



The Tragedy of the American Military

January 4, 2015

In mid-September, while President Obama was fending off complaints that he should have done more, done less, or done something different about the overlapping crises in Iraq and Syria, he traveled to Central Command headquarters, at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida. There he addressed some of the men and women who would implement whatever the U.S. military strategy turned out to be.

The part of the speech intended to get coverage was Obama's rationale for reengaging the United States in Iraq, more than a decade after it first invaded and following the long and painful effort to extricate itself. This was big enough news that many cable channels covered the speech live. I watched it on an overhead TV while I sat waiting for a flight at Chicago's O'Hare airport. When Obama got to the section of his speech announcing whether he planned to commit U.S. troops in Iraq (at the time, he didn't), I noticed that many people in the terminal shifted their attention briefly to the TV. As soon as that was over, they went back to their smartphones and their laptops and their Cinnabons as the president droned on.

Usually I would have stopped watching too, since so many aspects of public figures' appearances before the troops have become so formulaic and routine. But I decided to see the whole show. Obama gave his still-not-quite-natural-sounding callouts to the different military services represented in the crowd. ("I know we've got some Air Force in the house!" and so on, receiving cheers rendered as "Hooyah!" and "Oorah!" in the official White House transcript.) He told members of the military that the nation was grateful for their nonstop deployments and for the unique losses and burdens placed on them through the past dozen years of open-ended war. He noted that they were often the face of American influence in the world, being dispatched to Liberia in 2014 to cope with the then-dawning Ebola epidemic as they had been sent to Indonesia 10 years earlier to rescue victims of the catastrophic tsunami there. He said that the "9/11 generation of heroes" represented the very best in its country, and that its members constituted a military that was not only superior to all current adversaries but no less than "the finest fighting force in the history of the world."

If any of my fellow travelers at O'Hare were still listening to the speech, none of them showed any reaction to it. And why would they? This has become the way we assume the American military will be discussed by politicians and in the press: Overblown, limitless praise, absent the caveats or public skepticism we would apply to other American institutions, especially ones that run on taxpayer money. A somber moment to reflect on sacrifice. Then everyone except the few people in uniform getting on with their workaday concerns.

The public attitude evident in the airport was reflected by the public's representatives in Washington. That same afternoon, September 17, the House of Representatives voted after brief debate to authorize arms and supplies for rebel forces in Syria, in hopes that more of them would fight against the Islamic State, or ISIS, than for it. The Senate did the same the next day—and then both houses adjourned early, after an unusually short and historically unproductive term of Congress, to spend the next six and a half weeks fund-raising and campaigning full-time. I'm not aware of any midterm race for the House or Senate in which matters of war and peace—as opposed to immigration, Obamacare, voting rights, tax rates, the Ebola scare—were first-tier campaign issues on either side, except for the metaphorical “war on women” and “war on coal.”

This reverent but disengaged attitude toward the military—we love the troops, but we'd rather not think about them—has become so familiar that we assume it is the American norm. But it is not. When Dwight D. Eisenhower, as a five-star general and the supreme commander, led what may have in fact been the finest fighting force in the history of the world, he did not describe it in that puffed-up way. On the eve of the D-Day invasion, he warned his troops, “Your task will not be an easy one,” because “your enemy is well-trained, well-equipped, and battle-hardened.” As president, Eisenhower's most famous statement about the military was his warning in his farewell address of what could happen if its political influence grew unchecked.

At the end of World War II, nearly 10 percent of the entire U.S. population was on active military duty—which meant most able-bodied men of a certain age (plus the small number of women allowed to serve). Through the decade after World War II, when so many American families had at least one member in uniform, political and journalistic references were admiring but not awestruck. Most Americans were familiar enough with the military to respect it while being sharply aware of its shortcomings, as they were with the school system, their religion, and other important and fallible institutions.

Now the American military is exotic territory to most of the American public. As a comparison: A handful of Americans live on farms, but there are many more of them than serve in all branches of the military. (Well over 4 million people live on the country's 2.1 million farms. The U.S. military has about 1.4 million people on active duty and another 850,000 in the reserves.) The other 310 million-plus Americans “honor” their stalwart farmers, but generally don't know them. So too with the military. Many more young Americans will study abroad this year than will enlist in the military—nearly 300,000 students overseas, versus well under 200,000 new recruits. As a country, America has been at war nonstop for the past 13 years. As a public, it has not. A total of about 2.5 million Americans, roughly three-quarters of 1 percent, served in Iraq or Afghanistan at any point in the post-9/11 years, many of them more than once.

The difference between the earlier America that knew its military and the modern America that gazes admiringly at its heroes shows up sharply in changes in popular and media culture. While World War II was under way, its best-known chroniclers were the Scripps Howard reporter Ernie Pyle, who described the daily braveries and travails of the troops (until he was killed near the war's end by Japanese machine-gun fire on the island of Iejima), and the Stars and Stripes cartoonist Bill Mauldin, who mocked the obtuseness of generals and their distance from the foxhole realities faced by his wisecracking GI characters, Willie and Joe.

From *Mister Roberts* to *South Pacific* to *Catch-22*, from *The Caine Mutiny* to *The Naked and the Dead* to *From Here to Eternity*, American popular and high culture treated our last mass-mobilization war as an effort deserving deep respect and pride, but not above criticism and lampooning. The collective achievement of the military was heroic, but its members and leaders were still real people, with all the foibles of real life. A decade after that war ended, the most popular military-themed TV program was *The Phil Silvers Show*, about a con man in uniform named Sgt. Bilko. As Bilko, Phil Silvers was that stock American sitcom figure, the lovable blowhard—a role familiar from the time of Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners* to Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons* today. *Gomer Pyle, USMC*; *Hogan's Heroes*; *McHale's Navy*; and even the anachronistic frontier show *F Troop* were sitcoms whose settings were U.S. military units and whose villains—and schemers, and stooges, and occasional idealists—were people in uniform. American culture was sufficiently at ease with the military to make fun of it, a stance now hard to imagine outside the military itself.

Robert Altman's 1970 movie *M*A*S*H* was clearly "about" the Vietnam War, then well into its bloodiest and most bitterly divisive period. (As I point out whenever discussing this topic, I was eligible for the draft at the time, was one of those protesting the war, and at age 20 legally but intentionally failed my draft medical exam. I told this story in a 1975 *Washington Monthly* article, "What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy?") But *M*A*S*H*'s ostensible placement in the Korean War of the early 1950s somewhat distanced its darkly mocking attitude about military competence and authority from fierce disagreements about Vietnam. (The one big Vietnam movie to precede it was John Wayne's doughily prowar *The Green Berets*, in 1968. What we think of as the classic run of Vietnam films did not begin until the end of the 1970s, with *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*.) The TV spin-off of Altman's film, which ran from 1972 through 1983, was a simpler and more straightforward sitcom on the Sgt. Bilko model, again suggesting a culture close enough to its military to put up with, and enjoy, jokes about it.

Let's skip to today's Iraq-Afghanistan era, in which everyone "supports" the troops but few know very much about them. The pop-culture references to the people fighting our ongoing wars emphasize their suffering and stoicism, or the long-term personal damage they may endure. *The Hurt Locker* is the clearest example, but also *Lone Survivor*; *Restrepo*; the short-lived 2005 FX series set in Iraq, *Over There*; and Showtime's current series *Homeland*. Some emphasize high-stakes action, from the fictionalized *24* to the meant-to-be-true *Zero Dark Thirty*. Often they portray military and intelligence officials as brave and daring. But while cumulatively these dramas highlight the damage that open-ended warfare has done—on the battlefield and elsewhere, to warriors and civilians alike, in the short term but also through long-term blowback—they lack the comfortable closeness with the military that would allow them to question its competence as they would any other institution's.

The battlefield is of course a separate realm, as the literature of warfare from Homer's time onward has emphasized. But the distance between today's stateside America and its always-at-war expeditionary troops is extraordinary. Last year, the writer Rebecca Frankel published *War Dogs*, a study of the dog-and-handler teams that had played a large part in the U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Part of the reason she chose the topic, she told me, was that dogs were one of the few common points of reference between the military and the larger public. "When we cannot make that human connection over war, when we cannot empathize or imagine the far-off

world of a combat zone ... these military working dogs are a bridge over the divide,” Frankel wrote in the introduction to her book.

It’s a wonderful book, and dogs are a better connection than nothing. But ... dogs! When the country fought its previous wars, its common points of reference were human rather than canine: fathers and sons in harm’s way, mothers and daughters working in defense plants and in uniform as well. For two decades after World War II, the standing force remained so large, and the Depression-era birth cohorts were so small, that most Americans had a direct military connection. Among older Baby Boomers, those born before 1955, at least three-quarters have had an immediate family member—sibling, parent, spouse, child—who served in uniform. Of Americans born since 1980, the Millennials, about one in three is closely related to anyone with military experience.

The most biting satirical novel to come from the Iraq-Afghanistan era, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, by Ben Fountain, is a takedown of our empty modern “thank you for your service” rituals. It is the story of an Army squad that is badly shot up in Iraq; is brought back to be honored at halftime during a nationally televised Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving Day game; while there, is slapped on the back and toasted by owner’s-box moguls and flirted with by cheerleaders, “passed around like everyone’s favorite bong,” as platoon member Billy Lynn thinks of it; and is then shipped right back to the front.

The people at the stadium feel good about what they’ve done to show their support for the troops. From the troops’ point of view, the spectacle looks different. “There’s something harsh in his fellow Americans, avid, ecstatic, a burning that comes of the deepest need,” the narrator says of Billy Lynn’s thoughts. “That’s his sense of it, they all need something from him, this pack of half-rich lawyers, dentists, soccer moms, and corporate VPs, they’re all gnashing for a piece of a barely grown grunt making \$14,800 a year.” Fountain’s novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 2012, but it did not dent mainstream awareness enough to make anyone self-conscious about continuing the “salute to the heroes” gestures that do more for the civilian public’s self-esteem than for the troops’. As I listened to Obama that day in the airport, and remembered Ben Fountain’s book, and observed the hum of preoccupied America around me, I thought that the parts of the presidential speech few Americans were listening to were the ones historians might someday seize upon to explain the temper of our times.

If I were writing such a history now, I would call it Chickenhawk Nation, based on the derisive term for those eager to go to war, as long as someone else is going. It would be the story of a country willing to do anything for its military except take it seriously. As a result, what happens to all institutions that escape serious external scrutiny and engagement has happened to our military. Outsiders treat it both too reverently and too cavalierly, as if regarding its members as heroes makes up for committing them to unending, unwinnable missions and denying them anything like the political mindshare we give to other major public undertakings, from medical care to public education to environmental rules. The tone and level of public debate on those issues is hardly encouraging. But for democracies, messy debates are less damaging in the long run than letting important functions run on autopilot, as our military essentially does now. A chickenhawk nation is more likely to keep going to war, and to keep losing, than one that wrestles with long-term questions of effectiveness.

Americans admire the military as they do no other institution. Through the past two decades, respect for the courts, the schools, the press, Congress, organized religion, Big Business, and virtually every other institution in modern life has plummeted. The one exception is the military. Confidence in the military shot up after 9/11 and has stayed very high. In a Gallup poll last summer, three-quarters of the public expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the military. About one-third had comparable confidence in the medical system, and only 7 percent in Congress.

Too much complacency regarding our military, and too weak a tragic imagination about the consequences if the next engagement goes wrong, have been part of Americans’ willingness to wade into conflict after conflict, blithely assuming we would win. “Did we have the sense that America cared how we were doing? We did not,” Seth Moulton told me about his experience as a marine during the Iraq War. Moulton enlisted after graduating from Harvard in 2001, believing (as he told me) that when many classmates were heading to Wall Street it was useful to set an example of public service. He opposed the decision to invade Iraq but ended up serving four tours there out of a sense of duty to his comrades. “America was very disconnected. We were proud to serve, but we knew it was a little group of people doing the country’s work.”

Moulton told me, as did many others with Iraq-era military experience, that if more members of Congress or the business and media elite had had children in uniform, the United States would probably not have gone to war in Iraq at all. Because he felt strongly enough about that failure of elite accountability, Moulton decided while in Iraq to get involved in politics after he left the military. “I actually remember the moment,” Moulton told me. “It was after a difficult day in Najaf in 2004. A young marine in my platoon said, ‘Sir, you should run for Congress someday. So this shit doesn’t happen again.’ ” In January, Moulton takes office as a freshman Democratic representative from Massachusetts’s Sixth District, north of Boston.

What Moulton described was desire for a kind of accountability. It is striking how rare accountability has been for our modern wars. Hillary Clinton paid a price for her vote to authorize the Iraq War, since that is what gave the barely known Barack Obama an opening to run against her in 2008. George W. Bush, who, like most ex-presidents, has grown more popular the longer he’s been out of office, would perhaps be playing a more visible role in public and political life if not for the overhang of Iraq. But those two are the exceptions. Most other public figures, from Dick Cheney and Colin Powell on down, have put Iraq behind them. In part this is because of the Obama administration’s decision from the start to “look forward, not back” about why things had gone so badly wrong with America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But such willed amnesia would have been harder if more Americans had felt affected by the wars’ outcome. For our generals, our politicians, and most of our citizenry, there is almost no accountability or personal consequence for military failure. This is a dangerous development—and one whose dangers multiply the longer it persists.

Ours is the best-equipped fighting force in history, and it is incomparably the most expensive. By all measures, today’s professionalized military is also better trained, motivated, and disciplined than during the draft-army years. No decent person who is exposed to today’s troops can be anything but respectful of them and grateful for what they do.

Yet repeatedly this force has been defeated by less modern, worse-equipped, barely funded foes. Or it has won skirmishes and battles only to lose or get bogged down in a larger war. Although no one can agree on an exact figure, our dozen years of war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and neighboring countries have cost at least \$1.5 trillion; Linda J. Bilmes, of the Harvard Kennedy School, recently estimated that the total cost could be three to four times that much. Recall that while Congress was considering whether to authorize the Iraq War, the head of the White House economic council, Lawrence B. Lindsey, was forced to resign for telling *The Wall Street Journal* that the all-in costs might be as high as \$100 billion to \$200 billion, or less than the U.S. has spent on Iraq and Afghanistan in many individual years.

Yet from a strategic perspective, to say nothing of the human cost, most of these dollars might as well have been burned. “At this point, it is incontrovertibly evident that the U.S. military failed to achieve any of its strategic goals in Iraq,” a former military intelligence officer named Jim Gourley wrote recently for Thomas E. Ricks’s blog, *Best Defense*. “Evaluated according to the goals set forth by our military leadership, the war ended in utter defeat for our forces.” In 13 years of continuous combat under the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the longest stretch of warfare in American history, U.S. forces have achieved one clear strategic success: the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Their many other tactical victories, from overthrowing Saddam Hussein to allying with Sunni tribal leaders to mounting a “surge” in Iraq, demonstrated great bravery and skill. But they brought no lasting stability to, nor advance of U.S. interests in, that part of the world. When ISIS troops overran much of Iraq last year, the forces that laid down their weapons and fled before them were members of the same Iraqi national army that U.S. advisers had so expensively yet ineffectively trained for more than five years.

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“We are vulnerable,” the author William Greider wrote during the debate last summer on how to fight ISIS, “because our presumption of unconquerable superiority leads us deeper and deeper into unwinnable military conflicts.” And the separation of the military from the public disrupts the process of learning from these defeats. The last war that ended up in circumstances remotely resembling what prewar planning would have considered a victory was the brief Gulf War of 1991.

After the Vietnam War, the press and the public went too far in blaming the military for what was a top-to-bottom failure of strategy and execution. But the military itself recognized its own failings, and a whole generation of reformers looked to understand and change the culture. In 1978, a military-intelligence veteran named Richard A. Gabriel published, with Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army*, which traced many of the failures in Vietnam to the military’s having adopted a bureaucratized management style. Three years later, a broadside called *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era*, by a military officer writing under the pen name Cincinnatus (later revealed to be a lieutenant colonel serving in the reserves as a military chaplain, Cecil B. Currey), linked problems in Vietnam to the ethical and intellectual shortcomings of the career military. The book was hotly debated—but not dismissed. An article about the book for the Air Force’s *Air University Review* said that “the author’s case is airtight” and that the military’s

career structure “corrupts those who serve it; it is the system that forces out the best and rewards only the sycophants.”

Today, you hear judgments like that frequently from within the military and occasionally from politicians—but only in private. It’s not the way we talk in public about our heroes anymore, with the result that accountability for the career military has been much sketchier than during our previous wars. William S. Lind is a military historian who in the 1990s helped develop the concept of “Fourth Generation War,” or struggles against the insurgents, terrorists, or other “nonstate” groups that refuse to form ranks and fight like conventional armies. He wrote recently:

The most curious thing about our four defeats in Fourth Generation War—Lebanon, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan—is the utter silence in the American officer corps. Defeat in Vietnam bred a generation of military reformers ... Today, the landscape is barren. Not a military voice is heard calling for thoughtful, substantive change. Just more money, please.

During and after even successful American wars, and certainly after the standoff in Korea and the defeat in Vietnam, the professional military’s leadership and judgment were considered fair game for criticism. Grant saved the Union; McClellan seemed almost to sabotage it—and he was only one of the Union generals Lincoln had to move out of the way. Something similar was true in wars through Vietnam. Some leaders were good; others were bad. Now, for purposes of public discussion, they’re all heroes. In our past decade’s wars, as Thomas Ricks wrote in this magazine in 2012, “hundreds of Army generals were deployed to the field, and the available evidence indicates that not one was relieved by the military brass for combat ineffectiveness.” This, he said, was not only a radical break from American tradition but also “an important factor in the failure” of our recent wars.

Partly this change has come because the public, at its safe remove, doesn’t insist on accountability. Partly it is because legislators and even presidents recognize the sizable risks and limited payoffs of taking on the career military. When recent presidents have relieved officers of command, they have usually done so over allegations of sexual or financial misconduct, or other issues of personal discipline. These include the cases of the two famous four-star generals who resigned rather than waiting for President Obama to dismiss them: Stanley A. McChrystal, as the commander in Afghanistan, and David Petraeus in his post-Centcom role as the head of the CIA. The exception proving the rule occurred a dozen years ago, when a senior civilian official directly challenged a four-star general on his military competence. In congressional testimony just before the Iraq War, General Eric Shinseki, then the Army’s chief of staff, said that many more troops might be necessary to successfully occupy Iraq than plans were allowing for—only to be ridiculed in public by Paul Wolfowitz, then Shinseki’s superior as the deputy secretary of defense, who said views like Shinseki’s were “outlandish” and “wildly off the mark.” Wolfowitz and his superior, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, ostentatiously marginalized Shinseki from that point on.

In that case, the general was right and the politicians were wrong. But more often and more skillfully than the public usually appreciates, today’s military has managed to distance itself from the lengthening string of modern military failures—even when wrong. Some of this PR shift is

anthropological. Most reporters who cover politics are fascinated by the process and enjoy practitioners who love it too, which is one reason most were (like the rest of the country) more forgiving of the happy warrior Bill Clinton than they have been of the “cold” and “aloof” Barack Obama. But political reporters are always hunting for the gaffe or scandal that could bring a target down, and feel they’re acting in the public interest in doing so.

Most reporters who cover the military are also fascinated by its processes and cannot help liking or at least respecting their subjects: physically fit, trained to say “sir” and “ma’am,” often tested in a way most civilians will never be, part of a disciplined and selfless-seeming culture that naturally draws respect. And whether or not this was a conscious plan, the military gets a substantial PR boost from the modern practice of placing officers in mid-career assignments at think tanks, on congressional staffs, and in graduate programs across the country. For universities, military students are (as a dean at a public-policy school put it to me) “a better version of foreign students.” That is, they work hard, pay full tuition, and unlike many international students face no language barrier or difficulty adjusting to the American style of give-and-take classroom exchanges. Most cultures esteem the scholar-warrior, and these programs expose usually skeptical American elites to people like the young Colin Powell, who as a lieutenant colonel in his mid-30s was a White House fellow after serving in Vietnam, and David Petraeus, who got his Ph.D. at Princeton as a major 13 years after graduating from West Point.

And yet however much Americans “support” and “respect” their troops, they are not involved with them, and that disengagement inevitably leads to dangerous decisions the public barely notices. “My concern is this growing disconnect between the American people and our military,” retired Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under George W. Bush and Barack Obama (and whose mid-career academic stint was at Harvard Business School), told me recently. The military is “professional and capable,” he said, “but I would sacrifice some of that excellence and readiness to make sure that we stay close to the American people. Fewer and fewer people know anyone in the military. It’s become just too easy to go to war.”

Citizens notice when crime is going up, or school quality is going down, or the water is unsafe to drink, or when other public functions are not working as they should. Not enough citizens are made to notice when things go wrong, or right, with the military. The country thinks too rarely, and too highly, of the 1 percent under fire in our name.

“If citizens are willing to countenance a decision that means that someone’s child may die, they may contemplate more deeply if there is the possibility that the child will be theirs.”

America’s distance from the military makes the country too willing to go to war, and too callous about the damage warfare inflicts. This distance also means that we spend too much money on the military and we spend it stupidly, thereby shortchanging many of the functions that make the most difference to the welfare of the troops and their success in combat. We buy weapons that have less to do with battlefield realities than with our unending faith that advanced technology will ensure victory, and with the economic interests and political influence of contractors. This

leaves us with expensive and delicate high-tech white elephants, while unglamorous but essential tools, from infantry rifles to armored personnel carriers, too often fail our troops (see “Gun Trouble,” by Robert H. Scales, in this issue).

We know that technology is our military’s main advantage. Yet the story of the post-9/11 “long wars” is of America’s higher-tech advantages yielding transitory victories that melt away before the older, messier realities of improvised weapons, sectarian resentments, and mounting hostility to occupiers from afar, however well-intentioned. Many of the Pentagon’s most audacious high-tech ventures have been costly and spectacular failures, including (as we will see) the major air-power project of recent years, the F-35. In an America connected to its military, such questions of strategy and implementation would be at least as familiar as, say, the problems with the Common Core education standards.

Those technological breakthroughs that do make their way to the battlefield may prove to be strategic liabilities in the long run. During the years in which the United States has enjoyed a near-monopoly on weaponized drones, for example, they have killed individuals or small groups at the price of antagonizing whole societies. When the monopoly ends, which is inevitable, the very openness of the United States will make it uniquely vulnerable to the cheap, swarming weapons others will deploy.

The cost of defense, meanwhile, goes up and up and up, with little political resistance and barely any public discussion. By the fullest accounting, which is different from usual budget figures, the United States will spend more than \$1 trillion on national security this year. That includes about \$580 billion for the Pentagon’s baseline budget plus “overseas contingency” funds, \$20 billion in the Department of Energy budget for nuclear weapons, nearly \$200 billion for military pensions and Department of Veterans Affairs costs, and other expenses. But it doesn’t count more than \$80 billion a year of interest on the military-related share of the national debt. After adjustments for inflation, the United States will spend about 50 percent more on the military this year than its average through the Cold War and Vietnam War. It will spend about as much as the next 10 nations combined—three to five times as much as China, depending on how you count, and seven to nine times as much as Russia. The world as a whole spends about 2 percent of its total income on its militaries; the United States, about 4 percent.

Yet such is the dysfunction and corruption of the budgeting process that even as spending levels rise, the Pentagon faces simultaneous crises in funding for maintenance, training, pensions, and veterans’ care. “We’re buying the wrong things, and paying too much for them,” Charles A. Stevenson, a onetime staffer on the Senate Armed Services Committee and a former professor at the National War College, told me. “We’re spending so much on people that we don’t have the hardware, which is becoming more expensive anyway. We are flatlining R&D.”

Here is just one newsworthy example that illustrates the broad and depressingly intractable tendencies of weapons development and spending: the failed hopes for a new airplane called the F-35 “Lightning.”

Today’s weapons can be decades in gestation, and the history of the F-35 traces back long before most of today’s troops were born. Two early-1970s-era planes, the F-16 “Fighting Falcon” jet

and the A-10 “Thunderbolt II” attack plane, departed from the trend of military design in much the same way the compact Japanese cars of that era departed from the tail-fin American look. These planes were relatively cheap, pared to their essentials, easy to maintain, and designed to do a specific thing very well. For the F-16, that was to be fast, highly maneuverable, and deadly in air-to-air combat. For the A-10, it was to serve as a kind of flying tank that could provide what the military calls “close air support” to troops in combat by blasting enemy formations. The A-10 needed to be heavily armored, so it could absorb opposing fire; designed to fly as slowly as possible over the battlefield, rather than as rapidly, so that it could stay in range to do damage rather than roaring through; and built around one very powerful gun.

There are physical devices that seem the pure expression of a function. The Eames chair, a classic No. 2 pencil, the original Ford Mustang or VW Beetle, the MacBook Air—take your pick. The A-10, generally known not as the Thunderbolt but as the Warthog, fills that role in the modern military. It is rugged; it is inexpensive; it can shred enemy tanks and convoys by firing up to 70 rounds a second of armor-piercing, 11-inch-long depleted-uranium shells.

The tragedy of the F-35 is that a project meant to correct problems in designing and paying for weapons has come to exemplify them.

And the main effort of military leaders through the past decade, under the Republican leadership of the Bush administration and the Democratic leadership of Obama, has been to get rid of the A-10 so as to free up money for a more expensive, less reliable, technically failing airplane that has little going for it except insider dealing, and the fact that the general public doesn’t care.

The weapon in whose name the A-10 is being phased out is its opposite in almost every way. In automotive terms, it would be a Lamborghini rather than a pickup truck (or a flying tank). In air-travel terms, the first-class sleeper compartment on Singapore Airlines rather than advance-purchase Economy Plus (or even business class) on United. These comparisons seem ridiculous, but they are fair. That is, a Lamborghini is demonstrably “better” than a pickup truck in certain ways—speed, handling, comfort—but only in very special circumstances is it a better overall choice. Same for the first-class sleeper, which would be anyone’s choice if someone else were footing the bill but is simply not worth the trade-off for most people most of the time.

Each new generation of weapons tends to be “better” in much the way a Lamborghini is, and “worth it” in the same sense as a first-class airline seat. The A-10 shows the pattern. According to figures from the aircraft analyst Richard L. Aboulafia, of the Teal Group, the “unit recurring flyaway” costs in 2014 dollars—the fairest apples-to-apples comparison—stack up like this. Each Warthog now costs about \$19 million, less than any other manned combat aircraft. A Predator drone costs about two-thirds as much. Other fighter, bomber, and multipurpose planes cost much more: about \$72 million for the V-22 Osprey, about \$144 million for the F-22 fighter, about \$810 million for the B-2 bomber, and about \$101 million (or five A-10s) for the F-35. There’s a similar difference in operating costs. The operating expenses are low for the A-10 and much higher for the others largely because the A-10’s design is simpler, with fewer things that could go wrong. The simplicity of design allows it to spend more of its time flying instead of being in the shop.

In clear contrast to the A-10, the F-35 is an ill-starred undertaking that would have been on the front pages as often as other botched federal projects, from the Obamacare rollout to the FEMA response after Hurricane Katrina, if, like those others, it either seemed to affect a broad class of people or could easily be shown on TV—or if so many politicians didn't have a stake in protecting it. One measure of the gap in coverage: Total taxpayer losses in the failed Solyndra solar-energy program might come, at their most dire estimate, to some \$800 million. Total cost overruns, losses through fraud, and other damage to the taxpayer from the F-35 project are perhaps 100 times that great, yet the “Solyndra scandal” is known to probably 100 times as many people as the travails of the F-35. Here's another yardstick: the all-in costs of this airplane are now estimated to be as much as \$1.5 trillion, or a low-end estimate of the entire Iraq War.

The condensed version of this plane's tragedy is that a project meant to correct some of the Pentagon's deepest problems in designing and paying for weapons has in fact worsened and come to exemplify them. An aircraft that was intended to be inexpensive, adaptable, and reliable has become the most expensive in history, and among the hardest to keep out of the shop. The federal official who made the project a symbol of a new, transparent, rigorously data-dependent approach to awarding contracts ended up serving time in federal prison for corruption involving projects with Boeing. (Boeing's chief financial officer also did time in prison.) For the record, the Pentagon and the lead contractors stoutly defend the plane and say that its teething problems will be over soon—and that anyway, it is the plane of the future, and the A-10 is an aging relic of the past. (We have posted reports on the A-10, pro and con, at theatlantic.com/chickenhawk, so you can see whether you are convinced.)

In theory, the F-35 would show common purpose among the military services, since the Air Force, the Navy, and the Marine Corps would all get their own custom-tailored versions of the plane. In fact, a plane designed to do many contradictory things—to be strong enough to survive Navy aircraft-carrier landings, yet light and maneuverable enough to excel as an Air Force dogfighter, and meanwhile able to take off and land straight up and down, like a helicopter, to reach marines in tight combat circumstances—has unsurprisingly done none of them as well as promised. In theory, the F-35 was meant to knit U.S. allies together, since other countries would buy it as their mainstay airplane and in turn would get part of the contracting business. In fact, the delays, cost overruns, and mechanical problems of the airplane have made it a contentious political issue in customer countries from Canada and Holland to Italy and Australia.

“Political engineering,” a term popularized by a young Pentagon analyst named Chuck Spinney in the 1970s, is pork-barrel politics on the grandest scale. Cost overruns sound bad if someone else is getting the extra money. They can be good if they are creating business for your company or jobs in your congressional district. Political engineering is the art of spreading a military project to as many congressional districts as possible, and thus maximizing the number of members of Congress who feel that if they cut off funding, they'd be hurting themselves.

A \$10 million parts contract in one congressional district builds one representative's support. Two \$5 million contracts in two districts are twice as good, and better all around would be three contracts at \$3 million apiece. Every participant in the military-contracting process understands this logic: the prime contractors who parcel out supply deals around the country, the military's procurement officers who divide work among contractors, the politicians who vote up or down

on the results. In the late 1980s, a coalition of so-called cheap hawks in Congress tried to cut funding for the B-2 bomber. They got nowhere after it became clear that work for the project was being carried out in 46 states and no fewer than 383 congressional districts (of 435 total). The difference between then and now is that in 1989, Northrop, the main contractor for the plane, had to release previously classified data to demonstrate how broadly the dollars were being spread.

Whatever its technical challenges, the F-35 is a triumph of political engineering, and on a global scale. For a piquant illustration of the difference that political engineering can make, consider the case of Bernie Sanders—former Socialist mayor of Burlington, current Independent senator from Vermont, possible candidate from the left in the next presidential race. In principle, he thinks the F-35 is a bad choice. After one of the planes caught fire last summer on a runway in Florida, Sanders told a reporter that the program had been “incredibly wasteful.” Yet Sanders, with the rest of Vermont’s mainly left-leaning political establishment, has fought hard to get an F-35 unit assigned to the Vermont Air National Guard in Burlington, and to dissuade neighborhood groups there who think the planes will be too noisy and dangerous. “For better or worse, [the F-35] is the plane of record right now,” Sanders told a local reporter after the runway fire last year, “and it is not gonna be discarded. That’s the reality.” It’s going to be somewhere, so why not here? As Vermont goes, so goes the nation.

The next big project the Air Force is considering is the Long Range Strike Bomber, a successor to the B-1 and B-2 whose specifications include an ability to do bombing runs deep into China. (A step so wildly reckless that the U.S. didn’t consider it even when fighting Chinese troops during the Korean War.) By the time the plane’s full costs and capabilities become apparent, Chuck Spinney wrote last summer, the airplane, “like the F-35 today, will be unstoppable.” That is because even now its supporters are building the plane’s “social safety net by spreading the subcontracts around the country, or perhaps like the F-35, around the world.”

Politicians say that national security is their first and most sacred duty, but they do not act as if this is so. The most recent defense budget passed the House Armed Services Committee by a vote of 61 to zero, with similarly one-sided debate before the vote. This is the same House of Representatives that cannot pass a long-term Highway Trust Fund bill that both parties support. “The lionization of military officials by politicians is remarkable and dangerous,” a retired Air Force colonel named Tom Ruby, who now writes on organizational culture, told me. He and others said that this deference was one reason so little serious oversight of the military took place.

T. X. Hammes, a retired Marine Corps colonel who has a doctorate in modern history from Oxford, told me that instead of applying critical judgment to military programs, or even regarding national defense as any kind of sacred duty, politicians have come to view it simply as a teat. “Many on Capitol Hill see the Pentagon with admirable simplicity,” he said: “It is a way of directing tax money to selected districts. It’s part of what they were elected to do.”

In the spring of 2011, Barack Obama asked Gary Hart, the Democratic Party’s most experienced and best-connected figure on defense reform, to form a small bipartisan task force that would draft recommendations on how Obama might try to recast the Pentagon and its practices if he won a second term. Hart did so (I was part of the group, along with Andrew J. Bacevich of

Boston University, John Arquilla of the Naval Postgraduate School, and Norman R. Augustine, the former CEO of Lockheed Martin), and sent a report to Obama that fall. [Click here to read that memo.] He never heard back. Every White House is swamped with recommendations and requests, and it responds only to those it considers most urgent—which defense reform obviously was not.

Soon thereafter, during the 2012 presidential race, neither Barack Obama nor Mitt Romney said much about how they would spend the billion and a half dollars a day that go to military programs, except for when Romney said that if elected, he would spend a total of \$1 trillion more. In their only direct exchange about military policy, during their final campaign debate, Obama said that Romney's plans would give the services more money than they were asking for. Romney pointed out that the Navy had fewer ships than it did before World War I. Obama shot back, "Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military's changed. We have these things called aircraft carriers, where planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater, nuclear submarines." It was Obama's most sarcastic and aggressive moment of any of the debates, and was also the entirety of the discussion about where those trillions would go.

Jim Webb is a decorated Vietnam veteran, an author, a former Democratic senator, and a likely presidential candidate. Seven years ago in his book *A Time to Fight*, he wrote that the career military was turning into a "don't break my rice bowl" culture, referring to an Asian phrase roughly comparable to making sure everyone gets a piece of the pie. Webb meant that ambitious officers notice how many of their mentors and predecessors move after retirement into board positions, consultancies, or operational roles with defense contractors. (Pensions now exceed preretirement pay for some very senior officers; for instance, a four-star general or admiral with 40 years of service can receive a pension of more than \$237,000 a year, even if his maximum salary on active duty was \$180,000.)

Webb says it would defy human nature if knowledge of the post-service prospects did not affect the way some high-ranking officers behave while in uniform, including "protecting the rice bowl" of military budgets and cultivating connections with their predecessors and their postretirement businesses. "There have always been some officers who went on to contracting jobs," Webb, who grew up in an Air Force family, told me recently. "What's new is the scale of the phenomenon, and its impact on the highest ranks of the military."

Of course, the modern military advertises itself as a place where young people who have lacked the chance or money for higher education can develop valuable skills, plus earn GI Bill benefits for post-service studies. That's good all around, and is part of the military's perhaps unintended but certainly important role as an opportunity creator for undercredentialed Americans. Webb is talking about a different, potentially corrupting "prepare for your future" effect on the military's best-trained, most influential careerists.

If more members of Congress or the business and media elite had had children in uniform, the United States would probably not have gone to war in Iraq. "It is no secret that in subtle ways, many of these top leaders begin positioning themselves for their second-career employment during their final military assignments," Webb wrote in *A Time*

to Fight. The result, he said, is a “seamless interplay” of corporate and military interests “that threatens the integrity of defense procurement, of controversial personnel issues such as the huge ‘quasi-military’ structure [of contractors, like Blackwater and Halliburton] that has evolved in Iraq and Afghanistan, and inevitably of the balance within our national security process itself.” I heard assessments like this from many of the men and women I spoke with. The harshest ones came not from people who mistrusted the military but from those who, like Webb, had devoted much of their lives to it.

A man who worked for decades overseeing Pentagon contracts told me this past summer, “The system is based on lies and self-interest, purely toward the end of keeping money moving.” What kept the system running, he said, was that “the services get their budgets, the contractors get their deals, the congressmen get jobs in their districts, and no one who’s not part of the deal bothers to find out what is going on.”

Of course it was the most revered American warrior of the 20th century, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who warned most urgently that business and politics would corrupt the military, and vice versa. Everyone has heard of this speech. Not enough people have actually read it and been exposed to what would now be considered its dangerously antimilitary views. Which mainstream politician could say today, as Eisenhower said in 1961, that the military-industrial complex has a “total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—[that] is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government”?

Seth Moulton, a few days after his victory in last fall’s congressional race, said that the overall quality and morale of people in the military has dramatically improved since the days of a conscript force. “But it’s become populated, especially at the highest ranks, by careerists, people who have gotten where they are by checking all the boxes and not taking risks,” he told me. “Some of the finest officers I knew were lieutenants who knew they were getting out, so weren’t afraid to make the right decision. I know an awful lot of senior officers who are very afraid to make a tough choice because they’re worried how it will look on their fitness report.” This may sound like a complaint about life in any big organization, but it’s something more. There’s no rival Army or Marine Corps you can switch to for a new start. There’s almost no surmounting an error or a black mark on the fitness or evaluation reports that are the basis for promotions.

Every institution has problems, and at every stage of U.S. history, some critics have considered the U.S. military overfunded, underprepared, too insular and self-regarding, or flawed in some other way. The difference now, I contend, is that these modern distortions all flow in one way or another from the chickenhawk basis of today’s defense strategy.

At enormous cost, both financial and human, the nation supports the world’s most powerful armed force. But because so small a sliver of the population has a direct stake in the consequences of military action, the normal democratic feedbacks do not work.

I have met serious people who claim that the military’s set-apart existence is best for its own interests, and for the nation’s. “Since the time of the Romans there have been people, mostly men but increasingly women, who have volunteered to be the praetorian guard,” John A. Nagl told me. Nagl is a West Point graduate and Rhodes Scholar who was a combat commander in

Iraq and has written two influential books about the modern military. He left the Army as a lieutenant colonel and now, in his late 40s, is the head of the Haverford prep school, near Philadelphia.

“They know what they are signing up for,” Nagl said of today’s troops. “They are proud to do it, and in exchange they expect a reasonable living, and pensions and health care if they are hurt or fall sick. The American public is completely willing to let this professional class of volunteers serve where they should, for wise purpose. This gives the president much greater freedom of action to make decisions in the national interest, with troops who will salute sharply and do what needs to be done.”

I like and respect Nagl, but I completely disagree. As we’ve seen, public inattention to the military, born of having no direct interest in what happens to it, has allowed both strategic and institutional problems to fester.

“A people untouched (or seemingly untouched) by war are far less likely to care about it,” Andrew Bacevich wrote in 2012. Bacevich himself fought in Vietnam; his son was killed in Iraq. “Persuaded that they have no skin in the game, they will permit the state to do whatever it wishes to do.”

“Our military and defense structures are increasingly remote from the society they protect,” Gary Hart’s working group told the president.

Mike Mullen thinks that one way to reengage Americans with the military is to shrink the active-duty force, a process already under way. “The next time we go to war,” he said, “the American people should have to say yes. And that would mean that half a million people who weren’t planning to do this would have to be involved in some way. They would have to be inconvenienced. That would bring America in. America hasn’t been in these previous wars. And we are paying dearly for that.”

With their distance from the military, politicians don’t talk seriously about whether the United States is directly threatened by chaos in the Middle East and elsewhere, or is in fact safer than ever (as Christopher Preble and John Mueller, of the Cato Institute, have argued in a new book, *A Dangerous World?*). The vast majority of Americans outside the military can be triply cynical in their attitude toward it. Triply? One: “honoring” the troops but not thinking about them. Two: “caring” about defense spending but really viewing it as a bipartisan stimulus program. Three: supporting a “strong” defense but assuming that the United States is so much stronger than any rival that it’s pointless to worry whether strategy, weaponry, and leadership are right.

The cultural problems arising from an arm’s-length military could be even worse. Charles J. Dunlap Jr., a retired Air Force major general who now teaches at Duke law school, has thought about civic-military relations through much of his professional life. When he was studying at the National Defense University as a young Air Force officer in the early 1990s, just after the first Gulf War, he was a co-winner of the prize for best student essay with an imagined-future work called “The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012.”

His essay's premise was cautionary, and was based on the tension between rising adulation for the military and declining trust in most other aspects of government. The more exasperated Americans grew about economic and social problems, the more relieved they were when competent men in uniform, led by General Thomas E. T. Brutus, finally stepped in to take control. Part of the reason for the takeover, Dunlap explained, was that the military had grown so separate from mainstream culture and currents that it viewed the rest of society as a foreign territory to occupy and administer.

Recently I asked Dunlap how the real world of post-2012 America matched his imagined version.

"I think we're on the cusp of seeing a resurgence of a phenomenon that has always been embedded in the American psyche," he said. "That is benign antimilitarism," which would be the other side of the reflexive pro-militarism of recent years. "People don't appreciate how unprecedented our situation is," he told me. What is that situation? For the first time in the nation's history, America has a permanent military establishment large enough to shape our dealings in the world and seriously influence our economy. Yet the Americans in that military, during what Dunlap calls the "maturing years of the volunteer force," are few enough in number not to seem representative of the country they defend.

"It's becoming increasingly tribal," Dunlap says of the at-war force in our chickenhawk nation, "in the sense that more and more people in the military are coming from smaller and smaller groups. It's become a family tradition, in a way that's at odds with how we want to think a democracy spreads the burden."

People within that military tribe can feel both above and below the messy civilian reality of America. Below, in the burdens placed upon them, and the inattention to the lives, limbs, and opportunities they have lost. Above, in being able to withstand hardships that would break their hipster or slacker contemporaries.

"It's become just too easy to go to war," says Admiral Mike Mullen, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"I think there is a strong sense in the military that it is indeed a better society than the one it serves," Dunlap said. "And there is some rationality for that." Anyone who has spent time with troops and their families knows what he means. Physical fitness, standards of promptness and dress, all the aspects of self-discipline that have traditionally made the military a place where misdirected youth could "straighten out," plus the spirit of love and loyalty for comrades that is found in civilian life mainly on sports teams. The best resolution of this tension between military and mainstream values would of course come as those who understand the military's tribal identity apply their strengths outside the tribe. "The generation coming up, we've got lieutenants and majors who had been the warrior-kings in their little outposts," Dunlap said of the young veterans of the recent long wars. "They were literally making life-or-death decisions. You can't take that generation and say, 'You can be seen and not heard.'"

In addition to Seth Moulton, this year's Congress will have more than 20 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, including new Republican Senators Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Joni Ernst of Iowa. The 17 who are already there, including Democratic Representatives Tulsi Gabbard and Tammy Duckworth and Republican Representatives Duncan D. Hunter and Adam Kinzinger, have played an active role in veterans' policies and in the 2013 debates about intervening in Syria. Gabbard was strongly against it; some of the Republican veterans were for it—but all of them made arguments based on firsthand observation of what had worked and failed. Moulton told me that the main lesson he'll apply from his four tours in Iraq is the importance of service, of whatever kind. He said that Harvard's famed chaplain during Moulton's years as an undergraduate physics student, the late Peter J. Gomes, had convinced him that "it's not enough to 'believe' in service. You should find a way, yourself, to serve." Barring unimaginable changes, "service" in America will not mean a draft. But Moulton says he will look for ways "to promote a culture where more people want to serve."

For all the differences in their emphases and conclusions, these young veterans are alike in all taking the military seriously, rather than just revering it. The vast majority of Americans will never share their experiences. But we can learn from that seriousness, and view military policy as deserving at least the attention we give to taxes or schools.

What might that mean, in specific? Here is a start. In the private report prepared for President Obama more than three years ago, Gary Hart's working group laid out prescriptions on a range of operational practices, from the need for smaller, more agile combat units to a shift in the national command structure to a different approach toward preventing nuclear proliferation. Three of the recommendations were about the way the country as a whole should engage with its armed forces. They were:

Appoint a commission to assess the long wars. This commission should undertake a dispassionate effort to learn lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq concerning the nature of irregular, unconventional conflict, command structures, intelligence effectiveness, indigenous cultural factors, training of local forces, and effective combat unit performance. Such a commission will greatly enhance our ability to know when, where, how, and whether to launch future interventions.

Clarify the decision-making process for use of force. Such critical decisions, currently ad hoc, should instead be made in a systematic way by the appropriate authority or authorities based on the most dependable and persuasive information available and an understanding of our national interests based on 21st-century realities.

Restore the civil-military relationship. The President, in his capacity as commander-in-chief, must explain the role of the soldier to the citizen and the citizen to the soldier. The traditional civil-military relationship is frayed and ill-defined. Our military and defense structures are increasingly remote from the society they protect, and each must be brought back into harmony with the other.

Barack Obama, busy on other fronts, had no time for this. The rest of us should make time, if we hope to choose our wars more wisely, and win them.