

**Elucidating the Future:  
Soldiers and their Civil-Military Environment**

## *Service and the Cultural Divide in Civil-Military Relations*

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### **Introduction**

Service represents the undeniable essence of a military officer, a charitable worker and ought to be so for a politician – or at least I so believed until recently. In a recent conversation with twenty something German speakers I found myself cornered and attacked when I sought the correct German translation for the English statements: “I serve at the bequest of the people” and “I am a servant of the state.” I wanted to use the German words: “dienen” and “Diener” respectively. I was told in rather harsh terms that such words were no longer used, at least in some German speaking circles, and to those, such words were considered negative, implying a form of slavery.

Confronted with this conflict, I approached several colleagues across the German-speaking world and found that the terms are, indeed, still used – that they are neither old nor incorrect, merely disputed or misunderstood. Standing between the generations, between those in the military and those in the private sector, the cultural divide is clear and entrenched. How far this divide stretches will directly affect the effort required to build upon and maintain civil - military relations in the future. As it appears, the task is not simple.

As a life-long civilian and student of human political relations, I find myself in deep water when presenting arguments on the state of civil-military relations to such a distinguished audience of military professionals. Nonetheless, it is my civilian nature and my now distant memories of a youthful anti-authoritarianism, which provide me a unique perspective in this matter.

Civil-military relations can be divided in three parts: 1) civilian control of the military, 2) the attitude of civilians to the military and 3) the attitude of the military toward civil society. What I would like to focus on here is item 2, the attitude of civilians to the military. Within this context, I want to discuss the idea of service, both in terms of essence as well semantics. I wish to contend that no matter which wording is used to reflect the meaning of the word “service” that its essence remains constant, and that service as a social phenomenon is essential to civilian respect and ultimately control of the military.

Furthermore, I want to try to answer several questions related to the position and role service plays in society, vis-à-vis civilian attitudes toward the military. Among these are:

1. How do we define service and the servant?
2. Is this an issue of language or philosophy?
3. To what extent does service as a social event exist within our respective communities?

And finally,

4. Does the attitude toward service, either in language or in essence, make any real difference in determining civil society’s attitude

toward the military and hence impact upon the civil military relationship?

### **How do We Define Service and the Servant?**

The word “Service” in English comes with many definitions. The three most common are:

1. Employment in duties for another
2. The armed forces of a nation OR
3. Work duties for a superior, such as a servant

Idiomatically, the term service is widely understood as “to help or be of use.” Interestingly enough the word’s roots, its etymology, stems from the Latin *servitum* (slavery) and the servant *servus* (slave). It is a peculiar thing, one must note, that within Western society and its social and economic order, so much emphasis is placed on an activity rooted in slavery, the very opposite of our individualistic, freedom borne states. I will revisit this point later when discussing language and semantics.

In the meantime, however, the term service, or its equivalents in other languages, has various contextual meanings that need to be clarified. Some of these are vital terms used regularly in expressing the attitudes of the civilian population, the actors involved in the civil military relationship and the goals of military institutions, their officer corps and missions.

Take the term “Community Service.” The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines community service as “services volunteered by individuals or an organization to benefit a community or its institutions<sup>35</sup>”. Notice the terminology. The key terms are “volunteered” and “to benefit a community.”

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<sup>35</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Available online at: <http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/> from 17 MAR 2005

Public Service is another term defined as “a service performed for the benefit of the public, especially by a nonprofit organization<sup>36</sup>” or “the business of supplying an essential commodity to the public<sup>37</sup>”. Both parts of this definition present an insight into service, for both refer to an act, by either an individual or institution, performing or supplying to the benefit of many.

Interestingly enough the terms “civil service” and “public servant” are defined in a rather practical manner, namely “those branches of public service that are not legislative, judicial or military<sup>38</sup>” and “a person who holds a government position by election or appointment<sup>39</sup>” respectively.

To many civilians, particularly those with either no civic-voluntary or military experience, or just a unqualified antagonism to it, service and being a servant is nothing more than an economic fact, often referred to as the service economy. To such individuals working as a salesman, tech-support or even doctors, service is something defined in a job description. To such individuals it may very well hold no meaning or relevance whatsoever. Perhaps worse is that to many, particularly the young in Western Europe, service – to do something for someone or something greater than the self with no discernable return – is no less than slavery, to be despised and shunned at all cost. Understanding that there is a segment of the population whose numbers are not small and who see service as a negative is vital to recognizing the difficulties faced by current and future leaders in both the civilian and military sectors.

Finally, is to serve or to perform a service synonymous with being a servant? The traditional understanding of a servant is not merely one who serves, but rather one who is in the servitude of another. In fact, its roots, namely the Latin *servus* meaning slave, are very clear. Nonetheless, English-speaking societies tend to use the word servant in reference to public officials. It is a contradiction in meaning that bedevils translation. But what is meant by it? In this context, the term public servant is not referring to a slave. However, it is referring to the

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

complete dependence of authority upon the will of the public. Such an individual, although wielding perhaps great power, is subject to the will and often whims of their proverbial master, namely society at large, the electorate, and hence the term.

Historically, servants were indeed slaves in one form or another. Based on the concept that the master was of greater worth, the servant would act and dedicate his/her life for the benefit of the master. Many would argue that little has changed in the world economy since then. Nevertheless, servitude has indeed evolved. Indentured servitude, a form of voluntary slavery was widely practiced by immigrants to the United States who exchanged the cost of travel and migration with ten, even twenty years of dedicated service without pay, whereupon they earned their freedom. Today, citizens across the occidental world, regularly volunteer their time, efforts and in the case of the military, police and first responders, often put themselves in harms way for the benefit of all. Each in his or her own way is in fact a servant of some cause greater than the self.

So, what is service then? Clearly there are nuances, distinctions and most of all interpretations that make a discussion about a term, most often confused over its semantics, very difficult indeed.

What we glean from the aforementioned definitions is that service, both as a direct term and in its contextual usage, relates to an activity conducted on behalf of something greater. Whether it is an individual volunteering time or an institution providing security there is always in all definitions a relationship between the small and the large, between individual and community, between contribution and benefit – whether it is seen as positive or negative.

For the purposes of this discussion and for debating its relevance, I wish to settle on a simple definition of service as befits the context of the social good, i.e. that which serves the interests and well being of a community, society or state.

Service is an act by an individual or group thereof toward a cause that benefits the greater perceived good. It is an act beyond self.

## **Service – Issue of Language or Philosophy?**

Before I discuss in depth the role of service as I have just defined, I must ask whether the debate over service is merely one of language, as if it were a matter of rhetoric. I propose the contrary. It is one about an idea, an essence. Service or whatever word replaces it represents the concept of an individual dedicating to something beyond the self.

The idea in question touches, if not constitutes the proverbial glue that binds a society together. Without this cohesive force, societies disintegrate, from the family to the community to the state. How one understands service, the dimensions and nature of the self relative to the society and vis-à-vis all humanity, can be critical in determining a nation's ability to respond to and survive tragedy. Within this context, understanding what role service orientation plays in civil society is vital to understanding civil society as a whole and its relationship with military institutions.

Language and culture are so closely bound together, that one cannot merely disregard the semantic element of the debate. As an English speaker and as an American I have, what the Swiss author Christoph Braendle<sup>40</sup> described as “a natural perspective, rendering everything else as a mere deviation.” In his view, an individual possesses a semantic understanding of language – the natural perspective, which has no connection to either the historical roots or essence of the term. There is a clear logic to this. Referring again to the United States and its politicians, Senators, Congressmen and Presidents proclaim regularly that they are the servants of the people. Yet, in fact, they are during their tenure as legislators and executives, the masters of the people. It is also true that they are in temporary possession of their office, by way of their constituents' consent, and in so doing, are serving the role of their representative. The dichotomy here is interesting. For it is in the end an almost Plato-esque scenario. The rulers or masters of society serve the society. The key is “almost” as the wealth required to compete for public office is so significant, that those in the race are most certainly those more commonly associated with masters rather than servants.

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<sup>40</sup> Derives from unpublished notes taken from interview with Christoph Braendle (September/October 2004)

Language is an issue, and as Mr. Braendle states it is indeed a natural perspective. It is very difficult for an individual to separate the essence of an idea from its linguistic expression. Therefore, taking into account that the entire debate over the role that service plays in defining a civil society's orientation toward the military, may well be swept away by the mere assertion that it is semantic, I will try to both define and characterize what is meant by service, and why it plays such an essential and perhaps controversial role.

### **Service – Does it exist within our Communities?**

In the United States, service is widely considered as an honorable act. Being a servant to a cause, to a friend or to the state is perceived as an act requiring selflessness. American politicians often refer to their jobs in light of their role to serve, not merely represent, their respective communities. Charitable organizations and faith-based institutions provide the bulk of good will programs within its cities. And often referred to as noble, voluntary military service is regarded the highest order of personal sacrifice. In a society that puts so much emphasis on service and holds in such high esteem those who place service above self, it is no wonder that the military and civil sectors have a long standing solid relationship.

Service manifests itself in many forms in Western society. At the most basic level there are its religious institutions, providing shelter, food and welfare to society's most needy. There is the social tradition of volunteering, of giving in the form of charity, even of political participation. Yet service as defined here is not the same animal in different cultural perspectives. Europe and America, no matter how often we proclaim the contrary, do indeed hold different worldviews, and I would argue to the surprise and perhaps chagrin of many in Europe that the United States has a longer and more consistent history of service oriented community institutions than any other country on earth.

When comparing the role service-based institutions and habits play in society it is incumbent upon the viewer to recognize that Europe, since the Second World War, has widely instituted sweeping state-run welfare programs. It is perhaps for this reason that one finds less privately

organized service and donor based institutions playing a lead role in its communities. Hence, in order to more precisely evaluate the role such institutions play, it may serve us better to identify the characteristics of service before comparing societies outright.

Let us begin with the role of religious institutions. The United States is replete with churches, synagogues, mosques and the like. The roots of the nation are intrinsically bound to the desire of individuals to be free in their expression of religion. Hence religion and its open and outward expression are essential parts of the American fabric.

A Frenchman's observation of religion in American society underscores this point:

*“Religion in America, takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions...I do not know whether all Americans have a sincere faith in their religion – for who can search the human heart? – but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation and to every rank of society”* (Alexis de Tocqueville)<sup>41</sup>.

The 2004 PEW Forum Poll of The American Religious Landscape and Politics found that 85% of Americans attend church regularly or often and 81% actively believe in God<sup>42</sup>. They frequent their local churches and religious communities. They take part in religious services and local community projects. Whether rich or poor, they donate, participate and take part in what they perceive to be the well being of their local community.

To what extent is this true in Europe? In many regards, Europe is far more secular than the United States. Although it is true that in many European countries, there are state authorized religion taxes, which collect revenues from the population on behalf of religious institutions,

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<sup>41</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville “Democracy in America”, Vol. 1, Chapter 17, available online at [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc\\_indx.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_indx.html) 17 MAR 2005

<sup>42</sup> John C. Green: The American Religious Landscape and Political Attitudes: A Baseline for 2004. Internet Website <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/green-full.pdf> from 17 MAR 2005

its population increasingly perceives organized religion in a negative light.

Europe has a great deal of experience with religious domination of the state. Today, a new generation and culture are growing up hostile to its public expression and role. Simultaneously many would argue that Europe's extensive government managed social network has replaced the need for faith-based institutional activities. Hence, in the case of Europe, it is the government that guarantees the community's welfare.

The distinction here is profound. The average individual in the United States lacks a governmental institution to protect him or herself from the ravages of survival. Hence private and religious institutions are necessary to fill the gap. As a result, individual service, in this case albeit through faith-based institutions, is necessary for the survival of the community. In Europe, where the state assumes this responsibility, little local, family, or social obligation exists for an individual to volunteer in order to better his or her own community.

In the case of the United States personal service is therefore an act drawn out by necessity. In some parts of Europe, it is never even initiated as it is relegated to the state.

The legal structure in the United States seems particularly designed to promote self initiated activity, whether for the public good or its detriment. Let me provide the proverbial inner-city criminal's guide to understanding the inherent, albeit empirical, difference in legal orientation between the US and Europe and why it fits here. In the United States, everything is by default legal unless it is specifically defined as illegal. For this reason designer drugs in American cities are constantly one step ahead of law enforcement. Until an accident happens, until someone dies, no classification for the substance will exist and hence will not be considered illegal. In Europe it seems that exactly the contrary is the case. The model here, empirically seen, is – if it is not specifically legal, it is illegal. The implication is thus: Americans tend to initiate and act until laws stop them. This orientation permeates almost every aspect of American life, whether economic, religious, philanthropic, legal or illegal.

The social tradition of volunteering may also be an interesting reflection of the role service plays in civil society. Volunteering as a form of social order is a natural product of social participation. Both Europe and the United States are ripe with such activities. One may look to the many NGOs that have popped up in the recent decades. With goals from poverty alleviation, to foreign policy, from environmentalism to anti-globalization to military policy, NGOs constitute the most basic form of public participation in governance after voting. People sharing ideas and coalescing around an issue, bringing it to the public at large and affecting public policy is one of the foremost components of a free and representative society.

Volunteering not only exists in the United States, many would argue it is the backbone and cohesive agent of its society. Contrary to the popular belief outside the U.S. that no social net exists for its poorest citizens, churches, synagogues, mosques and various nonprofit organizations work tirelessly supporting their community's most unfortunate. The Bush administration capitalized on this phenomenon in recent years creating a program called the Faith-Based initiative allowing the federal government to openly support such initiatives financially.

This active citizen participation is highly reflective of the role service plays in our societies and illustrates the level of importance individuals attach to it. In short, I act because I can. In the United States the legal system not only fulfills the requirement of I can, it outright encourages it through law. In fact, if one has a cause in mind, and one has a significant enough group of like minded individuals, one can establish an institution that is not only exempt of tax, it may even receive vast amounts of government aid in grants. There is a saying: "the most profitable business in the world is a nonprofit." Green Peace is but one well-known example. Indeed, such laws, found in both the United States and Europe, foster the idea of individual service.

Nevertheless, distinctions remain that may be best relayed through a short story. When I first came to unnamed European country years ago to work with an intergovernmental organization, I went to the local Museum of Natural History and found it both rich and fascinating. Being a typical, if not otherwise silly American, I asked if I could

volunteer my time for the museum. I had to ask some ten different individuals until finally I was told, it was not allowed. When I asked why, I was told it was against the law. The idea that volunteering my time for the benefit of the community was illegal was no less than astounding. I cannot tell you if it is still true today, but I can say this: if a community cannot accept an individual's donation of time by law, then how can it expect its citizenry to volunteer for its defense?

Where time and effort are not or cannot be given, donations can be made. Donating money is yet another reflection of the role of service in a society. Few argue that donating ten thousand dollars to a local soup kitchen is equivalent to actually going there and delivering food to the homeless. Yet interestingly enough on average Americans donate circa 2 percent of their annual incomes to charity. If one takes into account that the 2003 Budget brought in over one trillion dollars in personal income tax, which is at least between 20 billion dollars annually in personal philanthropy. The number is staggering when one considers the welfare budget of some of the smaller European countries. Simply stated, no such equivalent social practice exists in Europe. The money needed for such programs, from social welfare to supporting the arts is a matter of government policy, of budgets and taxes.

For these reasons and probably many more, it is clear that there are inherent distinctions, in fact, institutional distinctions, between the United States and Europe as to the role individual service plays in securing and benefiting its respective societies. I would argue that, independent of any other mitigating factors, Europe's current orientation toward a stratified system of social welfare distribution does not promote its individual citizen's to provide service, sacrifice their time, efforts or wealth for the benefit of their communities.

I would also argue that the United States is uniquely designed around that very goal. It may very well be the case that governments are better designed to manage such activities, but it is, as I mentioned earlier, my natural perspective to believe otherwise.

I further believe that societies that exhibit the characteristics of individual service in privately managed and funded welfare

organizations, legislative orders and political participation are more inclined to both respect and cherish and ultimately manage the military.

Therefore, the extent to which service as a social event exists within civil society directly affects civil-military relations.

### **Civil Society's Attitude toward Military Service and its Impact upon Civil-Military Relations**

It has been widely, and successfully, argued that the real issue in civil-military relations is a matter of threat perception. Accordingly, the argument goes that if the civilian community is aware of a threat and perceives that threat as present, that they would necessarily support military budgets and programs proposed by their respective military establishments. This may indeed be the case, but it is by no means the only factor, and looking at Europe's reaction to terrorist attacks in Spain, it is by no means a guarantor for reaction.

Threat perception is important, but when the audience is not receptive, mistrusts, dislikes or is contemptuous of the military, its methods and its purpose, only the direst of immediate threats may suffice. I believe that the level to which the civil society is integrated with its military and experienced in social participation directly affects the relationship between the civilian and military spheres. Whether it is an issue of deployment, recruitment or budgeting, the orientation of a nation's civilian population towards its military is essentially predetermined, except in the most extreme of cases. US defense budgets, for example and like those of any country, rise and fall and it has been common logic to conclude that this is directly related to perceived threats. When under threat the budget rises, when not, it is downsized.

Nevertheless, despite the status of a threat, the U.S. population seems inclined to view its military officers as experts in their fields, protecting the republic from threats real and present as well as supposed and future based. Indeed, the institution is to a great extent often revered and, to its credit, is seen as a place where religious, cultural and racial divides were overcome, long before civil society was capable of the same. With its 215 year history of civil military relations, a militia in every state and a

system of reserves that spans the entire country, the US military has become a networked institution intimately woven into the fabric of American society. That network serves as the underlying basis for technical support to its war fighting abilities and renders it impossible for the military to fight a war without the deep support of the population. Such integration is essential, and since it is based on a part-time, peacetime and voluntary force, it is directly integrated into the civil society.

Few will dispute that the United States as a society as well as a state is often idealistic in its policies and in its understanding of the term service. Therefore, it makes perfect sense for the U.S. civilian community to have a natural inclination to support its defense forces while not limiting that perception to the military.

First responders, policemen, firemen, emergency units of all sorts are all held in high regard by the society. The perceived relationship between citizen and policemen, between individual and authority is surprisingly smooth and respectful. The slogan of some of the larger metropolitan police departments read: “to protect and to serve.”

In fact, imbedded within every echelon of American society is the orientation of service. This is not to say that it the cause of a strong civil-military relation, but without question, the understanding and acceptance of the significance of service does indeed directly influence the relationship.

Is the relationship between citizen and policeman the same in Europe? From a historical perspective it is not. Europe’s police, its internal security and military forces were until very recently the tools of state suppression, of a king’s authority, and not derived from the will or license of the people. It is hence no surprise that there is a distant relationship between the internal security forces of many Western European states and its population. If there is not a basic relationship of mutual understanding and respect at the lowest internal level, how could there be one at the highest, military level?

## **Conclusion**

Finally, I am impelled to ask the question that many civilians ask: Who owns the military? The classic study of civil-military relations dictates that the military is under civilian control. But what is civilian control?

In the United States the military belongs to the Congress, not the government. The distinction is legal but important. The people elect the Congress. Intermediaries called electors elect the President. While the President is the commander-in-chief, the military answers to the people through the Congress. This is not quite the case in most parliamentary forms of government, where the legislative and executive powers are vested in a single position or branch, under the Chancellor or Prime Minister. In such political structures where accountability is subject to the will of the party in executive authority, there is an almost logical cynicism bred into the electorate.

How a population perceives its level of ownership of government affects how they perceive their military; and in so far as individual service is spread, both in the armed forces as well as in social civil society, so is the perception of ownership advanced.

Additionally, there is a generational divide. Both Europe and America are experiencing a changing of the guard at the highest levels of their respective elected institutions. How the younger generation perceives the military, how their worldview defines threat perception, and to what degree they possess a sense of ownership of government will affect the next 50 years of civil military relations.

In the United States, service plays a key role, as both a cause and reflection of the relationship between citizen and soldier. Does it do so in Europe? If it does then the future of Europe's civil-military relationship will be constructive. If it does not then the European armed forces, barring clear and present threat scenarios, are in for continued budget cuts, fewer missions and decreased acceptance over time.

While a society's orientation to the concept of service above self is not the sole determiner of its views toward its soldiers, the role that individual service plays in a civil society does, indeed, impact and

reflect upon the civil-military relations within a country. It is a cultural factor that can soften or harden the relationship.

Understanding the role of service in society, its meaning to individuals, and its relevance is crucial to understanding the barriers which exist between the citizenry, its elected officials and the armed forces of a post-modern Europe. Bridging those divides in the coming years is critical, for without, Europe's population will grow less willing and less able to respect the military, and thus too the politicians, weakening further an already shaky relationship.