
THE MILITARY IS NOT EVERYTHING

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ABSTRACT

In her book *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, Rosa Brooks chronicles the military as a location of genuine community amidst an otherwise divided society and as an expanding center of institutional powers beyond national security. Neither is sustainable. The military cannot preserve a sense of national solidarity that has dissipated beyond base perimeters. Although active duty or recently retired military leaders are providing adult supervision in senior positions in the Trump administration, in the long run, the military is better suited to implement policies made in other government agencies. The military may be the best we have, but it is not enough to make up for shortfalls elsewhere.

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The Trump administration is deeply destabilizing American political institutions. A good deal of pre-Trump writing has been overtaken by recent events. Many books written in 2016 (including academic books) have been crowded out by the momentarily discontinuous developments since Trump assumed the presidency. Not so with Professor Rosa Brooks's *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*.¹ Even though the book was published in what now seems like the distant past of 2016, situated in the analysis and experience of more normal times, it has important things to say about the world after Trump.

Among these are singularly informed observations on the nature of civil-military relations in contemporary America. This material lands at two levels: the place of the military relative to national community, a kind of sociological inquiry (one that is to some extent generalizable across nation-states), and the more constitutionally and politically contingent relationship of civilian and military leaderships in the United States. Written before Trump, the book suggests the institutional virtues of the military, arguing that the military has been performing well both as a community and as a component of government while the rest of America dissipates. After the destabilizing effects of Trump, the question at both levels becomes more urgent: Can the military save us? I fear the answer is no, but

This essay was first prepared for a book roundtable co-hosted by the Institute for International Law and Public Policy at Temple University Beasley School of Law and the National Constitution Center on September 15, 2017. The essays from this roundtable have been published as a symposium collection within issue 32.1 of the Temple International & Comparative Law Journal.

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1. ROSA BROOKS, *HOW EVERYTHING BECAME WAR AND THE MILITARY BECAME EVERYTHING: TALES FROM THE PENTAGON* (2016).

that is only because at this point nothing can.

The book delivers a dual message on the place of the military in American society. First, within its boundaries the military itself comprises a healthy community. It is diverse in some expected ways (racially, for example).² In the face of severe polarization elsewhere, the military is surprisingly diverse in political terms.³

To the extent diversity is lacking, there are fixes. Brooks highlights the natural correlation of enlistment to the location of major bases, weighted to the South and West (the South accounts for almost 45% of enlistments).⁴ Moving a few military bases closer to urban centers in the Northeast would thus help correct an underrepresentation of Northeasterners among service members.⁵ Beyond the demographic profile, the book describes a strong sense of community among military members. Brooks herself is an interesting control case. As the autobiographical component makes clear, her background makes her an unlikely fan of military culture (her mother, the noted author Barbara Ehrenreich, has been associated with such iconically progressive institutions as *The Nation*, the Institute for Policy Studies, and the Democratic Socialists of America.).⁶ Now the spouse of a U.S. Army Special Forces officer,⁷ Brooks sings the praises of military life with only occasional flashes of irony.

More subtle is the book's description of how the rest of society looks to the military as a location of community. The military polls much higher favorables than other national institutions.⁸ There is a putative consensus that the military should be showered with resources. It would be cliché to source this support in some sort of patriotism (in fact, somewhat notably for a book about the military's place in America, the word barely appears at all in the book). The more intriguing explanation for coddling from the Right and Left alike is that "we're simply desperate to be reassured that there is an 'us' in the first place—that the United States is something more than simply 300 million people who don't much like or trust one another, and who definitely don't trust their government."⁹ One might

2. *See id.* at 162–65. Beyond the dimensions Brooks highlights, one might add that the military is diverse even in terms of citizenship status—an estimated 4% of enlisted personnel are non-citizens, though almost all of these are lawful permanent residents. Molly F. McIntosh & Seema Sayala, *Non-Citizens in the Enlisted U.S. Military*, Center for Naval Analyses (Nov. 2011), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/D0025768.A2.pdf.

3. BROOKS, *supra* note 1, at 163.

4. *See* OFF. OF THE UNDERSECRETARY OF DEF., PERSONNEL AND READINESS, POPULATION REPRESENTATION IN THE MILITARY SERVICES: FISCAL YEAR 2014 SUMMARY REPORT 21 fig.11 (2014), <http://www.people.mil/Portals/56/Documents/2014%20Summary.pdf?ver=2016-09-14-154051-563>.

5. BROOKS, *supra* note 1, at 164.

6. *Id.* at 439.

7. *Id.*

8. *See* Jim Norman, *Americans Give Military Branches Similar High Marks*, GALLUP NEWS (May 26, 2017), <http://news.gallup.com/poll/211112/americans-give-military-branches-similar-high-marks.aspx>.

9. BROOKS, *supra* note 1, at 323.

stretch this just a bit to paint the community constituted by the military as demonstrating the continuing possibility of community constituted by the nation.

Of course, at one time, community organized around the military helped constitute national community not just symbolically, but directly, through conscription. Conscription created an intensive shared experience among young men of almost every demographic profile. The military was an institution of which most American men were alums. It was an experience that facilitated understanding and solidarity across other divisions— regional, religious, and class (though not racial). Brooks dutifully, almost plaintively, calls for reinstating conscription under the moniker of a gender-neutral universal service, which would in fact do a lot to revive the national community.¹⁰

Short of a revived draft, can the military prop up the national community? One might think of the military as a kind of time capsule, harkening back to less fractured times (that is certainly the vibe of the book’s description of the more mundane aspects of military life)—a place where the good, old America is being preserved for reuse when the rest of us get our act together. But this seems improbable. For all its diversity, today’s military does not really represent a societal cross-section. Never mind the regional imbalance (unlikely to be corrected by base relocations now that bases are being closed), as the book notes, urban dwellers are underrepresented.¹¹

Although we do not have exact statistical data on household incomes of recruits, there is almost surely an underrepresentation of the economic elites. Affluence measurements demonstrate that most recruits are from neighborhoods within the “middle three quintiles,” of household income.¹² Among the wealthy, however defined, it is anomalous to find young men or women joining the armed forces even at an officer grade, a phenomenon that correlates with the inequality severely stressing a sense of national community.¹³ Obviously, some millennials are signing up, but in low numbers and not among the kind that get written up as such in mainstream media pieces on their generation (think hipsters).¹⁴ So the military is not really a space in which genuine national community is being

10. *Id.* at 360–61.

11. *Id.* at 163; see Todd South, *Bringing Back the Draft*, MIL. TIMES (July 25, 2017), <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2017/07/25/bringing-back-the-draft/> (noting that Alabama, a state with a population of five million, accounts for more military recruits than Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York combined).

12. OFF. OF THE UNDERSECRETARY OF DEF., *supra* note 4, at 24–26 (showing that most recruits are from lower middle, middle, and upper middle class neighborhoods, as calculated from “median census tract household incomes,” and that lowest income quintile neighborhoods “tend to have fewer people qualified to serve.”).

13. See, e.g., Amy Lutz, *Who Joins the Military?: A Look at Race, Class, and Immigration Status*, 36 J. OF POL. AND MIL. SOC. 167, 178 (2008) (“[T]he economic elite are very unlikely to serve in the military.”).

14. See Philip Bump, *Millennials Embrace a Long-Standing Tradition: Letting Someone Else Fight Their Wars*, WASH. POST (Dec. 10, 2015), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/10/millennials-embrace-a-long-standing-tradition-letting-someone-else-fight-their-wars/?utm_term=.9003f08e1d89 (citing Harvard Institute of Politics survey).

preserved or updated.

Moreover, it is unlikely that support for the military can be sustained at current levels. Yes, the military consistently polls substantially higher than other national institutions. But those polls do not measure the intensity of support. Given the social distance between many better-off Americans and the military, one might suspect that it is low. It is one thing to let uniformed service members board planes first (airports being one of the few social spaces in which military are visible to many Americans). It is another to let the military start cramping your style in more substantial ways. Over the long run, as the book hints, it will be difficult to keep the coddling up. It will cost too much. One telling indicator of waning intensity: as of 2007, only 18% of respondents in a Gallup poll supported reinstating the draft (80% opposed), down from almost 60% supporting a renewed draft in 1980.¹⁵ If poll questions were primed with the per capita tax bill that goes to funding the military, the favorability levels would decline dramatically,¹⁶ especially among the many Americans who have no real social exposure to the military community. In other words, it may be a bubble waiting to pop.

These are long-term trends, as the book demonstrates. The Trump presidency will not help. One wonders if political diversity will be sustainable in the military. Trump appears to have substantially outpolled Clinton among service members,¹⁷ and one might imagine his presidency triggering a greater level of self-selection out among Democrats who might otherwise enlist.¹⁸ Trump's politicized addresses at the service academies and before other military audiences would point in that direction.¹⁹

Far more dramatically affected by Trump's rise is the state of civil-military relations in the more usual policy sense. The Trump administration is shaping up to be one in which the civilian authorities, whether by design or default, let the military leadership go at it alone. James Mattis's nomination to be Secretary of

15. See Jeffrey M. Jones, *Vast Majority of Americans Opposed to Reinstating Military Draft*, GALLUP NEWS (Sept. 7, 2007), <http://news.gallup.com/poll/28642/vast-majority-americans-opposed-reinstating-military-draft.aspx>.

16. See generally Lauren Chadwick, *Most Voters Favor Defense Cuts. Most Politicians Don't.*, CTR. FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY in TIME (Mar. 10, 2016), <http://time.com/4253842/defense-spending-obama-congress-poll-voters/> (explaining that after being informed of military spending, most voters proposed cuts); *Military and National Defense*, GALLUP (2017) (indicating that, in the absence of information, most Americans continue to want to increase military spending).

17. See, e.g., George R. Altman & Leo Shane, *Despite Scandals, Trump Support Grows Stronger in Latest Poll of Troops*, MIL. TIMES (Oct. 19, 2016), <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2016/10/19/despite-scandals-trump-support-grows-stronger-in-latest-poll-of-troops/>.

18. See, e.g., Andrew Exum, *The Dangerous Politicization of the Military*, ATLANTIC (July 24, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/the-danger-of-turning-the-us-military-into-a-political-actor/534624/>; Jack Goldsmith, *Will Donald Trump Destroy the Presidency*, ATLANTIC (Oct. 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/will-donald-trump-destroy-the-presidency/537921/> (lamenting "great harm" of politicizing the military).

19. *Id.*

Defense required a waiver from a statute intended to protect civilian control of the military.²⁰ James Kelly serves as White House Chief of Staff after having overseen the other major security agency, the Department of Homeland Security. An active duty general served until recently as national security advisor. Trump is famously deferential to the brass (some attribute his tendency to the uniform, literally). In contrast to the kind of back-and-forth between the White House and the military that Brooks describes during the Obama administration, reports suggest that Trump has ceded an unprecedented level of decision-making authority to military commanders.²¹ The State Department, meanwhile, is looking like the victim of attrition, at best.²²

Trump's transfer of authority to military commanders is to everyone's evident relief. There is a general perception that the generals are supplying the adult supervision in an administration otherwise characterized by incompetence, and that the military leadership is taking a hit for the rest of us.²³ There are wide reports that Mattis and Kelly have agreed between themselves that one of them should always be in the country, lest Trump be unsupervised with respect to the use of force (now including the not-implausible use of nuclear weapons).²⁴ The situation turns the constitutional norm on its head. We are celebrating military control of key security decision-making because civilian control is too scary.²⁵

Brooks gives us more reason to welcome this development (or at least not

20. See S. 84, 115th Cong. (2017) (waiving application of 10 U.S.C. 113 as applied to James Mattis).

21. Simon Tisdall, *Donald Trump's Hands-Off Approach Gives US Military Free Rein*, GUARDIAN (June 14, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/14/donald-trumps-hands-off-approach-gives-us-military-free-rein>.

22. Laura Koran, *Top Diplomat: State Department Being 'Depleted At A Dizzying Speed'*, CNN POLITICS (Nov. 8, 2017), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/08/politics/diplomat-union-state-department-depleted-tillerson/index.html>.

23. See, e.g., James Kitfield, *Trump's Generals are Trying to Save the World. Starting with the White House*, POLITICO (Aug. 4, 2017), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/04/donald-trump-generals-mattis-mcmaster-kelly-flynn-215455> (describing how Trump relies on former Marine Corps general John Kelly for advice on how to run the White House more smoothly); Joshua Keating, *It's the End of Civilian Control of the Military as We Know It, and I Feel Fine*, SLATE (Mar. 1, 2017), http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/03/01/it_s_the_end_of_civilian_control_of_the_military_as_we_know_it_and_i_feel.html (stating Trump's desire to give Defense Secretary James Mattis a freer hand in making military decisions, such as the power to override the President regarding whether or not to torture terror suspects).

24. John Bowden, *Mattis, Kelly Hatched Travel Pact to Keep Tabs on Trump*, THE HILL (Aug. 1, 2017), <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/344759-mattis-kelly-agreed-that-one-would-always-stay-in-us-to-keep-tabs-on>.

25. But see, e.g., Jonathan Stevenson, *The Generals Can't Save Us From Trump*, N.Y. TIMES (July 28, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/28/opinion/sunday/mattis-mcmaster-foreign-policy-trump.html> (suggesting that while it was originally hoped that the generals would be able to keep Trump in check, they have done little to do so); Eliot A. Cohen, *The Downsides of John Kelly's Ascension*, ATLANTIC (July 31, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/the-downsides-of-john-kellys-ascension/535383/> (“[I]t is inappropriate to have so many generals in policy-making positions.”).

resist it), from someone who shares progressive sensibilities and who has first-hand exposure. The closing pages of the book sketch a paradigm in which the military *should* become everything and assumes responsibility for a range of policies traditionally allocated to civilian agencies (the State Department in particular).²⁶ The discussion here suggests a world in which the relative importance of Phase Zero is greatly magnified within the Pentagon's portfolio.²⁷ It is not clear exactly why this would be a good result, beyond the fact that everyone seems on board with increasing DoD funding in a way they are decidedly not with respect to State and other civilian agencies.

The situation is obviously contingent. It may be the best we can hope for during the Trump administration. As State is decimated, we can look to the military, flush with money, to take increasing responsibility on issues as varied as climate change, refugees, ethnic conflict, cyberattacks, development, and economic collapse, because we do not really have any other choice.²⁸ Under cover of uniform, the military could do good works that would otherwise provoke right-wing, "America First" antagonisms if undertaken by civilian authorities. All the better that the DoD is overseen by a person of quality (notably among those thanked in the book's acknowledgments). Given the very thin, or at least episodic, supervision of the agencies by this White House, James Mattis's military could be an interesting test case for the world to which Brooks points.²⁹

Once the Trump era has passed, the question seems closer. Brooks may supply one angle of attack: The military leadership wants to be supplied with policies, not make them.³⁰ If that is true within the zone of traditional military conflict, then it must be even more true with respect to non-traditional functions. The bureaucratic culture of the State Department, by contrast, is all about making policy. Somebody has to make policy. The White House apparatus is not equipped to do it alone—the National Security Council staff is a tiny governmental unit. One might suppose that military culture could adjust to pick up the slack, as it were, but that would seem to be a multi-generational project; given its size and traditions, the military is a bureaucratic ocean liner. There are related questions of expertise. Anything can be taught, but the kind of individuals who are signing up for the military are unlikely to be inclined to non-traditional missions (see the book's story

26. BROOKS, *supra* note 1, at 357–61.

27. *Id.* at 82.

28. *Id.* at 359.

29. Though little remarked on, the Trump administration easily has fewer lawyers in the cabinet and White House inner circle than any other modern presidency (counting only Attorney General Jefferson Sessions, EPA administrator Scott Pruitt, Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta, and CIA Director Michael Pompeo). There appear to be no practicing lawyers in Trump's inner circle. *See also id.* at 363 (noting an interesting test case for the call to reduce the policymaking roll of lawyers, who are at least implicitly faulted for the book's companion "how everything became war" theme).

30. *Id.* at 314 (discussing different possible models of civil-military relations for how the White House and the military can collaborate together).

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of the army flak who prefers McDonald's to "cultural food"),³¹ something that continues to be reflected in promotion structures.

This takes us back to the place of universal service. If universal service were possible, making the military everything might make sense. Instituting universal service would turn the ship around pretty quickly. It would justify and facilitate an expanded portfolio for the military insofar as it would reflect all quarters of society. But universal service is not going to happen. The overwhelming opposition in public polling is not just about money, though the public would surely blanch at the bill. Most Americans are not willing to give up a year or two of their lives (or their children's lives) for country. Community solidarity is too thin to support that kind of sacrifice. Which is another way of saying, the military cannot save "us."

But perhaps an expanded military can be more than it is, even if it cannot be everything. In that respect, Brooks's book is a fresh take on how we should situate the military in American society and how we might better manage the ways in which America engages the world.

31. *Id.* at 154.

