

Oct
24
2009

IS ADULATION OF THE MILITARY REALLY PATRIOTIC?

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Political Views

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Is Adulation of the Military Really Patriotic? by Ivan Eland

A recent article in the *New York Times* reported that the military has become frustrated with President Barack Obama because he hasn't quickly decided to risk more of their lives in an Afghan war that is likely to be unwinnable. In a post-World War II world that has featured a non-traditional militarized foreign policy of profligate interventions into the affairs of other nations, the U.S. military and its opinion have acquired great prestige and are accorded hushed reverence in American society. The military and flag are worshiped as never before. But is this really patriotism?



The nation's founders would roll over in their graves at what patriotism has become. After their bad experience with British colonial military abuses and seeing European citizens paying with blood and treasure for the frequent wars of their monarchs, the founders feared standing armies for undermining liberty. The U.S. Constitution rejected European militarism in favor of tight congressional controls over the employment, organization, and funding of the U.S. armed forces. Since World War II, those controls—such as congressional declarations of war—have been severely eroded.

And the American public, still feeling guilty over the admittedly terrible treatment of returning draftees from the Vietnam War, has retained its awe of the now voluntary military as an institution, even as it has soured on the Iraq and Afghan Wars. Even while fighting two unpopular wars, the public has supported huge defense budgets all out of proportion to what is needed to defend the country. Is this healthy for a republic?

The politically incorrect answer to this question is a resounding "no!" Being genuinely patriotic means supporting the country's society and culture. Excessive reverence for the U.S. government, military, and flag is merely nationalism and is similar to episodes in Russia, Germany, and Japan in the last century. And slathering the military with too many resources tempts politicians, such as George W. Bush and Madeleine Albright, to dream up unneeded military adventures overseas, which many times end in disaster.

True American patriotism, following in the tradition of the founding, rejects militarism without rejecting an appropriate role for the military. According to the Constitution, the active military should "provide for the common defense" and nothing more. This limited role should rule out the military being used to invade other nations for ostensibly lofty purposes.

To be even more politically incorrect, on 9/11, the U.S. military failed in this primary mission. No one was fired over this tragic fiasco. Since then, the military has been used to make things worse and actually undermine U.S. security. Armchair quasi-patriots—unfortunately, most of the country—don't like to acknowledge what triggers al-Qaeda's heinous attacks in the first place: U.S. interventions in Islamic countries. In both the counterproductive Afghan and Iraq invasions and occupations, the military made huge mistakes before having to

relearn counterinsurgency warfare tactics purposefully forgotten in the wake of its debacle in Vietnam. Does repeated incompetence deserve veneration?

One might then say so much for the military organization and its leaders, but shouldn't we still have reverence for the frontline soldier who risks his or her life for our freedom? Unfortunately, military personnel—like the general public from which they come—are under the same aforementioned delusion about what "patriotism" should be. One could argue that war is sometimes necessary for defense—although the current U.S. offensive-defensive strategy is unneeded, unconstitutional, and counterproductive—but war rarely leads to increased freedom, as the founders knew. The civil liberties erosion under the "war on terror" is illustrative. Also, military personnel should know, or take the time to learn if they don't, that the U.S. has been the most aggressive country on the planet during the Cold War and since in terms of the number of foreign military interventions.

Therefore, a new patriotism is needed. As a start, let's stop worshiping the military and flag and bring back the founders' old-fashioned respect for liberty and the Constitution.

Ivan Eland is Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at The Independent Institute. Eland is a graduate of Iowa State University and received an M.B.A. in Business Administration and Ph.D. in national security policy from George Washington University. He is also Director of Defense Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, and he spent 10 years in the U.S. Congress on national security issues, including stints as an investigator on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Principal Defense Analyst at the Congressional Budget Office. He is author of the books, *The Empire Has No Clothes: U.S. Foreign Policy and Putting "Defense" Back into U.S. Defense Policy*



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