82–83.

ther the secretary of defense, the national security advisor, the secretary of state, nor any of their deputies had ever been in uniform.³⁵ As Senator Charles Robb noted, “with less interaction between the civilian and military cultures, we’re going to have progressively less understanding of one another.”³⁶ This gap is a function of demographics, strategy, defense spending, and military policy. Changes in any of those variables (such as the end of the draft in 1973 or the decline in post–Cold War defense spending) will profoundly affect the magnitude and nature of civil-military interaction. There certainly is a cultural gap, but it is not one of diametrically opposed values. Much as many other professional cultures differ from each other (imagine, for instance, lawyers and doctors), military culture will differ from that of society at large.

The Danger in Closing the Gap

There are, of course, profound dangers for civil-military relations if the military is so different from society that it holds itself above society and unaccountable to those it serves. The symptoms, pointed out by Richard Kohn and others, are disrespect and unresponsiveness on the part of the military to civilian leaders, elements that in other countries have led to military coups. No panelists felt there was a threat of that in America, however. More likely, the gap in shared experience, understanding, and appreciation could result at the political level in an “over or under propensity to use force, civilian operational meddling, inadequate support of the military, or the imposition of policies destructive of military culture.”³⁷ At the societal level, it could result in a sense among soldiers and civilians that they have separate fortunes, as when Prussian citizens in 1806 considered that the army, not Prussia, much less themselves, had been “defeated” by Napoleon, whereupon Prussian leaders recognized that a “gulf existed between the state machine and the . . . people.”³⁸ However, if the military socializes its culture at the expense of functional imperatives, it can fail in the most critical way—in war. Both the initial failure of American troops in Korea in 1950 and the sorry state of

the military in the mid-1970s have been traced in part to attempts by the military to mirror prevailing civilian culture too closely. Regarding the Korean debacle, which he blamed on the social imperatives behind the Doolittle reforms of 1945, historian T. R. Fehrenbach wrote that “in 1945, somehow confusing the plumbers with the men who pulled the chain, the public demanded that the Army be changed to conform with decent, liberal society.”³⁹ The changes did not appear to have detrimental effects on the U.S. military forces because “the troops looked good. Their appearance made the generals smile. What they lacked couldn’t be seen, not until the guns sounded.”

In the aftermath of the disaster, Fehrenbach angrily wrote that “liberal society, in its heart, wants not only domination of the military, but acquiescence of the military toward the liberal view of life. But acquiescence society may not have, if it wants an army worth a damn. . . . Society’s purpose is to live; the military’s is to stand ready, if need be, to die.” Similarly, attempts by the military in the mid-1970s to recruit an all-volunteer force from a society still nursing the counterculture and Vietnam syndrome led to a dramatic weakening of standards.⁴⁰ General Walter “Dutch” Kerwin was one who resisted, writing in the 1970s that “the values necessary to defend the society are often at odds with the values of the society itself. To be an effective servant of the people, the Army must concentrate not on the values of our liberal society, but on the hard values of the battlefield.” Kerwin made headway: the army dropped the accommodating “We Want the Army to Join YOU!” in favor of the challenge “Be All That You Can Be.” But today, several panelists think, American society has come full circle, displaying another identity crisis, while the military, facing recruiting and retention problems, is again trying hard to look like society. Political leaders of both parties press the military to “get with it” and conform to prevailing civilian values. Thus, the army, in its never-ending effort to sell itself in the absence of conscription, stresses such incentives as financial benefits, training, and job security, as if the army were a sort of high school with a salary and fresh air. Nevertheless, enlistments decline and the army is having to accept enlistees who would have been turned away five years ago. And thanks to the trend toward feminization, the army is losing Hispanic recruits to the Marine Corps, which alone satis-

³⁵VFW *Magazine*, Feb. 1997, p. 15. See also Mark Shields, “When Heroes Were Ordinary Men,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 3, 1998.

³⁶Kitfield, “Standing Apart,” p. 1354.

³⁷See Peter Feaver, “Officers as Citizens: Politically Insulated? Politically Diverse?” presentation to the McCormick Tribune Foundation’s Soldiers and Citizens Conference, Chicago, May 1, 1998.

³⁸See Gordon A. Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955).

³⁹T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: Korea, a Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 467.

⁴⁰See John Hillen, “The Military Culture Wars,” *Weekly Standard*, Jan. 12, 1998.

fies their pursuit of *machismo*.⁴¹ Indeed, the Marine Corps still sells itself not as a place to work, but as a place to grow in honor, courage, and commitment—values little taught or even respected in much of civilian society. Small wonder that Thomas Ricks found some new marines contemptuous of the society whence they came after meeting the uncompromised standards of boot camp. They had achieved genuine self-actualization, not the feel-good therapy of victimhood.

The perceived importance of answering to social imperatives often leads to the compromise of proven military standards. In those cases, as Mackubin Owens has suggested, “the danger to the republic does not arise from any military threat to liberal American society, but from the reverse: the civilianization of the U.S. military ethos.”⁴² One wonders whether the Marine Corps and the shrinking combat elements of the other services can hold out against the relentless onslaught of social-advocacy groups. And as Fehrenbach noted in his day, modern proponents of traditional military culture cannot even look with certainty to the Pentagon or Capitol Hill for allies.

Conclusion

Social and functional imperatives are often inherently contradictory. The civil culture of a liberal democracy pulls the military one way, while the hierarchy of values needed to succeed in the unnatural stresses of war pulls it another way. The gap between the military and American society varies according to the balance between these imperatives. Currently, many people think that the gap is too large and needs to be closed. I argue instead that the gap is a fact of life: it should not be closed, indeed it cannot be closed, but managed. Such management is difficult and takes political courage of a high order, especially in a liberal society during peacetime. Unfortunately, the peacetime “default solution,” the path of least resistance for the military, is just to abandon many tenets of its traditional culture and surrender to society at large. The result is that social imperatives are imposed at the expense of functional imperatives, introducing a possibly calamitous confusion between means and ends. If the purpose of having a military establishment in the first place is to promote cozy civil-military

relations, then military culture should be forcibly brought into line with civilian culture. If, however, the purpose of having a military is to provide for the common defense, then the military must nurture the unique culture developed for that purpose. “Different, but not separate” must be the slogan guiding an effort that keeps the military responsive to society without ruining its functionally unique culture. In the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, military sociologists such as Huntington, Janowitz, Finer, and others helped to delineate the boundaries that make for healthy relations between the military and society. But they were addressing the challenges of a large conscript army during the Cold War, a genuine national emergency. In the absence of up-to-date and reasoned criteria for maintaining healthy civil-military relations in a time of peace, we are confronted by the simple demand to “Close the gap!” Thus, Senator McCain has said, “It’s a fundamental principle that armed services can truly serve a democracy only if they are a reflection of that society and are impacted by the same social trends.”⁴³ But what exactly does that mean? If society is “slouching towards Gomorrah,” must the military slouch along with it? Should it go just part of the way—softening rigid codes of conduct but maintaining enough discipline and order to keep the problems that infect greater society at bay? It would be hard to imagine the ex-POW McCain approving of a military shaped by the same narcissism, relativism, and “culture of complaint” that social critics tell us characterize American society today. And yet Secretary of the Navy John Dalton said in July 1994 that “as American society changes, the Naval service changes with it. That’s not bad—that’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

The question policymakers should be asking is not “How can we close the gap?” but rather “What is the cost of closing the gap?” And the answer is that sooner or later the cost will be measured in the security and well-being of the *civilian* culture which the military is mustered to defend. The military cannot, of course, violate the legal imperatives that influence its culture—they are nonnegotiable. Likewise, the military dare not violate its functional imperatives lest it lose its country’s wars. Therefore, if contradictions exist among the various imperatives that shape military culture, it is the social ones that the brass must find the courage to “stiff-arm.” There are many today who insist that America fix the “gap” problem by abandoning the military’s functional and legal imperatives in order to accommodate societal pressures. But for

⁴³Kitfield, “Standing Apart,” p. 1357.

⁴¹Thomas E. Ricks, “Army Faces Recruiting Obstacle: Less Macho Image,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 1997.

⁴²Mackubin Thomas Owens, “American Society and the Military: Is There a Gap?” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 27, 1998.

AMERICA THE VULNERABLE

anyone with the least historical sensibilities, that notion is simply preposterous.