

INSIGHTS

American Warrior Ethos

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American military and political leaders increasingly suggest a strong warrior ethos is key to the military's ability to succeed (McMaster, 2021). As with many widely-used phrases, "warrior ethos" is open to various interpretations. A shared understanding of warrior ethos, however, is foundational to our ability to maintain national security in today's volatile, uncertain, and rapidly changing technological and geopolitical environment. *Who* fights—and *why* they fight—and how warriors see themselves, are not merely academic questions. They profoundly shape how we conceive, prepare for, and counter threats to our way of life.

At the most fundamental level, a warrior is one who fights. Across cultures and languages, the idea of "warrior" has existed for millennia and is closely associated with violent killing, in pursuit of culturally approved (though not always universally endorsed) objectives. Warriors have fought for their lives, comrades, homes, communities, and countries since time immemorial (Fromm, 2010). One scholar describes the "classical Western image of the ideal warrior" as "a man whose astounding prowess in battle earns him power and respect among his peers. His display of skill, courage, and brute strength entitles him to recognition and favor within his community" (French, 2003).

The word "ethos" has many nuanced meanings but broadly refers to a way of being: a characteristic spirit and culture of a group of people that shapes how members of the group think and act. Because war has always directly involved life and death, the ancient concept of a warrior ethos packs a formidable emotional punch.

Americans have a complicated relationship with their warriors. The Constitution of the United States, ratified in June 1788, committed the American people to "*form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to [them]selves and [their] Posterity*" (U.S. Constitution, Preamble). Crafted and agreed in the wake of the Revolutionary War, this familiar preamble established a social contract—providing for the common defense—that generations of the American military have sought to fulfill in various ways as conditions seemed to demand. Colonial militias were raised, provisioned, led, and fought on their home territory to establish independence from Britain's monarchical rule. In the next century, the fledgling Army and Navy extended America's territorial boundaries, countered piracy on the high seas, repelled a Canadian incursion, and fought a bloody civil war. This experience reinforced a deeply

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ingrained culture that placed decision-making primacy in elected leaders and fostered deep skepticism about large standing armies.

The 20th century began with more of the same until the First World War changed existing U.S. military habits. Technological innovations, such as aircraft, and the unprecedented deployment of an American Expeditionary Force to fight in Western Europe marked a major departure from earlier uses of America's armed forces. Postwar contraction began a period of introspection, followed by the Second World War's dramatic expansion of American armed forces to over 8 million men. President Truman's subsequent attempts to reorganize and shrink this massive military force had limited success, constrained as they were by the onset of the nuclear arms race and the Korean conflict. Throughout the following decades of the Cold War, the conflict in Vietnam echoed the kinds of ground and air combat seen in earlier 20th-century wars. At the same time, the Air Force's Strategic Air Command (SAC) was building the most destructive arsenal in human history under the motto "Peace Is Our Profession"—which was itself an ironic nod to SAC's real purpose to deter both conventional and nuclear attacks that could wreak havoc on American and allied territory. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1991, U.S. military forces began a dramatic downsizing from Cold War levels, but conflicts in the Middle East tempered further reductions. The U.S. entered this century with somewhat less global capacity and a continuing focus on regional conflict.

In short, throughout its first two centuries, the U.S. military mostly fought in episodic rather than continuous combat, primarily relying on citizen-soldiers and sailors, led by a small core of full-time career personnel. A deeply rooted warrior culture existed in some elite units, but warrior as a common term was relatively rare. Indeed, in a comprehensive year 2000 study of U.S. military culture, the word warrior does not appear even once (Collins, 2000).

As wars changed, our vernacular changed. Afghanistan and Iraq counterinsurgency conflicts of the last two decades began to require repeated rotational tours from many U.S. military personnel. Emphasizing an expeditionary mindset and continuous lethal combat operations, these experiences molded an entire generation of servicemembers and shaped the public understanding of military service. To encapsulate the warfighting mindset associated with those operations—and perhaps as convenient shorthand to include all soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen—servicemembers were increasingly referred to as warriors, and the idea of warrior began to be institutionalized. For example, shortly after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. Army promulgated an explicit Warrior Ethos consisting of four statements: "I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade" (Warrior Ethos, 2025). The Marine Corps increasingly referred to a warrior as part of its combat arms training (Jamison, 2004); the Air Force promulgated warrior ethos in an "Airman's Creed" in 2007 (Gettle, 2007). Unsurprisingly, it is commonplace today to hear all American military members collectively referred to as warriors.

Yet, unlike warrior castes in earlier centuries, American warriors are part of a military *profession*, and that profession's nature affects how we should think of warrior ethos. In 1957, Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington characterized the expertise of the military profession as "management of violence" (Huntington, 1957) – which at first glance seems consistent with the idea of military professionals as warriors. However, Huntington defined the military profession much more narrowly than it is defined today. Writing at a time when the vast majority of the U.S. military was composed of draftees, he considered only experienced active-duty officers to be members of the military profession. Reservists, many support-specialty officers, and all enlisted troops were "military" but not "professionals," and while a fraction of junior officers would naturally progress over time into the military professional category, the majority of

military members never attained the competence to be part of the profession. Huntington also mentioned a professional ethos of “corporateness” among these senior officers—a tight-knit, mutually supportive, self-policing, and exclusive society reminiscent of warrior codes in many cultures (Huntington, 1957, p. 16). Lastly and importantly, Huntington identified the military professional’s responsibility as the “military security of his client, society” (Huntington, 1957, p. 15).

Two-thirds of a century later, today’s all-volunteer force is nearly unrecognizable through Huntington’s lens. Since 1973, Americans in uniform have served only voluntarily, are recruited from every demographic of American society, and many remain in uniformed service for decades. Our understanding of “the military profession” has broadened to include those whose competence is far beyond the straightforward management of violence. Today’s military professionals fill a vast (and still expanding) range of specialized roles across air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace domains requiring significant levels of specialized training, experience, and judgment. Some of these military professionals manage or inflict lethal violence; others provide essential military functions through acquisition of military capabilities, operating and defending national space assets, securing and operating in the cyber domain, planning and executing logistics, personnel management, and many other critical tasks. “The phrase “military security of society” is far more ambiguous today than when Huntington wrote it, because the military has become responsible for some functions previously done by civilians (or which were nonexistent); and government civilians and the private sector are increasingly responsible for functions directly exposed to attack and requiring active defense.

Just as warfare evolves, so must the warrior ethos. Military professionals from the most junior to the most senior have a responsibility to understand the evolution of warfare and to adapt the warrior ethos to conform to the demands of victory in the future.

That future differs from our instinctive grasp of it, because “war” increasingly includes significant contests in the domains of cyber and space, materially affecting the way warfare is traditionally fought in maritime, land, and air domains. Actions in those new contested spaces can and will tilt the outcome in violent combat, and just as easily cross boundaries into our homeland in new and threatening ways, affecting American lives and prosperity and posing new challenges. Rather than honoring a clear distinction between peacetime and wartime, our adversaries have far less respect for such dividing lines, as exemplified by the Chinese approach of “unrestricted warfare” (Liang and Xiangsui, 2020).¹ Sometimes called “political warfare” (Jones et al., 2023), this approach to imposing one’s will on an adversary encompasses far more than the violent combat we associate with war and warriors, and demands a far broader national approach to countering it. In the words of Sir John Keegan, “it is toward the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed” (Keegan, 1976). Beyond warfare of old, the disintegration of human groups can be now pursued in orbit, in hundreds or thousands of computers or phones or electrical substations or vehicles, or in more traditional battlespaces. Old frameworks for war, battle, attack, and defense no longer serve us well.

Because war is changing, future battles will happen in both the familiar physical domains of air, land, and sea, and in the new, far less tangible domains of space and cyber. War will almost certainly touch our homeland in ways it has never done before, either directly or indirectly. As a result, the warrior ethos must change to

1 This excerpt from the 1999 People’s Liberation Army colonel’s work makes crystal-clear the conceptual challenge the American military must prepare to confront: “*In terms of beyond-limits warfare, there is no longer any distinction between what is or is not the battlefield. Spaces in nature including the ground, the seas, the air, and outer space are battlefields, but social spaces such as the military, politics, economics, culture, and the psyche are also battlefields. And the technological space linking these two great spaces is even more so the battlefield over which all antagonists spare no effort in contending. Warfare can be military, or it can be quasi-military, or it can be non-military. It can use violence, or it can be nonviolent.*”

encompass combat in both new and old battlespaces. American warriors will need to fight in traditional and non-traditional ways, alongside combatant and “non-combatant” partners. The attributes called out in the military officer’s commission—patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities—are essential, but their manifestation will vary greatly depending on the specific abilities modern warriors bring to “the fight.” Warrior ethos isn’t an “either/or” where we can choose to define it around old warriors or new warriors—it’s both. Warriors in old domains and new domains must fight, and either win or lose, together. To function in battle—violent or not—they need to understand each other and work as a team. In the same way, the society they serve must understand and support them all.

As war evolves, the emotional issue of recognition for those affecting the combat from “outside the battlefield” (Lamothe, 2015) raises the question whether service members not directly orchestrating lethal combat can truly be called “warriors.” Can they embrace and demonstrate attributes like a will to win, a willingness to accept risk, and a capacity to inflict harm on an enemy? Just as crucially, are those attributes themselves still essential to a modern warrior ethos?

The Air Force Academy’s 23rd Superintendent, Lt Gen Tony Bauernfeind, recently addressed related questions about warrior ethos in a clear and powerful way. In his view, warrior ethos is a *mindset* that demands a *mastery of one’s craft*, developed through leveraging one’s natural abilities, relevant experiences, and dedicated study to be able to perform required military duties. The ethos requires continuous mental, physical, spiritual, team and family readiness to execute those duties. It requires accepting risk with intelligence and courage, along with the resilience to encounter adversity, adjust, prevail and lead a team to mission accomplishment through the most difficult circumstances.²

2 Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind (Superintendent United States Air Force Academy) remarks to cadet audience, November 20, 2024.

This description of warrior ethos captures the contemporary American military professional ethic far better than Huntington’s expression “management of violence” does; it is agnostic of the exact skills demanded. Today’s military missions demand a range of traditional and non-traditional military expertise that is far more diverse and demanding than Huntington ever imagined. Thus, expanding the concept of warrior *skills* is necessary and appropriate. Yet even as the definition of what warriors *do* becomes broader, the last quarter-century of deployed military operations has produced mixed messages about why American warriors serve: are they warriors by nature, or warriors for a purpose?

Here, we return to the American military’s origin story. From the colonial militias serving under George Washington to those who were deployed to Afghanistan to eliminate the Taliban as a host to terrorists attacking the United States, the American military’s core responsibility has been to “provide for the common defense”—or as the oaths of enlistment and commissioning specify, “to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). Fulfilling that duty—having the warrior ethos that suits an American military professional—requires much from every person who wears a U.S. uniform. It draws from the ancient warrior’s well: the indomitable will to take risk and to act decisively to succeed in deadly contests. It is fighting through smoke and bloody chaos to destroy an enemy in a firefight; maneuvering a helicopter or aircraft or submarine or tank at the ragged edge of its limits to reach, identify, and destroy a target; it is protecting innocents from friendly or enemy fire. It also draws from a different but no less essential well; it means staying cool under pressure in a quiet air-conditioned space, outthinking an enemy to employ and protect critical space assets or cause cyber disruption tens of thousands of miles away. Warrior ethos is also ensuring teammates at the tip of the spear are sustained by the rest of the spear in battle, no matter what. Some of these things require physical strength, endurance, and split-second judgment in the face of death; some demand feats of disciplined intellect and

composure; all require devotion to duty and to the values of the Service in which that duty manifests itself. It is fair to conclude that all who act with that kind of dedication to defend the “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” of their fellow citizens, while engaged in a lethal contest with an enemy—are warriors worthy of the name.

Those who fight on behalf of the United States serve for many reasons, but first among them are those noble objectives. They lead, follow and are empowered by respect and loyalty to their fellow soldiers, sailors, Airmen, Marines, Guardians, or Coast Guardsmen. American warriors do not kill or destroy on behalf of their nation for glory or satisfaction; they train, prepare, and act when directed in service of the society they have sworn to defend. American warriors must be military professionals first, deserving of the trust of the society they defend as their highest and most constant purpose. They must also think and act as warriors when called to action. They are defenders of the Constitution and American interests, territory, and people; they train and employ as warriors to achieve that purpose. They cannot be one without being the other.

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