

Better Citizens

After making Marines and winning battles

by Maj James M. Stephens

The *Armed Forces Officer* recognizes that military values will not always be congruent with civilian values. Such incongruence does not necessarily translate to incompatibility between the service member and the civilian provided that the service member can uphold civilian values without ascribing to them. Values congruence obviously cannot be expected given the hazardous parameters the military operates in and which necessitates them. What is not addressed is how the military should respond to a policy set down by civilian leadership enforcing unsound and unethical values that put our Marines needlessly at risk.

My challenge to the Marine Corps' conventional wisdom is this: It is an unacknowledged assumption that our civilian government will always be a rational and ethical actor that will behave with the best interest of the Marine Corps in mind. How can Marine Corps leadership, in the interest of both mission accomplishment and troop welfare, protect its most junior members from the strategic blunders of an ignorant, unethical, or immoral civilian government? The answer is quite simple: they cannot. By the time it is recognized, it is too late. Classical history provides us examples of the potentially painful confluence of military and civilian power plays. Cicero tragically learned in the last days of the Roman Republic that one good citizen is not enough to stop tyranny—even if that citizen is one of the finest orators western civilization has ever produced. It was the Athenian soldiers and sailors on the front lines of the Peloponnesian War who paid the price of Athenian political discordance that increasingly came to resemble a mob as the war dragged on. The only safeguard against these dangers is an

“For all the reasons given above, the military must maintain a set of values that are critical to its ability to perform the services the requires of it. Yet, at some times, those very military values might not coexist well with the values of the larger civilian society the armed forces serve.”

—The Armed Forces Officer

“The first duty imposed on those who now direct society is to educate democracy; to put, if possible, new life into its belief, to purify its mores; to control its actions; gradually to substitute understanding of statecraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its true interests for blind instincts; to adapt government to the needs of time and place; to modify it as men and circumstance require.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville

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actively engaged citizen population who are capable of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice in equal parts, fundamental ingredients to good citizens, and a comprehension of the uses of military power. The best the Marine Corps can do is foster the creation of good citizens through engagement and education as a kind of preventative

maintenance and hope it is enough to make the difference. The Marine Corps (and by extension the DOD) needs to look forward to the next generation of citizens who will represent the meanest recruit to the Joint Chiefs in the coming decades.

Currently, there appears to be a serious division between the armed services and the civilian population we protect on both a moral and technical level. Service members frequently live in a bubble as military bases are inaccessible to the general population and provide complete, comfortable societies to those inside, particularly when compared to

the areas surrounding them. Building fortresses in the middle of cities in the name of security is not a way to win the hearts and minds of a population. The Marine Corps should look at engaging every level of civilian education, such as expanding efforts in junior ROTC to sending our best and brightest to universities as educators, not just students. These programs will not provide overnight results because they are long-term investments. These outreach programs cannot be reduced to annual training requirements that involve a check in the box activity for commands who continually find themselves with less and less time each year to train to their own standards. These efforts need to be organized at the grass-root level with service members who have a vested interest in improving their communities.

Despite nearly two decades of conflict across the globe, public knowledge of the military remains embarrassingly low—being largely ignorant of the challenges experienced by deployed service members because it is so far away from their daily life. Google’s canceling of its contract with Project Maven in 2018 vividly illustrates how disconnected our population is from the reality of national security. It is a bad faith fallacy to assume the worst about the employees who signed the petition for Google to end the contract. They are American citizens who believe they are making the morally correct decision; unfortunately, that decision is made of faulty assumptions and naivety, not malice.

In Fiscal Year 2016, the U.S. Government allotted \$534 billion to the DOD while only \$68 billion to the Department of Education. We need to reorganize our priorities about what will contribute to our strategic success. The military needs a citizenry and civilian leadership who have the knowledge and understanding of what the military requires for success. Technology changes, but what makes a good citizen and statesmen never will.¹

In the article, “A Professional Military Education for Congress,” the author details the substantial gap between professional education available to the armed forces and civil servants in the U.S. Government. While military of-

ficers have a congressionally mandated professional curriculum, civilian leadership has no such requirement. The upper echelon of the military is expected to be educated in policy, but the policymakers are not expected to be educated in the military. Veterans are increasingly becoming scarce in Congress, “as congressional rates of military service have declined in parallel with the general population. Less than 20 percent of congressional members are veterans, but as recently as 1990 nearly 60 percent of Congress had a stint in uniform.” This should not come as a surprise; military experience should not be a requirement for civil service and

We need a nation of critical thinkers who are capable of thinking beyond polemic rhetoric, which has increasingly defined our political discussions and is resulting in a short-sighted naivete. Civic responsibility is a requirement for a republic’s survival.

Georges Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister during the First World War, once quipped, “War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men,” there is tremendous wisdom despite frequently being reduced to a pithy quip. Wars rarely have the common courtesy of having marked finish lines, unlike crusades which have clear and moral objectives. While the United States has



The Corps has an implicit responsibility to return better citizens to American society. Future Marines are sworn in at Marine Corps Recruiting Station Montgomery, AL. (Photo by Sgt Shannon Doherty.)

long gone are days of ubiquitous service in times of conflict. This makes it even more important to engage and educate Congress.²

We as military professionals have valuable skill sets that we can impart to the public. Organizing violence only represents a fraction of the military professional skill set. Our responsibility as professionals is ultimately to the society we live in. We must seek to educate the civilian population on how we serve as an instrument of policy, our limitations, and what we need for success in conflict, both technically and morally.

had its share of crusades since its inception, the Civil War and World War II, the conflicts in Vietnam, Korea, and Afghanistan were less well-marked—they are not board games to be packed up when completed. Our vision as military professionals must remain narrow because we should not be the ones making foreign policy decisions, a conscious decision by the founders. Instead, we need to help in the maturation of policymakers who will be both capable of forming achievable goals in the best interest of the country and thus the Marine Corps. While the Marine

Corps has shown time again it can win the battle, it is the civilian leadership that must win the peace.

Finally, we serve at the convenience of the population and must be ready to conform to the values that they wish to impress upon no matter how idealistic or faddish those values may be. The Marine Corps has been extraordinarily blessed as an institution for having a population that has allowed us to ground our values in such transcendental concepts. By fostering an engaged citizenry, we will be able to carry those values forward. We need our civilian populations to recognize that if they change our values, they will fundamentally change us. Our values must never be reduced to a mantra, where they can be warped into a twisted shadow of what they used to represent but must engross the understanding of each Marine.

We must look to the future with the stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, recognizing what we can and cannot control. One

day this grand experiment will fail. Attempts to “save” the country in the manner of Julius Caesar, marching across the Rubicon on Rome to end a corrupt, ineffective, and stagnant republic and replace it with a competent, energetic leader, would irrevocably destroy the tenants of the Constitution that have been sworn to uphold. While we are nowhere near the dysfunction of the late Roman Republic, the Gracchi Brothers would certainly recognize some parallels. The desire to create and sustain a utopia is one of the most certain means to bring about its end. Short of eliminating the evils of free will, the government will always be a human institution that is fundamentally flawed. We are not automatons and should not pretend to be. The armed forces of republics have always been a mercy of mercurial political winds; we are not the ship of state, but we are a division within it. We cannot stop the storm, nor can we singlehandedly save the ship. We can

increase our probabilities of survival by ensuring our own integrity and by infecting the rest of the crew with our competence and ideals.

Notes

1. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense Chief Financial Officer, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request: Overview: February 2015*, (Washington, DC: February 2015).

2. Jules Hurst and Sam Stowers, “A Professional Military Education for Congress,” *RealClear Defense*, (August 2017), available at <https://www.realcleardefense.com>; and Leo Shane III, “Veterans in the 116th Congress, by the Numbers,” *Military Times*, (November 2018), available at <https://www.militarytimes.com>.

