

Introduction

Warriors at the End of History

What use was an army at the end of history? What would its soldiers be expected to do, and what kind of soldiers might they be? Many within the post-Cold War United States Army would have rejected the premise of the first question. Even though the Berlin Wall had fallen, and liberal capitalist democracy seemed triumphant, history, for them, had not ended and they talked instead of violent threats and of continuing geopolitical uncertainty and conflict. Some turned to the darker rhetoric of a clash of civilisations to map out the Army's future role, while others even took to the domestic culture wars to find purpose.¹ Still, the question nagged at them. The Soviet Union had been an ideological foil for the United States since 1917 and the Cold War was the organising principle around which its contemporary army had been built, so the sudden disappearance of both was bound to cause disorientation and anxiety.² Moreover, the Army was finding it hard to navigate a broader societal shift. As the intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers has argued, the last decades of the twentieth century were, in many ways, an 'age of fracture' where the ideas that had organised American life began to fragment into smaller and less coherent pieces and where the narratives that had bound the nation together began to lose their force.³ Put together, the ongoing fragmentation of social reality in the United States and the geopolitical shock of the end of the Cold War posed a profound challenge to the Army's self-image as an institution that exemplified what was best about Americans.

¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

² On the long-standing prominence of anti-communism in US foreign policy, see Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–2006* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008); Walter LaFeber, 'An End to Which Cold War?' *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 1 (1 January 1992): 61–5; Douglas Little, 'Anti-Bolshevism and American Foreign Policy, 1919–1939: The Diplomacy of Self-Delusion', *American Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1983): 376–90. On broader post-Cold War anxieties, see Penny M. Von Eschen, *Paradoxes of Nostalgia: Cold War Triumphalism and Global Disorder since 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

³ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

2 Uncertain Warriors

Ironically, these questions emerged at a time when it seemed as though the Army, like the American military as a whole, had recovered its standing in American society and indeed attained new heights of respectability. It had put behind the tumult of the Vietnam era, as the advent of the All-Volunteer Force and a series of successful reforms had produced a high-quality force that attracted excellent recruits and was capable of remarkable feats on the battlefield. Indeed, even as the Soviet Union staggered through its final months and Pentagon leaders began to talk with some uncertainty about the post-Cold War world, the United States Army demonstrated logistical, operational and tactical virtuosity in assembling a vast force in the Saudi Arabian desert and using it to thoroughly defeat the Iraqi Army in a lightning campaign of just 100 hours of ground combat.⁴ Given that the victory in the Gulf War was the culmination of thirty years of transformation and reform, it seemed almost unfair that the Army would immediately have to turn to face a different world than the one it had been preparing for.

Yet the institution had no choice but to turn to these questions. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama's claim that the end of the Cold War signalled the end of history may have been controversial, but it captured the spirit of the age and pointed to the dilemmas faced by an organisation whose central activity – war – was the very stuff that history was made of.⁵ Deprived of an obvious opponent, suffering from a budgetary drawdown and buffeted by culture wars, the Army suffered from deep disquiet about its future direction. What sort of wars it might fight, what sort of threats would it face and what political leaders might ask it to do were open questions, and ones that Army leaders failed to answer convincingly.

Fundamentally, these questions were, like so many others of the politics of the late twentieth century, about identity. In their attempts to answer existential questions about the Army's role, Army leaders, policymakers and ordinary soldiers all offered competing visions of who and what the American soldier should be. Much as budgets, doctrine, force structure and equipment mattered greatly to the Army, and were often at the forefront of conversations about the future, all of these were undergirded by questions about people. Put simply, the Army could not

⁴ Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1994); Tom Clancy and Fred Franks, *Into the Storm: A Study in Command* (New York: Putnam, 1998); James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 1997).

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

function without recruiting and retaining the right type of soldier and, as had been the case for nearly two decades, it had to do so without the aid of a draft to help fill its ranks. As the torrid early years of the All-Volunteer Force had demonstrated, questions about personnel could never be very far from conversations about the Army's future.

Of all the military services, the Army has long been the one most concerned with its demographics and with the identity of its soldiers. Writing in 1989, the analyst Carl Builder argued that when the Army talked about itself, it tended to emphasise 'the depth of its roots in the citizenry, its long and intimate history of service to the nation, and its utter devotion to country'. As Builder put it, if the Navy worshipped at the altar of tradition, the Air Force at the altar of technology and the Marine Corps at the altar of combat, then 'the object of the Army's worship is the country; and the means of worship is service to the country'.⁶ Thus, the particular character of debates over the Army's identity, focusing as they did on the Army as a unique institution that needed to stand apart from broader American society in some way, are significant, as they cut against the grain of a longstanding rhetorical tradition within the Army of celebrating citizen-soldiers, even when the actual Army was composed entirely of professionals.

Uncertain Warriors tells the story of how the Army confronted uncertainty over its role and identity in the decade between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the War on Terror. It traces the Army's response to these challenges by focusing on the central figure in the institution's relationship with broader society and its self-image: the American soldier. It examines how – in doctrine, policy, speeches and popular culture – Army leaders, political leaders and soldiers themselves contested and sought to define that identity. In an effort to find coherence in what seemed to be a world without coordinates, the organisation eventually settled on a vague yet loaded term to describe the American soldier of the twenty-first century: warrior.

While the meaning of the term was ambiguous, it was a world away from the rhetoric of citizen-soldiers that had previously dominated, and even from the sort of quiet and steady proficiency implied in the equally popular phrase 'profession of arms'.⁷ Even if the citizen-soldier rhetoric

⁶ Carl Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis: A RAND Corporation Research Study* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 20.

⁷ The literature on military professionalism is vast. For an introduction, see John Winthrop Hackett, *The Profession of Arms: The 1962 Lees Knowles Lectures Given at Trinity College, Cambridge* (London: The Times Publishing Company, 1962); Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, reissue edition (New York: Free Press,

4 Uncertain Warriors

had been detached from the reality of a professionalised force, the fact that Army leaders had felt the need to invoke it said something about their broader vision of military service and the Army's relationship to the nation. The 'profession of arms' obviously emphasised the distinctiveness of the military experience, but it understood soldiering to be a vocation like that of the doctor, the lawyer or the accountant. By contrast, the 'warrior ethos' that emerged from attempts to resolve the contradictions inherent in the Army's post-Cold War position by its very nature emphasised that soldiers were a distinct group which stood apart from the rest of society because of the risks they faced and the constraints they lived under. The book demonstrates that when faced with the question of whether the Army should seek to widen or shrink the gap between itself and broader society, Army leaders effectively chose the former course of action, a decision whose consequences would reverberate for years to come.

Efforts to preserve the military's enhanced post-Desert Storm reputation meant both defending the professional ethos and technocentric focus of the organisation and resisting pressure to adapt to evolving societal norms relating to gender and sexuality, as Army leaders felt that conforming to these standards might damage the organisation's ethos and cohesion. In response to complaints both from within the ranks and from conservative politicians about a military that was becoming 'politically correct', Army leaders rolled out a warrior ethos programme, a new effort to revamp basic training and instil warrior values into its soldiers. The warriors produced by this programme would be ready for anything, from peacekeeping to high-tech conventional war, and would be able to deploy as part of expeditionary force to anywhere in the world at a moment's notice. Crucially, warriors would be ready to fight on arrival, no matter what their specialisation. At its heart, the warrior ethos was about affirming that the central business of the Army was war, not the countless peacetime tasks that often made up the mundane reality of the soldier's existence. Even as the official 'warrior ethos' was silent on questions of gender and mission, it sought to break down barriers between elite and non-elite troops by focusing on close combat as the ultimate measure of the soldier. However, not only did it require all soldiers to orientate themselves towards combat, it also legitimated a growing subculture that saw soldiers as part of a special group that was distinct from – and superior to – their fellow Americans.

1964); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981); Allan Reed Millett, 'Military Professionalism and Officership in America', A Mershon Briefing Center Report (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center of the Ohio State University, 1977).

Arguments over who the force should look to recruit and who would be allowed to serve may have stemmed from differing visions of the Army's future missions, but they also touched upon these broader debates about changing norms in American society. Similarly, questions about how the organisation could prepare its soldiers for a life of frequent deployments, and what could it reasonably call upon them to do once they were deployed, were at once strategic, organisational and political. Leon Trotsky once claimed that 'the army is a copy of society and suffers from all its diseases, usually at a higher temperature', something that surely holds true for the United States Army, even for the professional force of the All-Volunteer era.⁸ Thus, given demographic changes and changing cultural norms around issues such as gender, sexuality and military service itself – the 'age of fracture' that Rodgers wrote about – the Army found itself at a crossroads in terms of the type of soldier it wanted to recruit and train, and how, as an organisation, it wanted to relate to its country more broadly. While public support for the military remained at historically high levels, and the public almost universally looked upon soldiers with admiration, questions about the character of the American soldier were also political flashpoints. As the historian Andrew Hartman has noted, the culture wars were in essence a debate over the idea of America, so an institution that saw itself not only as defending the nation but as its embodiment on the battlefield was bound to find itself caught up in some of these disputes.⁹

The Army was not solely or even primarily navigating its post-Cold War dilemmas by reference to social or cultural debates. Among military theorists, there was a growing sense that the character of war had begun to fundamentally change, and geopolitical shifts meant that the Army found itself embroiled in a debate over how it might reinvent itself in the face of new challenges.¹⁰ Even in the immediate aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, while soldiers were being feted in the streets of American cities, Army leaders worried about what the future held. Senior leaders recognised that not every opponent would be as easy to fight as Saddam

⁸ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 211, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.237974>.

⁹ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁰ Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Steven Metz, 'A Wake for Clausewitz: Toward a Philosophy of Twenty-First Century Warfare', *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 24, no. 1 (4 July 1994), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1685>; Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Hussein had been. Not only that, but the end of the Cold War deprived the Army of its mission of confronting the Warsaw Pact in Europe, meaning that the prospect of conventional warfare on that continent, which had preoccupied the force for much of the twentieth century, was now an exceedingly remote possibility. Accordingly, the Army had to reassess its priorities, especially as budget cuts began to constrain the choices of an organisation that had been lavishly funded during the final years of the Cold War. On one end of the spectrum, the Army was troubled by the fact that victory in the Gulf War seemed to be down to the precision bombing of American airpower rather than the skills of ground combat units; on the other, it faced a series of lengthy deployments to messy conflict zones with ambiguous missions. The Army simultaneously found itself on peacekeeping duty in places such as Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia, and being compelled to articulate a vision for how it would wage high-tech war in the era of the 'Revolution in Military Affairs'.¹¹

The historian Brian McAllister Linn has argued that the study of militaries in peacetime is plagued by a tendency to look for the causes of future wars. This means that 'peacetime armed forces are more accurately defined as the pre-war armed forces'.¹² However, foreknowledge of the wars to come 'makes it relatively easy to pinpoint the weapons, the individuals, and the doctrines that proved important'. This can give a sense of inevitability to these histories, where everything is prologue for the main event that looms just off the stage. However, Linn notes that 'for those who lack this historical hindsight, who are living through the aftermath of the last war, and who lack a clear vision of the future – the challenges of being a military professional in peacetime are much more complex'.¹³ This book attempts to recover that sense of uncertainty and complexity that was inherent in the period that fell between the Cold War and War on Terror. In the absence of the sort of clear structuring narratives provided by these two conflicts, the Army had to articulate a strategy that was not so much based on countering specific enemies but that was, in the words of the 2001 'Quadrennial Defense Review', 'capabilities-based', ready to be applied against any threat that emerged from an uncertain environment.¹⁴ This post-Cold War era is particularly interesting both because

¹¹ The 'Revolution in Military Affairs' concept posits that new technologies combine with doctrinal and tactical innovations to fundamentally alter the character of war.

¹² Brian McAllister Linn, 'Military Professionals and the Warrior Ethos in the Aftermath of War', in *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, 1988–2017*, ed. Mark E. Grotelueschen (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2020), 591.

¹³ Linn.

¹⁴ 'Quadrennial Defense Review Report' (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, September 2001), iv.

it was a strange kind of peacetime – one that saw several armed American interventions around the world – and because the absolute degree of hegemony enjoyed by the United States in this ‘unipolar moment’ was surely historically unparalleled.¹⁵ The headaches that this primacy gave the Army may have been ones that previous generations of leaders would have wished for, but they were very real nevertheless.

This book argues that the Army had three major responses to the unique dilemmas of the post-Cold War world. First, because planners struggled to envisage what future conflicts might look like and what US strategic priorities might be, they focused on building an adaptable, expeditionary force that could deploy quickly to anywhere in the world to further US aims, which could often be wide ranging. Unlike the Cold War-era Army, with its large overseas bases that housed military families and communities, the aim of reform efforts was to make sure that soldiers could be deployed on short notice, ready to carry out a huge range of tasks, including, for the first time, peacekeeping missions. Even as the Army downsized to a smaller, more expeditionary force, leaders refused to alter the overall mix of forces, keeping large numbers of armoured units on hand, and emphasising the need for sophisticated and well-trained soldiers who could handle any mission rather than focusing on specialised units equipped for particular contingencies. In the long arc of American military history, this was an unusual move, as the commitment to maintain a small Army at high levels of readiness and modernisation contrasted with past practices of maintaining a skeletal framework that could be quickly expanded into a much larger army in wartime.¹⁶ Nonetheless, given the way the successes of the post-Vietnam reforms had been validated in Operation Desert Storm, maintaining a slightly smaller version of the Army of the 1980s seemed to make the most sense to Army leaders at the time.

¹⁵ Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Charles Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’, *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 23–33; Sidita Kushi and Monica Duffy Toft, ‘Introducing the Military Intervention Project: A New Dataset on US Military Interventions, 1776–2019’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (8 August 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027221117546>.

¹⁶ Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York: Free Press, 1975); William A. Taylor, *Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016); Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); David R. Segal, *Recruiting for Uncle Sam: Citizenship and Military Manpower Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989); J. P. Clark, *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Second, in keeping with its preference for holding on to its existing force structure, the Army successfully resisted external pressures to rethink the nature of military service. The lesson of the Gulf War and the end of the Cold War had been that the All-Volunteer Force had worked.¹⁷ Despite growing worries about a civil–military gap as a shrinking force made up of a less representative sample of the population concentrated more and more on large bases, half-hearted efforts to change the demographics of the military had little effect. The post-Vietnam notion that soldiers were inherently heroic was largely unshakeable and woven into American politics and popular culture.¹⁸ Despite the changed strategic context and the new array of missions faced by the Army, calls to reintroduce the draft or move to a different model of military service fell on deaf ears, and even the Reserve Components of the Army became more professional and occupational in their outlook. Indeed, such was the emphasis on the ‘profession of arms’ that the concept of the citizen-soldier was effectively reduced to a rhetorical flourish deployed by military leaders and politicians in search of applause lines. Worries about recruiting and retention, which became more acute towards the end of the decade, did little to alter faith in the All-Volunteer Force.

Finally, if the Army successfully defended its model of military service, it had only partial success when it came to keeping the institution out of step with changes in broader society relating to gender and sexuality. Army leaders joined with other service chiefs to successfully oppose the Clinton administration’s efforts to allow openly gay troops to serve but did so in a way that betrayed a lack of confidence that their resistance to this change could endure forever. The Army, like the rest of the military, also resisted attempts to open combat roles to women, but – in the wake of the 1996 Aberdeen Proving Ground sexual assault scandal – efforts to roll back progress and resegregate basic training failed. Not only that, but societal pressure and the more utilitarian question of what sort of skills would be needed for peacekeeping and non-combat missions, not to mention maintaining the Army’s sophisticated technology, combined to create space for a critique of military masculinity in surprising places. Thus, while the Army’s growing emphasis on a ‘warrior ethos’ that

¹⁷ On the history of the All-Volunteer Force, see Beth Bailey, *America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Robert K. Griffith, *US Army’s Transition to the All-Volunteer Force, 1968–1974* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996); Bernard Rostker, *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).

¹⁸ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Walter L. Hixson, “Red Storm Rising”: Tom Clancy Novels and the Cult of National Security’, *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 4 (1 October 1993): 599–614.

emerged towards the end of the decade was in part a backlash against the perceived threat of ‘identity politics’, ultimately this project sought to produce an ethos that, while not quite gender neutral in its focus, looked very different from the more traditional warrior ethos that many had hoped the Army would promote.

Debates over military service, roles and missions, and identity sometimes moved through different terrain and involved different protagonists but usually boiled down to two duelling impulses. One was to emphasise that professional American soldiers were something akin to Spartan warriors, where every soldier was psychologically committed to the demands of combat, regardless of specialty or distance from the battlefield. The other impulse was directly in opposition to this notion of a hypermasculine ‘warrior culture’. Those who pushed back against discourse about warriors were a diverse group ranging from those who wanted to reinstate an all-male draft to those who wanted to fully end the gay ban and open all positions in the Army to women. In spite of their differences, they all emphasised not only the need for the Army to be broadly aligned with the values of American society but asserted that those very values had martial virtues of their own, given the ambiguities of modern conflict.

There is something ironic in the fact that a period which supposedly marked the final triumph of liberal democracy saw the return of the warrior: a pre-modern and even primordial figure. This is doubly ironic because, as Linn notes, professional soldiers began to supplant warriors in early modern society precisely because warriors tended to contribute very little in peacetime and were unreliable, being more focused on their own personal honour than broader political goals, and often terrorised civilians.¹⁹

Even if the definition of warrior has been remarkably stable across cultures and time, the manner in which people have deployed the term and, crucially, understood its moral valence has differed. For instance, the classicist Bret Devereux argues that, contrary to popular understanding, warriors were not in fact common in ancient Roman or even Greek society.²⁰ In warrior societies such as Sparta, individuals might conflate their own sense of masculine honour with that of the *polis*, but as Greek

¹⁹ Linn, ‘Military Professionals and the Warrior Ethos in the Aftermath of War’, 595.

²⁰ Bret Devereaux, ‘The U.S. Military Needs Citizen-Soldiers, Not Warriors’, *Foreign Policy*, 19 April 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/19/united-states-afghanistan-citizen-soldiers-warriors-forever-wars/>.

city-states evolved into more complex polities, the division of labour became more specialised, and the warrior identity predominated less.²¹ The Latin term for warrior, *bellator*, was rarely applied to Roman soldiers, who were known as *milites*, which, as Devereux points out, ‘comes from the same mil-root as the word “mile,” signifying a collection of things (a Roman mile being a collection of a thousand paces)’.²² Roman *milites* were part of a collective. Soldiers were paid by, and thus subordinated to, a higher authority, ‘a relationship that naturally placed them in groups raised by some other political entity – be it a king, parliament, or congress’.²³ For a soldier, fighting is an occupation carried out in service to a larger polity. In contrast, warriors are attached to war because it forms a central part of their own personal identity. This meant that even where societies required military service of all men, they did not expect them to be warriors. Soldiers become civilians again when they take off the uniform, but warriors can never truly retire. Even when the war ends, a warrior remains a warrior. Even when warriors fight in groups, they fight for individual reasons rooted in their own personal identity rather than for a greater cause. Thus, warriors are ‘definitionally a class apart, individuals whose connection to war sets them outside civilian society’.²⁴ Inevitably, such a group, focused as it was on martial rather than other virtues, would look upon civilians with contempt. For Devereux, the re-emergence of rhetoric lauding warriors is a dangerous development: one that portends a threat to a free and democratic society.

Even if actual warrior societies were far less common than the popular imagination allows, the celebration of the values associated with warriors, such as courage, honour and glory in battle, was certainly ubiquitous across time and space. By the end of the twentieth century, though, it seemed like the balance between veneration of that warrior ethos and societal disgust at the absurdity and tragedy of war had tipped decisively towards the latter impulse. In 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross commissioned a large-scale survey to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Conventions. This survey, ‘People on War’, consisted of interviews with 12,860 people across twelve countries who had endured the effects of modern war in recent years.²⁵ These interviewees,

²¹ Moshe Berent, ‘Anthropology and the Classics: War, Violence, and the Stateless Polis’, *The Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2000): 257–89.

²² Devereaux, ‘The U.S. Military Needs Citizen-Soldiers, Not Warriors’.

²³ Devereaux.

²⁴ Devereaux.

²⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross, ‘The People on War Project: ICRC Worldwide Consultation on the Rules of War’ (Geneva: ICRC, 1999), iii, www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/globalreport.pdf.