Professionalism and Politicalization: Notes on the Military and Civilian Control

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I.

The general topic “Military values in a Democratic Society” should be approached with caution; not because of its novelty, but rather because of the fact that the assumed conflict is a somewhat conventional and overworked one. It certainly does exist, but there is not much agreement as to what it involves and what it means. To begin with, the existence of any particular group within the general society—from the family on upwards—poses problems of conflict. The conventional democratic attitude seems to be that these can almost always be resolved with mutual benefit. Indeed, it can be argued that this process of conflict and agreement is what the term society actually stands for. If a group doesn’t raise such problems, e.g., interstate pen pals, it isn’t really very social.

Between armed forces and a society considering itself democratic, on the other hand, this assumption is considered to be somewhat shaky. A widely spread sentiment holds that armed forces are at least a necessary evil and at worst a social menace. The prospects for mutual benefit are, in fact, held to be exceptionally limited. In case of conflict, it is felt, someone has to give in and the party that gives in loses: if the military, its effectiveness; if society, its democratic values. Similar situations, moreover, are not assumed to apply to other general social systems: monarchical, aristocratic, oligarchic, traditional, totalitarian, etc. There it is assumed that the process of negotiation can take place without either side’s running prohibitive risks, mainly because the process of negotiation is controlled by an ultimate authority which can be depended upon to resolve all quandaries in terms of what it considers to be its own benefit. In democracy however, the process of negotiation is assumed to be an open-ended one. If there is an irreconcilable conflict, therefore, it is because of the belief that the two concepts “democracy” and “military” are unnatural partners, and the job in order is to find out why this belief should exist.

What, first of all, do we mean by the term “military”? A profession? A branch of the political order? A social class? A conglomerate of all three? Mostly the first, to judge by current usage. But if a profession, why the concern with social compatibility? We have recently come to hear a good deal about the social responsibilities of doctors, lawyers, academics and clergymen. But that is not the same as questioning the social utility of their calling. The assumption remains that they perform a valuable social role. With the military, however, we cannot ignore the persistent and widespread belief that their professional attitudes and skills are socially both useless and destruc-
tive, and that their failure to subvert democratic values is attributable only to political weakness on their part and the determined vigilance of their opponents.

It can be argued that it is the peculiar nature of military professionalism that causes the trouble. An armed force can be defined as a group trained and disciplined with the aim of its being an instrument for the systematic manipulation of violence. As such, it is clearly a threat to everyone else. But, by analogy, we could define lawyers as a group trained and disciplined as an instrument for the systematic manipulation of property transactions and official procedures, and doctors as a group designed for the systematic manipulation of bodily processes, academics of thought processes and clergymen of individual consciences and moral codes. All implicitly threatening preoccupations. So, where’s the difference?

Medicine, law, education, and religion are professions which appear to pose less of a threat or which seem to be more controllable. Perhaps because a democratic society harbors the assumption that there is a basic equality when contacts can be negotiated on the basis of personal choice and when the layman is free to shop among a range of particular skills and outlooks. Moreover, in most cases the professionals we deal with are primarily members of our particular community and only secondarily members of an exclusive class. We are dealing with individuals, in a series of discrete acts. The power we give them may affect our own particular welfare, but it has virtually no effect on the basic social structure. Whereas, in the case of the military we are always dealing with a monolithic system and cannot bargain on an individual basis. Indeed, in an analogous case that where religion is so organized that society can only deal with its professional members as part of an organization and where no differences are recognizable or permitted among individual clerics, the church has generally been regarded as a threat to democratic values. It can be argued, therefore, that when we speak of democratic values, we mean pluralistic as opposed to totalitarian democracy, and that opposition to the military as a component of society is based on the belief that essentially and unalterably it is a monopolistic and monolithic structure. It is the nature of the system rather than its function that raises difficulties.

There is, as a matter of fact, a traditional ideological allegiance between non-professional, i.e., militia-type military organizations and societies more or less democratic and pluralistic in nature. Such societies held that armed forces whose officers are primarily members of some secular body and only subordinately soldiers posed no threat to civilian control. The assumed danger of military intervention comes only with the advent of professionalism; the existence of a body of officers exclusively devoted to a military life.

It is not that democratic-pluralistic type societies are opposed to violence. There is no firm ground for holding them to be either more or less pacific in nature than societies of any other kind. There is, moreover, not much evidence that in societies of this kind military organizations — professional or otherwise — are more inclined than other groups to subvert the normal processes of government. The influence of big business and of professional political associations is, it can be argued, much greater and much more adept at thwarting and distorting expressions of the general
will. What is really held against the professional military, it seems to me, is the belief that they are a more or less alien body, unwilling and unable to play the social game as others feel it should be played.

II.

What kind of game do they play? Is it the systematic manipulation of force in an incoherently violent society that puts us off? But then how much violence is there in a military career? Consider the hypothetical case of a professional American officer born in the early 1890’s. He would have gotten his commission in time for a year’s combat in World War I, seen, at most, four years of action in World War II, three years battle in Korea, and then retired in the middle or late fifties; a maximum of eight years of war in een forty-odd professional career. Compare this to the career of a doctor or lawyer and the suspicion emerges that war may not be the working context of military life.

This contrast is indeed enlightening in more ways than one. Professionalism in one case limits access to society, in the other broadens it. The doctor or the lawyer, for example, may have worked during his career span as a private practitioner, for some official agency, in business or for some non-profit institution. The professional soldier, on the other hand, will have worked only in the context of an armed force, and there exclusively in the service of the state. The connection seems invariable: no political system, no armed forces; no armed forces, no military career.

Military experience then is time spent within a peculiar system. Military careers are determined almost entirely by that system’s values. The professional prospects of a soldier are determined by the grades he receives in the performance of his particular assignment, be it PX commander or Kamikazi pilot. If his superiors give him a favorable judgment, he moves on to higher and greater responsibilities. If not, he stays where he is or drops out.

The professionalism of the military is, therefore, radically different in nature from the other social instances of this concept. There is no “free-floating” element in its application. Lawyers, doctors and Ph.Ds. may lose the approbation of their peers and still gain a satisfactory degree of personal satisfaction working for some other non-professionally oriented social institution, if society is such as to allow a sufficient degree of pluralistic differentiation. Soldiers can find professional satisfaction only within the context of an armed force.

A realistic analysis of the relationship between an armed force and its society must, therefore, concentrate on the problems which the factors of internal control and external self-sufficiency pose for a massive bureaucratic system. In doing so, it is advisable to concentrate on the routine rather than the extraordinary circumstances of military life. Combat accordingly should be seen in proper perspective. It is abnormal insofar as it subjects military operations to factors falling outside the control of the system. Its conduct exposes the “natural” network of communication and authority to unforeseeable and often unmanageable disruptions. It forces the system to accept as members, individuals whom it would otherwise judge to be
unqualified and undesirable. It exposes its operations to the judgments of uncommitted and unsympathetic outsiders. If the organization survives and prospers, it is in spite of and not because of such experiences. The strength and wellbeing of a military organization is to be measured not in terms of its relationships with actual or potential allies and opponents, but rather by its capacity to mobilize and manipulate its own internal resources.

III.

In its way, all this reduces itself to the old chestnut of the armed forces being a “state within the state”. There is, however, a vital difference. The ostensible objective of the conventional state is that of coordinating the activities of the various social groups so that they work towards some general end or set of ends. The ostensible objective of a professional armed force is to plan and carry out its operations with a minimum of interference from outside forces. This objective reflects another peculiar aspect of military professionalism, what might be called its intransitive nature, that is to say, its reluctance to act outside the organizational framework. Let me be more specific: the primary target of other professional activity is the uninitiate, laymen who are devoid of the skills in question. Normatively speaking, it is more meritorious and more rewarding to serve the ignorant rather than the informed. Among the military, on the other hand, professional reputation increases proportionately with the professional level of those who are the object of one’s skills; leading a commando unit is preferable to serving with the militia, staff appointments preferable to line appointments, regular opponents preferable to guerrillas, etc. The organization not only dictates the standards of proper and improper behavior, it also sets itself up as a working model of the social system within which such conduct is to be carried out. The ultimate goal of a military career is an appointment in an organization where every individual present has attained the highest possible level of experience and authority, e.g., the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Another way of phrasing this is to say that the values of military professionalism are upwardly mobile. Far from seeking to increase his circle of inferior and dependent laymen, the individual officer charts a career whose success is measured by the degree to which his associates are equal or superior in rank to him; if not in rank then at least in some quasi-ideological equivalent, valor, social caste, race or doctrinal purity. In this again, it can be contrasted with other professions whose social values are downwardly mobile, i.e., their proficiency is measured by the degree to which untrained individuals are brought under their influence and control.

As an individual operating within a social system, therefore, the professional soldier’s major objective is that of closing the circle of his social contacts, so that his activities take place in a context where everyone involved is not only a member in good standing of his own organization, but also someone whose future prospects are better than average. His own professional standing is a direct reflection of the aggregate rank of his associates. In planning and evaluating his own career he accordingly has an intense interest in prescribing and maintaining the standards and practices of his
peers. We can contrast this with other professions where prestige and success are measured by the nature and the number of the laymen served.

A soldier trained and indoctrinated according to a certain pattern has then a vested interest in the maintenance of that formula. It guarantees the professional value of his own skills and it provides him with a scale for measuring the status of his associates. More significantly, he will see in his associates' standing a reflection of his own. In an army where horsemanship is the measure of merit, assignment to a mule train may well be regarded as a dead end. In a system where staff planning is stressed, an unbroken succession of field and combat assignments might, even if honorific, be considered a prelude to an early retirement. Not because the skills involved are lacking in complexity or that they are unimportant, but because it is a matter of common observation and general knowledge that officers given such assignments are being denied the company and the experience of their more promising colleagues.

IV.

What I have been describing are the mechanisms whereby a profession is transformed into a caste; in this particular case, the armed forces from an agency of public service into an exclusive social system. But even in the context of this admittedly hypothetical transformation, the fact remains that armed forces cannot exist in isolated form. They are by necessity attached to the outside world; but their inward orientation makes this attachment fundamentally simple. In simple logical terms, their external relations can be described as falling into two general classes: relations with individuals who are not members of any armed force, and relations with individuals who are members of another armed force (in the interests of simplification, let us assume that within any given society all soldiers are members of a single armed force). The former class are, of course, civilians, the latter opponents, actual or potential.

Under the conditions of pluralistic democracy, the relations between the armed forces and civilians are, at least theoretically, quite straightforward. Soldiers are public officials. They are not the embodiment of any particular set of values. They are not the chosen defenders of any specific social or political institution. They hold public office on the assumption that they will provide society with a specific set of services whenever society considers itself in the need of having such services performed. The formal contacts of soldiers and civilians are therefore political in nature; that is to say, they focus on the problem of the acquisition and retention of public office. The medium of civil society provides the soldiers with a background from which he emerges and a standard by which the social importance of his services may be measured. If soldiers need other soldiers in order to give themselves the sense of belonging to a profession, they need civilians in order to persuade themselves that the profession they belong to operates in the real world, and that its criteria are objectively imposed and officially accepted. Without the civilian alternative, military rank would be a natural not an elective state. Without the notion of political accountability military status would be a caste function rather than a token of efficiency. Under these latter circumstances armed forces could certainly exist, but they would not be professional
in the generally accepted sense. The existence of an active public permits the military assumption that rank confers responsibility and that professional advancement is a form of compensation for personal sacrifices in the general interest.

Relations with opponents, according to the same formal system, can be described as being economical in nature. They provide a framework for the allocation of resources. The existence of an active public gives the armed forces a claim to reality; they are doing something for someone and not merely serving themselves. The existence of opponents gives a formal structure to the military world. It links their activities to the material and ideological conditions of the society they serve. Enemies, real or hypothetical, provide the professional system with a rational outlook. They are the basis for describing the missions armed forces are expected to perform. They measure the relative utility and scarcity of available resources and provide a spectrum of competing ends and means according to which the maximum degree of security is to be attained.

Civilian control has, even in the best of circumstances, been a chancy thing; under ordinary conditions a convention, and in critical times an unwarranted luxury. As a general rule, it appears that the need society assumes it has for an armed force is inversely related to the degree of control it can exercise over the latter's operations; the greater the dependence, the lesser the control. It may be that this is the case because of the three functions involved, only the political (that of granting commissions and subsidizing rewards) is under the direct influence of popular judgment. The other vastly more critical functions (the determination of professional standards and the formulation of operational values) are conventionally treated as a matter of caste expertise.

Assuming that a democratic society is willing to sponsor an armed force, and that it wants to have a professional one, there are three general areas in which the issue of political control must be extended: the recruitment and indoctrination of officers, the allocation of status, the determination of goals. In the matter of recruitment and indoctrination, the major concern is that of the degree to which the officer corps is, at least in origins, expected to mirror the general composition and beliefs of their society as a whole. The democratic principle would hold that the more a professional body approaches the condition of a self-perpetuating caste, the more remote it is from the values of the society it professes to serve. Conversely, an officer corps could be considered attuned to the operating consensus to the degree that its origins presented a social profile approximating the social composition of the politically active public, e.g., parliament or a national convention.

In the allocation of status the general principle should be one of bureaucratic control; namely that of the accountability of officers in terms of debatable and reviewable standards of public service. Here the assumption would be that the prime value for military responsibility is the maintenance and promulgation of egalitarian values. This, of course, runs somewhat counter to the notion of professionalism.

The third point — the determination of goals — now seems to present the broadest range of problems. It covers not only the decision to go to war and who makes it, but also the description of the hypothetical range of possible conflicts and the instruments
and methods with which they are to be conducted. In essence it poses the problems of what sort of wars are rational for a given society, how the decision to undertake them is to be made, and what sort of behavior is permissible in their name. It is this point that has really upset the balance. There was a time when the choice was limited by the boundaries of the state and the conventions of warfare. Modern technology has, however, given advanced societies the capacity to determine in arbitrary fashion where their frontiers are, and to devise in equally determined and arbitrary fashion the methods and instruments for "defending" them. An advanced armed force does not solve problems so much as it creates them. Once in existence, it embarks upon a race to anticipate the reactions its simple presence will logically elicit from any presumably hostile power. The very anticipation creates a spiralling process. Ultimate control then would depend upon the existence of a general public with a belief in its own rational understanding of military problems as firm as that of the professional body with whom they are to debate them, and with that, the belief that military expertise is more public than it has been and less professional than it seems.