

Warriors, the Army Ethos, and the Sacred Trust of Soldiers
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There are well-dressed foolish ideas just as there are well-dressed fools. –Sebastien-Roch Nicolas De Chamfort

As a discursive factor in current information operations, the Army's formal use of the term "warrior" for its Soldiers may be practically and morally counterproductive.¹ Nowadays words matter more than ever. This discussion explores the psychological implications of using "warrior" when we mean "soldier" and why those implications can be important for current and future contingency operations.

Historically—and therefore discursively—the ethos of a warrior is frequently and connotatively contradictory to that of a soldier (especially that of the "professional soldier") in important ways that matter now. The Army's "Soldier's Creed/Warrior Ethos" conflates the denotative terms "warrior" and "soldier" and entangles their identifying traits at the expense of connotation. An

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important historical example can help with understanding why the ostensibly honorific "warrior ethos" may now be a liability. The Battle of the Metaurus River, though largely unknown except to historians, was one of history's most important and telling military events. As an example that demonstrates the difference between "warriors" and "soldiers" (in a war that shaped the way the two words have come down to us), this battle can help to illustrate my point.

At the height of the Second Punic War, in 207 BCE, Hasdrubal Barca invaded Italy with reinforcements for Hannibal's army, which had dominated the peninsula for 11 years. At the Metaurus, two Roman forces combined to check Hasdrubal, and he met his death in the midst of a Roman cohort before reaching his brother. His army—composed mostly of Celtic warriors and veteran Ligurian, Iberian, and African soldiers—lost a pitched battle against a disciplined Roman citizen-army, many of whose soldiers had force-marched into position just before the fight.

Hasdrubal's loss was a major turning point that prevented Hannibal from obtaining the reserves he needed to assault Rome and topple it before it had a chance at empire. As I discuss later, the *soldiers* in this battle behaved differently than the *warriors* did, effectively drawing a

graphic distinction between the two words for the remainder of Western history.

The Warrior's Spirit

Achilles and Hector were Western warriors in what we call the Homeric age. Today "warrior" evokes Homeric imagery and has these heroic connotations, which is probably why the Army employs the expression. Over the last decade, the term's antique patina has come into vogue along with a rage for all things fashionably retrograde, but unfortunately all the word's connotations accompany it. Many will insist "warrior" is simply another honorable, albeit florid name for a well-trained and motivated soldier. This understanding neglects the word's historical and literary provenance and tries to make a modern meaning for "warrior" with only the good half of its implications.

Historically, the name "warrior" has connoted an advocate of war, one not only skilled but also bloody-minded and primitive ("ancient and medieval") who fights for his own glorification, indulgence, and even visceral satisfaction.² To possess a

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warrior spirit is to be indomitable and courageous, but in literature and history, "warrior" also suggests an unreliable, undisciplined, self-regarding person with a noisy zeal for war and action. Importantly, the term carries associations about love of the fight itself. As J. Glenn Gray says in his timeless classic, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*—

When soldiers step over the line that separates self-defense from fighting for its own sake, as it is so easy for them to do, they experience something that stirs deep chords in their being. The soldier-killer is learning to serve a different deity, and his concern is with death and not life, destruction and not construction.³

Gray's "soldier-killer" thus suggests a refraction of the archetypal warrior as an ecstatically self-regarding person. As Gray indicates, transforming from soldier to warrior—in this sense—is "easy." It requires little encouragement. Human nature already contains the impulse to *destroy* like a warrior. People have evolved to like violence.

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Soldiers from Alexander to Robert E. Lee have recognized this latent potential for enjoying war's violence ecstatically. Lee's famous self-conscious observation to Longstreet—"It is well that war is so terrible: we would grow too fond of it."—illustrates this propensity.⁴

Gray further observes, "The satisfaction in destroying seems to me particularly human, or, more exactly put, devilish in a way animals never can be." Unleashing ecstatic soldier-killers, Shakespeare's "dogs of war," suggests opening a Pandora's Box of untrammelled *impulsiveness* that Gray calls both "totalitarian and exclusive." Gray describes how he witnessed a group of officers who shot at people's property simply to continue the destruction after a battle. He remarks on his feelings of shame seeing Americans impulsively revel in vandalizing the town while their wounded "still lay on the field."⁵ They acted like real Vandals, the Germanic warriors who sacked Roman cities after battle. The Vandal's self-indulgence in destruction hints at the ecstatic appeal found in the romanticized literature of the warrior-adventurer. The historical and literary warrior image most often represents this all-too-common impulsiveness, which is rarely anything but "totalitarian and exclusive."

Warrior impulsiveness frequently leads to actions much worse than vandalism. As Gray points out, the warrior's lust for destruction brings eros to the fore, and they resonate together.⁶ In myth and legend, the warrior knight revels in both combat and sexual gratification. Love stories of chivalric myth concern archetypical knights in lust, fighting not only to destroy but also to satisfy sublimated urges. Jason, Achilles, Odysseus, Lancelot, Tristan, Musashi, and Rustam—to name only a few—were sexual warrior-adventurers in this way. Two well-known Western examples serve here, Achilles and Lancelot. Achilles sows destructive rancor among the Greeks because of his rivalry with Agamemnon over the girl Briseis, the sexual spoils of war. He is prone to impulsive rage, and commits the most notorious war crime in all of literature, the desecration of Hector's body. He is a warrior but not a soldier. The Arthurian Lancelot goes berserk as a killer—often to the point of fratricide—and indulges his impulse as an illicit lover with the queen. Notorious for his sense of disdain for collateral damage in battle and love, Lancelot views with contempt the inconveniences of having noncombatants in the battlespace. He too is a warrior but not a soldier. Of these two most prominent Western examples, the case of Achilles is more germane because it involves the rape of

Briseis. As is well known, rape and death perennially accompany each other in war.

This darker reality, the warrior as killer and rapist, represents archetypal behavior that the Army surely does not want to evoke. Yet we persist, with (actual) poetic "warrior"-inspired names such as "Task Force Conqueror," "Crusader Company," and the like, and this naming happens in an environment in which we claim to take information operations seriously. Conquerors in history raped; Crusaders in history raped. Rape of the people and rape of the land were the main motivations for conquest.

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Warriors versus Soldiers in Culture and History

Historically, in the West, the paradigmatic warrior was a barbarian akin to the tribal and heroic Celts at the Metaurus River. The magnificent Celts gloried in Homeric combat at the expense of organization and discipline. Their chieftains frequently challenged Roman consuls to single combat, like an army of one. History has thus informed popular culture. It has given "warrior" its distinction implying an *individual*, whether in a group or alone. Movies like *Gladiator* illustrate this ethos. The individualistic

heroic spirit the character Maximus displays as a gladiator in the film is of course how our Army conceives of the term "warrior" for its Soldiers (i.e., "an Army of one"). Yet, tellingly, Rome honors the dead Maximus not as a warrior but as a "soldier of Rome." He is thus explicitly not honored for his individualistic gladiatorial prowess, but for his leadership of an army that ran roughshod over warrior barbarians.

Hastrubal was a soldier, as was his famous brother Hannibal. So were his Roman enemies. "Soldier," connotes service, submission to authority and discipline, rigor in teamwork, and commitment to a higher need than one's own (including one's need to be a warrior). With "soldier," the organized *group* dominates the individual. The word is related to a Roman Latin word for pay. In history and literature, the word "soldier" implies cooperation, strength in order and silent obedience, and—at its best—a preference for peace.⁶ In popular culture, films like *Saving Private Ryan* demonstrate this ethos. Such films idealize the American Soldiers' *selflessness*. They also emphasize how "soldier," evokes the word "citizen" in a way "warrior" does not.⁷

The Spartans, fictionalized as pure warriors in the film *300*, were more the Western ideal of the citizen

soldier and the professional. They believed that argument and political maneuver were superior to combat:

In Sparta the returning general, if he had overcome the enemy by deception or persuasion, sacrificed an ox, and if by force of arms a cock. For although the Spartans were the most warlike of peoples, they believed that an exploit achieved by means of argument and intelligence was greater and more worthy of a human being than one effected by mere force and courage.⁸

Spartans understood that resorting to lethal combat represented a failure. They were professionals in that they cooperated, selflessly, for the good of their society as they saw it. That society possessed some morally and esthetically perverse traits (including eugenics, pederasty, abject slavery, sociopathic xenophobia, and mate-swapping), but they avoided war whenever possible. For all their repugnant militarism, Spartans were not lovers of the fight. Homeric display was for them bad form.

Romans consciously tried to emulate the military side of the Spartan ethos while rejecting most of the pathologies. Their paradigmatic soldier was the citizen of Republican Rome. He served for pay in an organized, bureaucratic institution with regulations and retirement

benefits (when professionalized under Marius). Like the Spartans they admired, Romans prized military efficiency. For them, Homeric display was not just bad form but a military crime. The Roman general Titus Manlius Torquatus famously executed his own son for "a false conception of glory" by advancing from his post to attack, warrior-like, after a barbarian enemy challenged him to single combat.⁹

Romans strove to be more like a team of mechanics in battle, eschewing the fractious disunity of a warrior mentality. As Josephus says, "The Romans are sure of victory . . . For their exercises are bloodless battles and their battles bloody exercises."¹⁰ The secret of Roman longevity rested with the legion's practiced organizational teamwork and mechanical efficiency in both logistics and tactics against enemies imbued with a tribal warrior ethos. Legionary soldiers fought with shovel and shield and a business-like sword drill, and they self-consciously contrasted themselves with Gallic Celts who cared little for formations and less for the discipline implied by shovels. Celts fought with the edge of the blade in over-wrought swordplay honed for surviving individual combat. Vegetius tells us that Romans ridiculed these barbarian warriors for their organizational and tactical folly:

Care was taken to see that the [legionary] recruit did not rush forward so rashly to inflict a wound as to lay himself open to a counter-stroke from any quarter. Furthermore, they learned to strike, not with the edge, but with the point. For those that strike with the edge have not only been beaten by the Romans quite easily, but they have even been laughed at.¹¹

Romans thus spurned the warrior ethos for its theatrical inefficiency. Polybius relates this philosophy in describing the traits of ideal centurions for Republican armies:

In choosing their centurions the Romans look not so much for the daring or fire-eating type, but rather for men who are natural leaders and possess a stable and imperturbable temperament, not men who will open the battle and launch attacks, but those who will stand their ground even when worsted or hard-pressed, and will die in defense of their posts.¹²

Legionary soldiers—the *milites*—did not overvalue “closing” with their enemies—their priority was on keeping the line and waiting their turn. To the Romans, a competent soldier transcended the mere warrior through his restraint. The Romans brought selfless team effectiveness to high art while their warrior enemies largely reveled in impulsive

individualism. Legionnaires were, above all, expected to act like soldiers, not individuals. Their disciplined restraint set them apart, and American Soldiers are their mimetic descendants.

Informing the Subtext of the Army's Ethos

In the age of the "strategic corporal," our Army can ill afford to hearken back to Homeric values.¹³ Glamorizing implications of "love for the fight itself" as a subtext by institutionalizing its Soldiers in name as "warriors" is probably a bad idea given today's conflicts. The term is an intensifier that the Army would not use if it had no such glamor attached. Regardless of its value as an honorific, touting the so-called "Soldiers Creed/Warrior Ethos" is counterproductive precisely because it discursively sends this signal. Good soldiers are not impulsive and selfish, they don't seek glamor, and they do not see fighting as the pursuit of ecstatic gratification. Professionals know their niche in the operating machinery, and they do not relish in, or exult in, the business of killing. To attempt to glamorize such an endeavor is in itself a cheapening and amateurish act diminishing the sacred respect good soldiers deserve.

The grandiosity of warrior imagery thus appears self-defeating in today's information age. Marketing a warrior

mentality sends the wrong messages. It may help lure some people to enlist, but such imagery can undermine operations by grinding away at a soldier's respect for other people, including those who are potential enemies. One can develop a warrior spirit (in the best sense) without advertising. One can foster resolute courage without hyping the warrior's mien.

Warrior's ethos or Soldier's creed? The Army's official "Soldiers Creed/Warrior Ethos" (from 2003) mixes the discursive associations of "warrior" with the word "soldier" (italics and insertions below are mine):

Soldier's Creed and Warrior Ethos—

O I am an American *Soldier*.

O I am a *Warrior* and a member of a *team* [*This is arguably an oxymoron*].

O I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values.

O I will always place the mission first.

O I will never accept defeat.

O I will never quit.

O I will never leave a fallen comrade.

O I am *disciplined*, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my *warrior* tasks and drills.

O I always maintain my arms, my equipment, and myself.

O I am an expert and I am a *professional*.

O I stand ready to deploy, engage, and *destroy* the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.

O I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.

O I am an American Soldier.¹⁴

As it happens, history and literature do not associate warriors with *teams* or *discipline*. Warriors know weapons, but logistics and anything beyond basic tactics bewilder them. Warriors *destroy*, but soldiers *defend* and *protect*. Juxtaposition requires some mental gymnastics for anyone aware of subtexts. Encouraging American Soldiers to see themselves as "warriors" is stretching a metaphor beyond its limits, implying to outsiders that the Army believes its own propaganda. Why persist with this conflation? When one pretends that words mean something that they do not, one is more likely to throw out the moral baby with the bathwater.¹⁵ Temporally, legally, and morally, American Soldiers are soldiers and ultimately better than mere warriors.

What the Army values. Language suggests values. The "Army Values" mentioned in the creed need close examination given the dissonance in the professional manifesto: Where is the part about protecting the innocent? Is it implied?

If one engages in a profession or occupation the purpose of which, ultimately, is to kill people efficiently, one would want to make his supreme principle of action the avoidance of killing the wrong people. That should be explicit.

Admirable as it is, the "Values" list is not sufficient, even with its accompanying parse (see the FORSCOM website at note 14). If the Army has an articulated ethos that does not make avoidance of killing the wrong people explicitly the supreme principle, something is wrong.

MacArthur's "sacred trust." Tomoyuki Yamashita, a Japanese Imperial Army general, was formally convicted and executed in 1946 after a war crimes tribunal found him guilty of not controlling his troops (and sailors not under his command) when they sacked Manila in the Philippines in 1944.¹⁶ The Americans had cut him off from communication with his troops in the city, and murder and rape ensued. During his trial, General Douglas MacArthur declared that the soldier's first obligation, "the very essence of his being," was the "sacred trust" entailing "protection of the weak and unarmed."¹⁷ Yamashita failed in this regard, so MacArthur thought, and was guilty of the highest crime a soldier can commit—loss of discipline, loss of control *while in command*. He was found guilty in spite of his not being present and not having any means of control over the

rampaging soldiers and sailors. He was responsible for what happened because some of the troops committing war crimes were in his chain of command, and he had command responsibility. He violated the sacred trust because he was the military commander of some 3,700 soldiers still in the city, and it mattered not that U.S. bombardment, maneuver, and electronic warfare had deprived him of the ability to exercise his command.

If a soldier has a sacred trust to protect the weak and unarmed, directly or as command responsibility, it ought to be part of any code thought to be definitive. If a general has command responsibility for his soldiers' rampaging, for their loss of discipline leading to moral chaos, his most explicit advice to those under his command should be to be disciplined and adhere to that trust.

To give due attention to disciplined self-control in killing, the Army ought to be more emphatic about it than it currently is. If we held Yamashita to such standards, we must also apply them to our commanders and planners. We as an Army do believe the soldier's sacred trust to be a moral reality. We therefore ought to do everything we can to prevent careless killing, to avoid fratricide, and to encourage soldierly discipline, especially moral

discipline. So why have an articulated ethos that clouds the issue by calling American Soldiers *warriors*?

Institutionalizing the Soldier's Sacred Trust

The Army Values should clearly state that MacArthur's "sacred trust" exists, and that it is paramount in a profession that entails legitimate killing. The sacred trust ought to be clear for all to see, not only to demonstrate moral commitment to the public but to reinforce ethical reflection among one's own troops. In military public relations, such a demonstrated commitment should be fundamental.

Restraint is the justifying principle of professional military obligations. It should be connected, recognizably and inherently, with the statement, "I am an American Soldier." Those are the associations that we need now, rather than warrior associations. One can never, and rightly would never, expect any soldier to be in perfect control in battle. However, the realities of today's world demand that the military reaffirm its commitment to restraint and protection, rather than destruction. That is fundamentally why a rigorous morality of killing should be part of formally published credos as well as practiced principles—to make the best outcomes as likely as possible

given the chaotic circumstances of battle and its aftermath.

The Army has been undergoing an attitude adjustment about killing in counterinsurgencies, and now may be a good time to break its habit of using the term "warrior." If we believe in a sacred trust, we ought to eliminate any possibility of people misconstruing our intentions. We do not need florid allusions to warrior impulsiveness and egoism. Our creed should reinforce the notion of teamwork without having associations suggesting self-aggrandizement. The real warrior ethos from history is counterproductive because it incites bloody-mindedness at the expense of constructive concerns. Warriors of old song and tradition kill and destroy, and who they kill doesn't much matter as long as they get the enemy too. Soldiers, on the other hand, protect. They have a sacred trust. It's not romantic, but it's their moral duty.

Warriors and Soldiers at the Metaurus

At the Metaurus, Hastrubal arrayed his army on uneven ground near the bank of the river after a failed attempt to ford it and evade the reinforced Romans. He posted his best soldiers (his Iberian and African veterans) on the right under his personal command where he knew the brunt of the Roman attack would come. His distrust of his Gallic

warriors was clear in the way he positioned them on the rough ground covering his left flank, which was virtually inaccessible to Roman flanking and frontal attacks.

After the Telamon battle in 225, according to Polybius, the Romans lost their fear of warrior barbarians. That is likely the main reason Hastrubal posted the Celts on such difficult terrain. Clearly lacking the Carthaginian veteran's stamina, the Gallic Celts were also tired. As Livy says in the context of the Metaurus, "Gauls, to be sure, always lack stamina."¹⁸ Indeed, the perennial difference between warriors and soldiers is that "warriors always lack stamina." As long as they are fed and they haven't had too much exertion, they might be of some good when grouped together, but when things turn difficult, warriors are apt to be tired, distracted, and disorganized. In this case, many of Hastrubal's Celts had wandered out of position, confirming his distrust of their ability for teamwork.

As Polybius remarks of the Celts generally, their leaders were "beneath contempt. For not only in the majority of their actions, but in every single instance the Gauls were swayed by impulse rather than by calculation."¹⁹ This observation reveals the essence of the difference between the warrior image in history and that of the soldier. For the warrior, impulse trumps all—as it did at

Troy for Achilles. For the Carthaginians at the Metaurus River, the Gaul's impulsiveness compounded their lack of stamina and tactical discipline. When the Carthaginian right began to collapse, and the Romans were able to assault the difficult terrain on the left flank, "they found many of the Celts lying drunk and asleep."²⁰ Appetites burden the warrior's undisciplined heart, and Polybius reserves his worst scorn for this particular failing.

Hastrubal's drunken Celts contrasted with the 6,000 Roman soldiers who had just endured six days of forced marches under Gaius Claudius Nero (an ancestor of the notorious emperor) to reinforce the consular army of Marcus Livius facing him. Before the opposing armies formed for battle, Hastrubal realized the Roman force was larger than before. He recalled a Roman trumpet blast during the night and remembered it was the signal for the arrival of a general. When the Carthaginian leader noticed different shield patterns and haggard horses, he guessed he was in deep trouble.²¹ Hastrubal understood the discipline required for them to be there and saw in the Roman lines the determination of soldiers who had performed a miracle of maneuver. No mere warrior would ever have endured such a mission. Hastrubal tried to break off but could not. In recalling the earlier Battle of Telamon, Polybius sums up

the differences between the Roman citizenry and the warrior tribes threatening the future of Rome: the power of tribes—however well equipped and numerous—can always be defeated “by the resolution and the ability of men who faced the danger with intelligence and cool calculation.”²²

The Army should reevaluate whether it can afford to continue calling its Soldiers “warriors.” In both the perception of our Soldiers and the minds of those people who are conflicted by insurgencies (who see armed Americans in their countries), the dissonance implied by “warriors” can produce opposing psychologies. No matter how one cuts the cards of history, or reads the literary tradition we have inherited, the term “warrior” must emerge as a *faux pas* in the information domain. The word must suffer the stigma that history and literature have foisted upon it. The idea of creating “information warriors” (as advertised in the September-October 2009 edition of *Military Review*) is therefore probably self-defeating. Though we have Soldiers who are warriors at heart—in the best sense—it may be better not to constantly call them that. Perhaps the Army should outgrow this conceit and get back to basics. The Army is full of great Soldiers, not literal warriors, and their mission is to protect, not to destroy.

NOTES

1. Only the Air Force and the Army use "warrior" in their basic creeds, and

Endnotes are listed at the end of the article.

the Army is the only service that makes constant reference to the word. The SEALS and Army Special Forces creeds also briefly mention it. However, the Army's Ranger Creed makes no mention of "warrior." Its matter-of-fact statement that "I am a specially selected and well-trained Soldier" is admirably accurate and succinct. Arguably, the "ranger ethos" is the most professional in this sense. The Marine Corps makes notably few official references to "warrior," and those it makes are mostly associated with their Wounded Warrior program. Among the Wounded Warrior programs across the services, the term appears as a poetic honorific not carrying the implications of a creed. I refer the reader to the official Internet sites of all five services.

2. *Merriam Webster Unabridged Dictionary* online. The primary meaning of "warrior" is "a man engaged or experienced in warfare and especially in primitive warfare or the close combat typical of ancient or medieval times."

http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/?ref=U_mwol_top

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language

(New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) discusses the etymology

of "warrior" as coming from an Old North French word meaning "to make war."

3. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (New York: Harper & Row, Bison Books, 1998) 51-57.

4. Lee's comment to James Longstreet at Fredericksburg, 13 December 1862: "It is well that war is so terrible: we would grow too fond of it." Quoted in *The Dictionary of War Quotations*, edited by Justin Wintle (New York: Macmillan, The Free Press, 1989) 286.

5. Gray, 55.

6. *Ibid.*, 53.

7. *Merriam Webster Unabridged Dictionary*. "Soldier" primarily means a member of an organized body of combatants. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* discusses the etymology of "soldier," indicating its origins stem from the early medieval concept of serving for pay contrasted with most combatants who served as feudal vassals without pay. "Soldier" equates to the ancient Latin word *milites*, used for Roman legionary regular soldiers.

8. Plutarch, "Marcellus" in *Makers of Rome*, translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin Classics, 1978) 109.

9. Livy, *Rome and Italy: Books VI-X of the History of Rome from its Foundation*, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt

(New York: Penguin Classics, 1988) 166. Ironically, Torquatus got his name by slaying a Gallic chieftain in single combat.

10. Josephus, quoted in Lynn Montross's *War Through the Ages*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 43.

11. Vegetius, quoted in Michael Grant's *The Army of the Caesars* (New York: M. Evans & Company, 1974) xxvii.

12. Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin Classics, 1979) 322.

13. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine*, (January 1999), <www.au.af.mil/au/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm> (2 July 2009).

14. U.S. Army "Army Values," "Soldiers Creed," and "Warriors Ethos" on line at the Forces Command website. <www.forscom.army.mil/reeng/Army%20Part1%20Values.htm>.

15. Thomas Paine, "The Author's Profession of Faith," *The Age of Reason*, (The Project Gutenberg Etext of The Writings of Thomas Paine Vol. IV), <www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/twtp410.txt>.

16. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977) 316-322.

17. Ibid, 317. MacArthur's exact words: "The soldier, be he friend or foe, is charged with the protection of the weak

and unarmed. It is the very essence and reason for his being. When he violates this sacred trust, he not only profanes his entire cult but threatens the very fabric of international society. The traditions of fighting men are long and honorable."

18. Livy, *The War with Hannibal: Books XXI-XXX of the History of Rome from its Foundation*, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt (New York: Penguin Classics, 1988) 493.

19. Polybius, 146.

20. Ibid, 426.

21. Livy, 490.

22. Polybius, 146.

**Biography comes after
endnotes and is in italics.**

BIO

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