



Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars by William A. Taylor.

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In *Military Service and American Democracy*, historian and US Navy veteran William Taylor (Angelo State Univ.) presents a well-researched and discerning examination of the historical context of current debates about the nature of military service and civil-military relations as a framework for larger discussions about service, citizenship, and democracy. Such debates, he argues, act as “a mirror reflecting the nation’s conscience” (188).

The book comprises ten chronological chapters regarding changes in military personnel policy from World War II through the official conclusion of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan at the end of 2014. Specifically, Taylor explores “two pivotal questions regarding U.S. military service: who serves in the military, and how” (2). Although not a sociologist, he weaves policy history into broader cultural questions of representation, ethics, and equality, noting that

military service has been an arena of contested citizenship, one in which American values have been tested, questioned, and ultimately redefined This process resulted in greater inclusiveness and expanded opportunities in military service.... Modern American history witnessed constant debates regarding military service: whether it was to be compulsory or voluntary, who served, and what was the best method of providing personnel for the nation’s defense. This process of defining military service through personnel policy, reconstructing it based on practical, political, and social pressures, and expanding it to eliminate inequities illuminates the role of military service as a litmus test for American values. As a result, military service promoted citizenship, opportunity, and equality. In this sense, military personnel policy served as the nation’s conscience, bringing difficult and uncomfortable questions about American values into sharp relief. (2-3)

Taylor proceeds to examine the historical records of salient personnel policies beginning with large-scale conscription in the Second World War and ending with the reliance on private security contractors that continues today. He contends that the tension between conscription and voluntary service had unforeseen sociocultural consequences, as different segments of the population were granted or denied the right to serve. In some cases, such as racial desegregation, the military was ahead of American civil society. In others, such as sexual orientation, it lagged behind.

Taylor concentrates particularly on the implementation of the draft during World War II, racial desegregation during the Korean War, and the creation of the volunteer force in the wake of Vietnam. He quotes public testimony, personal letters, and official memoranda to illustrate the struggles over new policies between the Department of Defense, the military services, and Congress; resistance to change was a common theme across the decades. The author’s heavy reliance on citations from archival sources sometimes makes his prose feel repetitive and dry, but his verbatim quotations of various officials’ arguments and counterarguments add a welcome human touch to what could have been an impersonal story of contending bureaucracies.

The book's best quality lies in the underlying sense of dramatic irony in its narrative. Sitting comfortably in the present, we know that racial desegregation and the expansion of women's roles did not degrade combat effectiveness, readiness, or unit cohesion; we also know that polemics claiming a volunteer force "would be either all African American, all poor, all female, or all of the above" (141) were not borne out by events. Objections to the volunteer force and the services' attempts to derail its implementation now seem risible, as does then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell's opposition to repealing the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy back in 1992. The effect of these disputes is to make clear that today's debates about personnel policy echo the history of the last seventy-five years.

Another leitmotif of the book is that, on the bureaucratic level, grand ideas for shaping the nature of military service were routinely foiled by the personnel requirements of new conflicts. Thus, for example, during the Korean War, racial segregation quickly broke down as African-American combat units reached their authorized strength faster than white units. Unwilling to halt the flow of conscripts into theater based purely on race, senior commanders instead adopted an informal policy of desegregation, even though results at lower echelons were, at first, mixed. By the end of the war, the proof of concept was well in hand. Though in some cases ideological motivation underlay the move toward desegregation, in the end, the cold, rational reality of combat effectiveness was the chief catalyst for change.

Throughout, Taylor avoids passing moral judgments on contentious arguments about who can or should serve. Only in the chapter on private security contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan does he take a clear position, asserting that the "uneasy relationship between military service and private security contractors has become the major contemporary challenge of the volunteer force" (170) and "private security contractors have served to sever the vital connection between citizenship and military service" (178). Here, too, rational calculations of military effectiveness have outweighed moral arguments about service. But the use of contractors inevitably raises a fundamental ethical question about the nature of modern war: who has the authority to kill, or be killed, for his or her country? That question is beyond the scope of Taylor's book,¹ but the "severed link" between American citizens and soldiers lies at the heart of contemporary civil-military relations:

the ideal of military service, as it has in the many previous debates considered throughout this book, can reflect the dangers of this drift so that civilian leaders will redefine military service as a bond between citizens and their nation, just as they redefined military service countless other times whenever it strayed from the values of a democracy. (187)

A skeptic might wonder just what incentives would drive such change in today's environment. But William Taylor's principal achievement here is to have persuasively shown that the study of changes in American military service during and since World War II, often in the face of strong opposition, gives us reason to hope that the bond between citizen and soldier can one day be re-forged.

1. But see Amy E. Eckert, *Outsourcing War: The Just War Tradition in the Age of Military Privatization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U Pr, 2016).