

Militarism

If our civilization is destroyed, it will not be by barbarians from below. Our barbarians come from above.

Henry Demarest Lloyd, American journalist (1847-1903)

Patriotism is the last resort of scoundrels.

Samuel Johnson

Young Men: The lowest aim in your life is to become a soldier. The good soldier never tries to distinguish right from wrong. He never thinks; never reasons; he only obeys. If he is ordered to fire on his fellow citizens, on his friends, on his neighbours, on his relatives, he obeys without hesitation. If he is ordered to fire down a crowded street when the poor are clamouring for bread, he obeys and sees the grey hairs of age stained with red and the life tide gushing from the breasts of women, feeling neither remorse nor sympathy. If he is ordered off as a firing squad to execute a hero or benefactor, he fires without hesitation, though he knows the bullet will pierce the noblest heart that ever beat in a human breast.

A good soldier is a blind, heartless, soulless, murderous machine. He is not a man. He is not a brute, for brutes only kill in self defence. All that is human in him, all that is divine in him, all that constitutes the man has been sworn away when he took the enlistment oath.

Jack London

What occurred in Oklahoma City was no different than what Americans rain on the heads of others all the time, and subsequently, my mindset was and is one of clinical detachment. The bombing of the Murrah building was not personal, no more than when Air Force, Army, Navy or Marine personnel bomb or launch cruise missiles against government installations and their personnel.

Timothy McVeigh, who was trained by the U.S. Army

...a set of beliefs taught to each generation in which the Motherland or the Fatherland is an object of veneration and becomes a burning cause for which one becomes willing to kill the children of other Motherlands or Fatherlands.

Howard Zinn on nationalism

I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism.

- ML King.

Militarism: the harshest despotism

By Robert Maxwell O'Kane
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There are many "isms" in our vocabulary; most are familiar to us in terms of their general meanings, and we freely choose those with which we agree or disagree. The most prominent of modern "isms" include, for example: Capitalism, Socialism, Communism, Fascism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Fundamentalism, Liberalism, Conservatism, Nationalism, Scientism, Patriotism, Terrorism, and so on.

An "ism" is defined variously as: a belief, a tenet, a dogma, a doctrine, an article of faith, a persuasion, a cult. An allegiance to, or a rejection of, one or more of the most prominent "isms" has significant implications for nations, institutions, and individuals in the modern world. They shape in important ways the cultural, social, economic, political, educational, and intellectual mores of societies.

One important "ism" not listed in the examples described here is the focal point of this commentary: it is that of *militarism*. We do not often hear it discussed in the public forums, nor do we, generally, focus attention on it in the media, or more significantly, in the curricula of schooling.

What is *militarism*?

The basic definition states that it is "a military spirit, ideals and attitudes of professional soldiers; the glorification or prevalence of such a spirit, ideals, in a nation, or the predominance of the military caste in government."

This sounds straightforward enough — and most of us probably accept it as a sufficient description of the narrower term, the "military." But "militarism" transcends our usually benign acceptance of a military presence; it doesn't merely con-

sist of the armed services. Militarism, as stated by Woodrow Wilson in an address at West Point in 1916, "is a spirit... It is a point of view... that spirit is the use of violence as a solution in problems... the point of view is something that spills over into every field of life, even into the school and family."

Militarism is an important, and many observers believe an increasing, influence in the societies of the world, including ours. Robert Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority*, advances this view: "The rising influence of the military has less to do with any aggressive intent on its part than it does with the mounting concern on the part of government and society that apart from military dominance of some kind, the texture of social order will not be maintained... to imagine that the military's annual budget (hundreds of billions of dollars) does not have significant effect upon the economy is of course absurd, and it may be assumed that with respect to the military as with any other institution, beginning with the family, what effects the economic sphere also affects in due time other spheres of life."

Militarism, as with other "isms," seeks to increase and extend its influence in the affairs of the society. Advocates of any of the "isms" are deeply, seriously, committed to the "isms" values, convictions, and goals be they political, economic, religious, social, cultural, or militaristic.

Militarism is unique in several ways in the coterie of "isms". It has a long history, beginning at least in the early Greek society in the 6th Century B.C. and continuing through the centuries associated with wars and warriors—Pericles, the Peloponnesian Wars, the Caesars, the Crusades, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Civil War, World

Wars I and II, Korea, Viet Nam, for example.

As we are reminded, "Whether we like it or not, the evidence is clear that for close to 3,000 years, down to this moment, Western Civilization has been the most war-ridden, war dominated, and militaristic civilization in all human history."

Militarism is also unique in its distinctively highly visible symbolisms: the uniforms, weapons, frequent public displays, and periodic military actions and subsequent celebrations of such. These are, generally, necessary and appropriate accoutrements and recognitions of the military services. But, beyond these obvious symbolisms and the physical presence of the military there is the more significant, pervasive presence of the "spirit," the way of thinking in the militaristic mode which is so influential in the society.

Militarism is characterized, from earliest times, by its accent on violence, competition, discipline, centralization, secularism and, significantly, youth. These are the characteristics of the military community. There

is little that is ambiguous about militarism.

I turn again to Robert Nisbet: "There is nothing so constrictive of freedom of creativeness, and of genuine individuality as the military in its relation to culture... this has always been true. As soon as the special character of military power begins to envelop a population, its functions, rules and traditional authorities, a kind of suffocation of mind in the cultural sphere begins. Not is there any evidence that military power, even when its onset has been welcomed, is ever loved by those under it. Of all forms of despotism, that of the military is harshest, for under the military the social order is scarcely more than permanent garrison... even so we must understand the military's appeal."

My next commentary will address in more detail some of the major influences of militarism on our institutions, organizations, and ways of thinking — and life.

(Editor's Note: Two additional parts on this subject will appear in May.)

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