Protecting, Not Just Reflecting, Society

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Army Staff Sgt. Michael Romero, a member of Joint Task Force Guantanamo, proudly shows off his tattoos 29 April 2015. Romero was shocked when he heard of the Army's restrictive 2014 policy regarding tattoos and was relieved after its repeal in early April 2015. As the authors note, senior military leadership must consider the consequences on military effectiveness of shifting societal trends such as the popularity of tattoos when deciding on policies that will conform to or diverge from those trends. (Photo illustration by Sgt. Adrian Borunda, U.S. Army)

Samuel Huntington, in his classic book *The Soldier and the State,* observed that the American military institution is shaped by two forces: "a functional imperative stemming from the threats to the society's security and a societal imperative arising from the social forces, ideologies, and institutions dominant within the society."[1] The interaction of the two imperatives—national security and societal alignment—produces a tension in the military profession as it navigates between the two obligations. On one hand, a military—especially an all-volunteer military—should resemble the society it serves. As Sen. John McCain once noted, "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."[2] On the other hand, the adoption of societal trends, mores, or attitudes must be evaluated against the functional imperative of national security. As McCain stated in March 2017, "We also know that challenges we see in our military often reflect similar challenges confronting broader society … We know that those who serve in the profession of arms must be held to a higher standard … It is a matter of military effectiveness."[3]

Thus, before the military can accommodate an emerging social trend or shift in societal attitudes, any consequences on military effectiveness must be analyzed and examined. Assessing the potential impact of societal influences is a burden borne by the stewards of the profession—the uniformed senior military leaders. It is their responsibility to evaluate and debate the issues before conforming to (e.g., tattoos) or diverging from (e.g., legalization of marijuana) shifts in societal practices or perspectives. Of course, actively monitoring the military's assimilation of societal trends and attitudes

against the backdrop of the functional imperative is often easier said than done. Some trends pass into the military unseen by senior policy makers who are more focused on fighting wars or acquiring bigger budgets.

The Marines United scandal, for example, revealed how the dark practices of revenge porn and nude photo sharing could quietly permeate the profession's boundaries without notice.[4] On other occasions, senior leaders may acquiesce to arguments and positions promoted by external advocacy groups, think tanks, or academic and political elites. For example, one of the contributors to the recent demise of the U.S. Army's Human Terrain System (HTS) was the American Anthropological Association whose leaders concluded, "In the context of a war that is widely recognized as a denial of human rights and based on faulty intelligence and undemocratic principles, the Executive Board sees the HTS project as a problematic application of anthropological expertise."[5]

For other societal influences, debate within the profession may be muted because of concerns of appearing moralistic or out of step with society. For example, although the number of American adults in cohabitating relationships has climbed to eighteen million—a 29 percent increase since 2007—analyzing the implications on military (and family) readiness can be potentially awkward.[6] Senior leaders may be reluctant to discuss the negative consequences of cohabitation at the risk of coming across as judgmental to the two-thirds of Americans who view living together without any promise of eventual marriage as perfectly acceptable.[7]

The following paragraphs introduce six societal trends or ideologies that are currently pushing against the boundaries of the military profession. Regardless if originating from the left, right, or middle of the political spectrum, these societal influences require thoughtful analysis and discussion at the senior leader level. Their potential impact on readiness must be recognized and examined despite pressures from external interest groups or a predominant public perception.

Personal Privacy

Americans value their privacy. With revelations of potential monitoring by entities ranging from the National Security Agency to our bedroom television sets, it is not surprising that 93 percent of Americans think it is important to be in control of who can get

information about them. Or, that 79 percent believe it is important to not be asked highly personal questions in social or work settings.[8] Of course, as America's expectations for privacy have increased, the military has slowly followed suit. Although few join the military because of a desire for more privacy, personal privacy in the military context has become expected and embraced. Open-bay barracks and rows of stall-less toilets have rightfully given way to private rooms and semiprivate baths. The subtle impact of influences such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) privacy rules, the wide acceptance of participation in after-hours social media outlets, and even the "my personal life is my own business" arguments behind the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" have accentuated the separation between the work and personal spheres of life.

But, the military is an intensely personal profession. The military cannot ignore the privacy expectations brought in by its members, but it needs to intervene when those expectations affect readiness—especially when good order and discipline are threatened. Declaring aspects of personal lives as off-limits can lead to consequences as extreme as discounting the warning signs of a mass shooting to the more subtle erosion of the breadth of command responsibility that leaders accept for those in their charge.

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Sgt. Adrian Rattigan, a native of Jamaica assigned to Lightning Troop, 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, and an infantryman in Battle Group Poland conducts an interview with Polish media 30 January 2018 after a NATO live-fire exercise near Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland. As the authors of this article note, military interaction with the media helps build bridges between society and the government that serves it and must be rationally considered by military leadership. (Photo by Capt. Gary Loten-Beckford, 22nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, U.S. Army)

The military is a unique institution whose leaders personally promote and safeguard the well-being and welfare of its members—regardless of an on- or off-duty status. The societal trend toward more privacy must be moderated by the more pressing requirement to maintain a safe and ready force.

The Media

Society's trust in the media has dropped to a new low with only 32 percent of Americans saying they have a great deal or a fair amount of trust in the media.[9] Meanwhile, nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the mainstream media is full of fake news. By party affiliation, that number breaks down to 80 percent of Republicans, 60 percent of independents, and 53 percent of Democrats.[10] Take that societal skepticism, overlay it on the longstanding military-media divide, add in the infamous *Rolling Stone* piece that brought down Gen. Stanley McChrystal, and it is no wonder that many military senior leaders view the media suspiciously.

But while the media may not be the most ardent fans of the military, they are also not the enemies of the military. Instead, as Defense Secretary James Mattis—who reported having his own "rather contentious times" with the media—noted, the press should be viewed as a constituency that must be dealt with.[11] A military serving a democracy cannot allow increasing societal disdain for the press to prejudice its relationship with the media. Although the military-media relationship is an uneasy one, mission accomplishment is often tied to getting the military's story out to taxpayers, Congress, family members, allies, enemies, or the military itself. Access to those audiences—despite prevailing societal attitudes—continues to be provided largely by the mainstream media. Perceiving the media as enemies isolates the military and works against the military's functional imperative.

Diversity

Diversity is now considered a touchstone of a flourishing society or a successful organization. A majority of Americans (64 percent) believe that growing racial and ethnic diversity is making the United States a better place to live.[12] Furthermore, 69 percent of corporate executives view diversity and inclusion as important business issues.[13] The wide impact of diversity has been documented in research ranging from findings that socially diverse groups tend to be more innovative to the curious conclusion that journal articles written by ethnically diverse coauthors have a greater contribution to science (e.g., Wong and Gerras).[14] Despite the seemingly universal veneration of diversity, however, empirical studies are actually ambivalent concerning the benefits of diversity to the organization. Organizational researchers are hard pressed to find any direct effects—either positive or negative—of diversity on performance.[15] Researchers suggest that this is because context is critical in determining diversity's influence on performance.

For the military, the context determining the impact of diversity is the functional imperative—the unrelenting requirement for military effectiveness. Diversity must be viewed through the lens of standards and readiness. Unfortunately, in today's environment, such talk is frowned upon. When a Google

The endemic inefficiency of the burgeoning defense bureaucracy is a hindrance to readiness as it siphons off dollars intended for the war fight. Reform, however, is a delicate proposition as politicians are wary of endangering jobs and revenue while uniformed leaders are cautious of tales of excess and waste jeopardizing

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engineer wrote a politically incorrect memo questioning the company's plan to increase diversity, he was silenced by Google, excoriated by diversity advocates, and eventually fired.[16] The military cannot follow suit. It must maintain its ability to impartially discuss, analyze, and evaluate the impact of sex, race, sexuality, and other areas of diversity on readiness. Military effectiveness, not diversity for diversity's sake, remains the preeminent objective.

Defense Spending

For the past decade, societal support has been gradually trending upward for increases in defense spending. In 2007, only 20 percent of Americans believed the country was spending too little on national defense while 43 percent thought we were spending too much. In 2017, the tide has shifted. Today, 37 percent of Americans believe we are not spending enough on defense while 31 percent think we are spending too much.[17] Opinion polls also show that of those who say they would support increased federal spending on military defense, 71 percent are Republicans and 31 percent are Democrats.[18] The shift in societal support signals the near certainty that increased defense spending will be a top priority in the not so distant future.

While additional funding is needed by a U.S. military facing an unpredictable and lethal world situation, the efficacy of any increase will be tempered by the "institutional constipation" of the "adversary … closer to home"—the bloated defense bureaucracy.[19] Senior military leaders cannot allow increased societal support for loosening the defense funding spigot to obviate much needed efforts in organizational and process reform.

proposed spending increases. Nevertheless, increased defense spending encouraged by growing societal support must be accompanied by redoubled efforts to reduce redundancies and eliminate inefficiencies.

Sanitizing Life

Researchers exploring rising asthma rates recently made a startling discovery. Although Amish and Hutterite farming communities share very similar genetic ancestry, simple lifestyles, customs, and diet, asthma in Amish children is only one-fourth the rate of Hutterite children. Why the difference? The Amish live in single-family dairy farms relying on horses for fieldwork and transportation. The Hutterites live in communities miles away from their livestock and use modern farm machinery. Scientists found that the air in Amish homes, due to the proximity of livestock, contains nearly six times more microbial products. The Amish dust stimulates the children's innate immune systems protecting them from asthma and allergies.[20] The research supports the hygiene hypothesis suggesting that early exposure to germs toughens kids up for later in life.[21]

The takeaway here, however, is not about asthma or the Amish. It is about the tendency of American society to sterilize the world of our young people depriving them of the ability to develop resilience for the future. In the zeal to rid the planet of bullying and microaggressions, we have Bubble Wrapped our youth with trigger warnings and safe spaces. The military, however, must prepare its members for the brutal, not-so-nice reality that war is grimy, ruthless, unfair, and callous. And, our soldiers are best prepared for that reality with small doses of

unpleasantness and challenge rather than a sanitized environment devoid of hardship and hurt feelings. This is not an endorsement of hazing or toxic leadership but instead a cautionary observation of a disquieting societal trend.

Climate Change

According to recent polls, a substantial majority (70 percent) of Americans believe global warming is happening.[22] The importance and implications of climate change, however, are not so agreed upon. Two-thirds, or 66 percent, of Democrats say they worry about global warming a great deal, compared to only 18 percent of Republicans. Despite their concern about climate change, however, a surprising 41 percent of Democrats do not see global warming as a threat to them or their way of life during their lifetime. Likewise, the Republican camp is split with 40 percent believing that global warming is more the result of pollution by humans and 57 percent believing that natural changes in the environment are the cause.[23]

Of course, the military must steer clear of the partisan atmosphere surrounding this issue. Even using the terms "global warming" or "climate change" can tread dangerously close to a deadly political minefield. But, that does not mean that the military should ignore the threats of rising sea levels, melting Arctic ice, water scarcity, or severe weather events. The military is unparalleled in contingency planning and preparation. So despite societal indecisiveness on the causes and consequences of climate change, the military must be proactive in addressing the national security implications of changing weather patterns across the world.

These six trends are just a sampling of the many aspects of American society that surround and potentially affect the military institution. Other societal influences such as shifting attitudes concerning gun rights, gender identity, immigration, and religious freedom are also passing through the collective consciousness of the profession. Senior military leaders in their role as stewards of the profession must deliberately initiate discussion, debate, and analysis of each trend against the standard of national security. The military is and should remain a microcosm of the larger American society, but the functional imperative of safeguarding the autonomy, prosperity, and well-being of the Republic is paramount. ■

The views in this article are the authors' and do not represent those of the U.S. Army War College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

Notes

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