

The Big Dick School of American Patriotism

by Nan Levinson via jaxie - ICH *Wednesday, Mar 18 2015, 7:55am*

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Let's face it: we live in a state of pervasive national security anxiety. There are various possible responses to this low-grade fever that saps resolve, but first we have to face the basis for that anxiety -- what I've come to think of as the Big Dick School of Patriotism, or (since anything having to do with our present version of national security, even a critique of it, has to have an acronym) the BDSP.



The BDSP is based on a bedrock belief in how America should work: that the only strength that really matters is military and that a great country is one with the capacity to beat the bejesus out of everyone else. Think of it as a military version of *50 Shades of Grey*, with the same frisson of control and submission (for the American citizen) and the assumption that a good portion of the world is ripe to be bullied.

The BDSP is good citizenship conflated with JROTC, hosannas to sniper kills, the Pentagon's commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War -- what are we celebrating there anyway? -- Rudolph Giuliani pining for a president who loves America in Reaganesque fashion, and the organizers of South Boston's St. Patrick's Day, who wouldn't let the local chapter of Veterans For Peace march with their banners because, so the story goes, they didn't want the word "peace" associated with veterans.

Of course, the Big Dick School of Patriotism isn't new -- revolutionary roots, manifest destiny, history as the great pounding of hooves across the plain, and all that. Nor is it uniquely American, even if there is something culturally specific about our form of national hubris on steroids. Still, there have been times in our history when civilians -- some in power, some drawing strength from numbers -- have pushed back against the military and its mystique, or at least have demanded an accounting of its deeds. And of course, until the Cold War bled into 9/11, there was no national security state on the present gargantuan scale to deal with.

As he was leaving office, President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously warned against the overweening power of what he called "the military-industrial complex." As a senator, J. William Fulbright similarly warned of "the arrogance of [American] power" and used his Foreign Relations Committee chairmanship to challenge the Vietnam War -- whereupon Fred Friendly, president of CBS News, got

that network's executives to agree to preempt "Captain Kangaroo" and cover those hearings live.

On the populist side, there was General Smedley Butler, who campaigned against the military in his retirement, the Bonus Marchers of Great Depression Washington, and of course the massive antiwar resistance and remarkable insubordination of American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Similarly, some soldiers from the all-volunteer force of our era worked to undermine the U.S. occupation of Iraq in various (though far less pervasive) ways, including conducting "search and avoid missions" in which they would park, hang out, and falsely report that they were searching for weapons caches.

These days, no one in America directly takes on the military. Not the president, who just requested \$534 billion for the new Pentagon budget, plus an additional \$51 billion for supplemental war funding. Not Congress, where the range of debate over an "authorization" of war in Iraq and Syria goes from "hawks," who want assurances that we'll blow ISIS to oblivion by any means, to "doves," who want assurances that there will be no "boots on the ground" while we blow ISIS into oblivion. Certainly not the courts, which, among other things, have consistently refused to let military objectors invoke their right to disobey illegal orders. And not American citizens who are now well trained to spend their time thanking their all-volunteer warriors for their sacrifices before turning back to the business of everyday life.

It seems to matter little to anyone that, since 9/11, what is supposed to be the greatest fighting force in the world has been stymied by modestly armed insurgencies -- in response to which we keep buying our military yet newer props like the wildly overpriced, over-touted, and underachieving F-35 fighter plane, and sending them back to clean up the very messes they helped produce not so long before. There never seem to be any consequences to this repetitive course of action. Well, none if you don't count the squandering of whatever political capital this country had after 9/11, or the way a million or so veterans injured in Iraq and Afghanistan will require costly care for the rest of their lives, or the billions spent on war rather than the environment, infrastructure, education, or [fill in your favorite civic need here].

Okay, it's true that a tiny crew of largely overlooked politicians like Jim McGovern of Massachusetts and Barbara Lee of California did try to limit war funding; that Obama did finally resist calls for invading Syria (before he began bombing it); and that the Supreme Court did rule that the Stolen Valor Act of 2005, which criminalized lying about military awards, was unconstitutional.

But how much attention gets paid to all that? Massively less than to the glories of American Sniper. Or to Commander-in-Chief Obama reassuring soldiers that, regardless of race, creed, class, religion, or whom we choose to love, "when it comes to our troops, when it comes to you and your families, as Americans we stand united. We are proud of you. We support you. And we can never thank you enough."

And why would anyone with political ambitions claim otherwise when there's no gain, no glory in it? After all, the American public may be weary of war, but a widely-cited annual poll found a majority of them in favor of taking on ISIS, even if it embroils us in a big-dick war in Syria.

Making the Military into a Clique

So what gives? How do you explain an America in which, despite the disastrous record of the U.S. military these last 13 years and the growth of extremist Islamic groups in the same period, there is essentially no pushback in this country. One obvious answer is that it's easy to keep valorizing the military when you have nothing to do with it. That big, busy, well-funded world-unto-itself currently includes less than 1% of the population. Add in their families and the civilians who work on or near

military bases (or in the Pentagon) and, as a rough estimate, perhaps you have something in the vicinity of 5% of Americans who interact with the military on a regular basis. For the other 95% or so, the rest of us, what that military does, especially in distant lands, is just a blip on the busy-busy screen of our consciousness. Yet the further we get from the military, the more beguiled we are by it.

It helps, of course, that young Americans don't have to worry about being drafted against their wishes. The last citizen was drafted in 1973 and, despite calls in these years for the reinstatement of conscription, no one in the BDSP seems in any hurry to do so. "One lesson learned from Vietnam," the father of a Marine told me, "is if you're going to start a war, don't even pretend to threaten the sons and daughters of the upper middle class and the rich."

It isn't just the absence of threat that distances the public from American war making, however. It's also the inbred nature of the military itself. In the Vietnam years, when about one-third of the troops who fought were conscripts, all soldiers spent a year "in-country." This meant individuals rotated in and out of the war zone at different times rather than as intact units, and soldiers circulated back into civil society regularly. This was certainly good for civil society -- we heard about the war directly from the people fighting it -- but it wasn't so great for the armed forces.

So when the change came to an all-volunteer service, the military made a point of training and deploying units together to increase cohesion. And cohere they do, from a long, grueling period of training and indoctrination through an all-encompassing military world in which you live, work, and play with the same people 24/7 to the secret handshake of shared jargon and experience that is meant to bond you for life.

Not coincidentally, this makes dissent within the military ever less likely. A number of soldiers and marines have told me over the years that they deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan with their units despite misgivings about the wars they were to fight because, if they hadn't, someone else -- usually someone they knew -- would have had to go in their stead. The result of all this cohesion is the sort of cliquishness that would make a 13-year-old whispering in a school cafeteria blush. I'd guess that it also makes politicians who aren't fully enrolled members of the BDSP leery of challenging the military on what may be matters of life and death. It certainly leaves the citizenry in that position.

Yet separate from us as those soldiers may be, they're still our troops, our movie heroes, and (I suspect) our source of guilt, because they fought our wars while we were otherwise engaged. Contemporary war may be sanitized for the American public and no longer televised Vietnam-style, but all that shaking of our heroes' hands and wringing of our own hands about their victimization comes out of some sense of responsibility sloughed off.

The Personnel Is Political

A draft would certainly make a difference in this increasingly strange civilian-soldier nexus, but its absence is hardly the only reason that Americans now hold our armed forces sacrosanct in a way that once would have seemed foreign indeed. For starters, the military functions as a powerful lobby in Washington, which is increasingly effective when it comes to reinforcing a hands-off approach to its affairs and blocking outside scrutiny. Take, for example, the Military Justice Improvement Act of 2013. It would have moved prosecution of felony-level sexual assault cases from the military chain of command, which controls most aspects of an enlistee's life, to independent military prosecutors. Trust us, insisted the top brass, we can police ourselves, never mind that one in five servicewomen reported unwanted sexual contact and 25% of them said the offender was someone in their chain of command. The bill fell to a filibuster in the Senate last year.

One strategy the military employs in dealing with Congress is something called “jointness.” It’s a relatively recent coinage for cross-service cooperation in research, planning, procurement, and operations. While it’s focused on increasing operational flexibility and efficiency among branches of the military, it’s also meant to heighten intra-service collaboration when it comes to lobbying for funding. (The stratagem of awarding lucrative contracts in key congressional districts of both parties doesn’t hurt either.)

Although the Pentagon’s budget has decreased in recent years, that follows enormous growth in the post-9/11 decade -- as much as 40% in real terms between 2001 and 2012. The administration’s new budget request is supposed to take into account the end of two costly wars, yet it still exceeds the \$499 billion cap called for by sequestration, and that base budget is only part of what we’re spending overall on American war-making.

When you’re a hammer, the saying goes, everything looks like a nail. And when more than half of the federal discretionary budget goes to the military, every international problem looks like a job for them. According to the National Security Strategy report the White House released in February, “Any successful strategy to ensure the safety of the American people and advance our national security interests must begin with an undeniable truth -- America must lead.” And who will be, as they say, at the tip of the spear? “Our military is postured globally to protect our citizens and interests, preserve regional stability, render humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and build the capacity of our partners to join with us in meeting security challenges.”

In other words, one attitude that increasingly grips this country is that, if it’s going to be done at all, it’s probably going to be done by the military. It has been sold to us as the best, maybe the only functioning part of the government. Not surprisingly, then, the most recent annual Gallup poll found that almost three-quarters of those surveyed had “quite a lot” or a “great deal” of confidence in the military. Since 2001, that public confidence has never fallen below 66%.

In touting “Toward the Sounds of Chaos,” its most recent recruiting campaign for the Marines, ad agency J. Walter Thompson claims that enlistment “provides an opportunity to face down everything from traditional warfare to the natural disasters that necessitate highly organized humanitarian assistance.” This spreading send-in-the-Marines mentality -- one form of the post-9/11 BDSP way of life -- keeps us from a reasonable assessment of the best uses of our military forces.

Last fall, for instance, President Obama dispatched about 3,000 Army personnel to Liberia to build and staff treatment facilities for Ebola patients. Once upon a time, the U.S. was quite capable of mounting a genuine civilian humanitarian relief mission. Now, if you’ve got thousands of physically able workers on the payroll with a job description that includes risk, I suppose that deploying them to a disease zone makes sense. Still, if you needed hospitals built and staffed, wouldn’t it make more sense to send in civilian builders, nurses, and doctors?

Be Afraid, Very Afraid

In truth, the Big Dick School of Patriotism is invested in keeping only one “branch” of government functional: the U.S. military and the national security state that goes with it, even as it trumpets constant terrors and threats this country must face.

The National Security Strategy lists terrorism, cyber-vulnerability, climate change, and infectious diseases as rising threats to global security. That’s a frightening enough quartet and hardly a complete list of actual dangers. Amid them, our headlines fill regularly with “threats” that are nightmarish, but soon dissolve like bad dreams in the morning light. The latest, from a video by the

Somali terrorist organization al-Shabab, was to the Mall of America in Minnesota and, farfetched as it was, the media and the political class ran with it. I found the Mall of America pretty scary on a regular shopping day, but such endless threats and the hysteria that surrounds them do make our self-protective instincts kick in. Jeh Johnson, the head of Homeland Security, even warned mall-goers to be particularly careful because, he said, "it's the environment we're in, frankly."

Is it? It's increasingly hard to tell in BDSP America. Fear can be a useful political tool because people who believe they're surrounded by enemies are primed to accept almost anything. When you feel you're losing control, the response is often to try to get more control, which is part of the appeal of the BDSP crew, with their exaltation of swarms of people in uniforms equipped with tanks and guns.

When that swarm is reputedly the best trained, most effective military since the Roman Legions exited the planet, that ought to be a lot of control. Except, of course, that it isn't. Or tell me that things don't seem more out of control now than 13 years ago, after calamity rained from the sky and the BDSP types whooshed in to save us all.

The eternal emphasis on militarism, even when it's portrayed as triumphalism, has the effect of ratcheting up anxiety. Security is one of the basic things a government owes its citizens, but security is both a state of being and a state of mind. If security is always at issue, how can we ever feel safe?

In the end, maybe the Big Dick School of Patriotism comes down to this: we embrace the idea of an all-powerful military because at a time when the world seems such a fragile and hostile place, if even our military won't keep us safe, who will?

Unless there just might be a better way to go through the world than by carrying a big dick?

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