

## ESSAYS

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### MORAL IMPERATIVES

#### **War without Sacrifice? The Loss of Personal Responsibility**

Cheyney Ryan

**I**t is troubling how detached Americans have become from the decision to go to war. At one time, the question of whether the country should go to war was taken to be of the utmost personal concern. The question of whether “*we*” should go to war was the question of whether *I* should go to war—specifically, of whether I should sacrifice my body, or the bodies of my loved ones, for the purposes of war. Indeed, a prominent concern of the Founding Fathers was to maintain this personal involvement in the question of warfare. They worried that if the question of war became an abstraction—if the question of whether the *nation* should go to war was not experienced as the question of whether *I* should go to war—then disaster might follow.

Well, this is exactly what has happened in the contemporary United States. This essay arose out of discussions with my students at the time of the Gulf War, when I was first struck by how many of them saw no connection at all between whether the country should go to war and whether they would, at the very least, be willing to fight in it. Some of the responses to the current war on terrorism have only increased my concern. Let me explain with an anecdote.

Not long after September 11, ABC News held a “town hall” discussion involving representatives of the Bush administration and an audience of young adults. At several points, administration statements about the importance of collective vigilance were met with sustained applause. One military man asked if the nation was truly prepared for a “30-year effort against terrorism”—and there were resounding calls of “Yes!” But one remark near the end, above all, got the most applause. It was in response to one young man’s anxious question, when an administration representative said, “No, we have absolutely no intention of reviving the draft. “

I can understand not wanting to be drafted. But surely the audience’s clamorous response to the assurance that *they* would not be asked to serve is curious, to say the least. What does it mean to support or call for a war and its sacrifices if one is not *oneself* willing to make those sacrifices? Should conscientious citizens only support wars in which they are in fact willing to die, or is this too high a requirement? How did it happen that the question of war became, as I believe it is, so detached from questions of personal responsibility? How should we think about reconnecting the two? Let me begin with the normative question.

### **The Principle of Personal Integrity**

As I said, it was during the Gulf War that I was first struck by how differently I thought about war than some of my students. Discussing the wisdom of that war with them, I’d note that the first question for me was:

Are the Gulf War’s aims worthy enough for *me* to die in that effort?

My thinking was that if I did not deem that war worthy enough for me to die in it—tomorrow, say—then how in good conscience could I endorse policies that ask someone else to make this sacrifice? To do so would be a bit like saying: “I am all in favor of social policy X, a policy that will impose an enormous cost on a certain number of people—but I am not willing to bear that cost myself. I support it, rather, in the full knowledge that I will *not* be asked to bear that cost.” As an academic philosopher, I’m inclined to restate the thinking here in terms of a more general principle for thinking about personal responsibility and military action:

You should only endorse those military actions of your country in which you yourself would be willing to give your life (tomorrow).

For shorthand, let's call this principle the *Principle of Personal Integrity*, or *PPI*.

I call it a principle of "integrity" because the reasoning behind it would seem to be this: when I endorse particular military actions of my country, then I, as a citizen of a democracy, am asking some of my fellow citizens to participate in that war and die in it. The issue of integrity is that if I ask a fellow citizen to do something, then I ought to be willing to do it myself. Standing behind the issue of integrity is the value of reciprocity, which political philosophers have recently identified as the heart of liberal thinking. To violate the PPI is to impose an unfair burden on others.

The reasoning endorsed here is importantly hypothetical. The issue is not whether I am in fact willing to die in the war tomorrow, for there may be good reasons why I am not that are compatible with still supporting the war. For example, someone might support a war but reject actually dying in it because he or she has already served in the military and hence has already assumed that burden. But note that the exception here itself assumes the principle of reciprocity, and I suspect that all other exceptions assume it as well. Even veterans, though, must be willing to say that they *would* be willing to die in the war tomorrow, but for their veteran status. If they are not, then they cannot legitimately support the military action, according to the PPI.

I must admit that when I first started thinking about these matters it seemed to me that the reasoning here was fairly trivial. Of course one should not support a war without being personally willing to make the sacrifices war requires. But while the occasional person agrees with me (they are usually from the World War II generation), the overwhelming response is otherwise. Fellow political philosophers often respond that my principle is either flatly false or dramatically overstated. I'll say something about their objections below, though not nearly enough to address the questions that can be raised.

The more interesting response—from a sociological standpoint—is the one I encounter in young people, which verges on outright incomprehension. What could my supporting a war *possibly* have to

do with my own willingness to die in it? One person who has noted this curious disconnection is William Bennett, whose organization conducted a poll in June 2002 which found that whereas almost 70 percent of young people agreed with the United States's right to invade Iraq, an almost equal number would refuse to participate themselves. Bennett's concern was a lack of moral fiber, but the attitudes of young people reflect important changes in our political arrangements that have institutionalized this disconnect. What are those changes?

### **Distancing Citizens from War**

The question returns us to my opening remarks about the Founding Fathers. A major political issue of the 17th and 18th centuries was the existence of a "Standing Army." Roughly, a standing army was a permanent, professional army answerable to the king only. It was regarded as a source of great evil, which is why the American colonists became so alarmed when they perceived one arising on their own shores in the form of the British Redcoats. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence cites as one of King George's crimes, "He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the consent of our legislatures," and at least five of the other grievances it lists are variations on this theme. Anti-Federalist anxieties over the re-institution of a standing army were central to the debates over the Constitution, which is why the topic is a recurring one in the *Federalist Papers*. A good many sections of the Constitution are directed to preventing such an army from arising, such as the requirement that the military budget be reviewed every two years, and—interestingly enough—the notorious Second Amendment on the right to bear arms.

The main alternative to a standing army was the idea of a "people's militia": a nonprofessional, non-permanent military force composed of ordinary citizens. Proponents argued for such a militia on several grounds that are relevant here.

They argued that in a republic it is imperative that the costs of state actions be borne by average citizens. Hence, the financial costs of wars should be covered by general direct taxation, and not—as they typically were in those days—by government borrowing. And the personal, that is, *bodily* costs of war should be borne by average

persons via a citizens' army. Both points draw on the political tradition of classical republicanism as developed in the works of Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Commonwealthmen. We also find them both in Kant's great essay on "Perpetual Peace," whose first sentence bemoans those "heads of state who can never get enough of war," and whose first section attacks the use of debt to finance wars and insists that defense be carried out by "the voluntary periodic military training of citizens."

That average persons should count on bearing the costs of wars was regarded as a requirement of personal morality (what I have called integrity). In fact, Kant maintains that paying men to kill or be killed violates their "rights of humanity." General citizen involvement in wars was also seen as contributing to a kind of democratic prudence. The Founding Fathers reasoned that if average citizens know that the costs of a war will be extracted from their purses or bodily persons, they will exercise much greater caution in endorsing that war. This point lies at the heart of what has come to be called the "democratic peace thesis"—the notion that democracies will be less inclined to go to war because they impose the costs of wars on the average citizens who, through their representatives, decide whether or not to go to war. Kant speaks of how they will weigh the "calamities" of war seriously because they can count on "doing the fighting themselves" and "paying the costs of war from their own resources."

The extent to which these guiding concerns of the Founding Fathers have been cast aside in recent decades is remarkable. The financing of wars through deficit spending is a case in point. Contrast Franklin D. Roosevelt's careful attempts to prepare World War II America for higher taxes with Lyndon Johnson's financing the Vietnam War through borrowing, which destabilized the economy for years. Or consider the Bush administration's program of cutting taxes and financing the war through borrowing. Even more striking is the radical departure from the notion that in a democracy a professional army is one of the worst conceivable evils and that wars must be fought by average citizens—or not at all.

The turning point here, as with so much else in military policy, was Vietnam and the end of the draft. Both World Wars I and II had involved universal conscription, which may have lacked the volun-

tary character of the militia but still institutionalized the link between endorsing war and fighting in it. Hence the image of the “citizen soldier” for whom citizenship and military service were two sides of the same coin. The nostalgia for this notion in films like *Saving Private Ryan* suggests how far we’ve strayed from it. The Vietnam draft introduced class and racial biases that were surprisingly absent in previous 20th-century wars, but as a member of that generation I can attest to the fact that the prospects of fighting were still very real.

Everything changed when Nixon ended the draft, in an attempt to counter antiwar feeling in the middle class by removing the threat of service. Many forget that it was liberals like Edward Kennedy that opposed Nixon’s act, partly on the grounds that it would institutionalize a professional military inordinately composed of the black and brown. History has proven Kennedy right. Minorities are overrepresented in the military, particularly in the fighting wings. Since World War II, when the sons of politicians were just as likely to serve, there has been a steady decline in the number of senators or representatives whose children fight in our wars, so that today it is basically nil.

The draft is no longer necessary because manpower needs have changed. America’s wars no longer involve a massive infusion of troops; they are more reliant on high-technology. But this change is not simply the result of some autonomous logic of war; it is as much a product of conscious policies to lessen war’s impact on the average person. Take the case of technology: starting with World War I and the extraordinary amount of resistance it generated among both civilians and soldiers, particularly at the war’s end, military policymakers sought ways to replace manpower with technology so as to avoid the kind of massive battles that war involved. This is a key to understanding World War II. It explains the heavy reliance on air power in the European theater. It lay at the heart of the most serious disagreement between Britain and the United States on how to fight the war: Churchill consistently resisted opening a second European front in the hope that other means, primarily air power, would bring the Germans to their knees.

World War II was still a mass war, but the orientation of policymakers has continued to be replacing manpower with technology, particularly with air power. Like Churchill and World War I,

American policymakers responded to the resistance of both civilians and soldiers to Vietnam by envisioning new forms of war that would have minimum impact on the citizens of their own country. Hence the development of exotic “smart” weaponry that has rendered possible military actions with almost no American casualties. Another product of the Vietnam experience is the so-called “Powell Doctrine,” which insists that military engagements be kept as short as possible and only be fought when there is massive military superiority, as in the case of the Gulf War or Afghanistan. The aim, again, is to avoid the negative impact that drawn-out, difficult conflicts like Vietnam had on the morale of both civilians and soldiers.

There is much to applaud in these developments. We can be glad that a smaller and smaller number of Americans have to fight, and the development of smart technologies helps minimize civilian casualties among our opponents. But the question I am raising involves the downside of all of this, the extent to which it distances war from the average person’s concerns in ways that evoke the traditional standing army. Theorists like Kant called for the abolition of such armies (“*miles perpetuus*”) from the fear that they lead to endless conflict. Our current arrangements may, similarly, make military adventurism more likely, but with the constraint that actions be limited so as not to impact ordinary persons too much. We see this limitation in the current war on terrorism, in which sacrifice for the average citizen involves at most giving blood, donating money to charity, or—as the president has requested—hugging one’s children. The upshot of all of this, I’ve been suggesting, is that the question of war is no longer treated with the requisite moral seriousness.

### **The Willingness to Die**

Some people will respond to what I have said by challenging the principle that it assumes. They will maintain that the failure of citizens to abide by the PPI does not reflect any lack of moral seriousness. What it reflects is the fact that the PPI isn’t true. Although this essay is not an attempt to justify the PPI fully, I will try to respond to at least some of the major objections to it to motivate my claim that society’s departures from it are worrisome.

At the heart of the PPI is the notion that one should be willing to bear one’s fair share of the cost for the policies one endorses—in this

case, for the wars one endorses. A major objection to the PPI is that it overstates what that “fair share” is in stating that one should be willing to *die* in the war tomorrow.

This characterization is obviously quite dramatic. Someone might respond: My support for a war at most commits me to assuming the cost of *participating* in that war. Hence it does not commit me to dying in it. Rather, it commits me to assuming a certain risk of dying. And that risk is in fact very small. In modern war, only a small percentage of the people in most armies fight at all, and only a small percentage of them die. So the question in supporting an action like the war on terrorism is not “Would you be willing to die there, tomorrow?” but “Would you be willing to assume an N% risk of dying there, where ‘N’ is very small?” My general principle—the PPI—should be reformulated accordingly.

Someone might elaborate on this point by introducing a parallel. War may involve dying, they might say, but so do many other activities that society engages in. When the Verrazano Narrows Bridge was built in New York, a number of workers were buried alive in cement. Some people probably die in any large construction project. It does not follow that if I’m in favor of building the Verrazano Narrows Bridge then I must myself be willing to be buried in cement tomorrow. Almost every activity involves the assumption of some risk. Even college professors are shot every once in a while by irate students. It does not follow that endorsing higher education means being willing to bear the ultimate cost for it.

There are several ways to respond to this challenge. Let me focus on the soldier/construction worker parallel.

Both soldiers and construction workers may accept a risk of dying, but soldiers actually accept more than this. When you become a soldier you are not just expected to risk death, you are expected to die—if the circumstances require it. This is implicit in the fact that a soldier, unlike a construction worker, can be ordered to die if need be. Hence soldiers are taught that they have a duty to die for their country, but no construction worker is taught that there is a duty to die for a bridge. War is about dying in a way that building bridges is not, and this is why the fact of death is treated so differently. When soldiers die they are honored for giving their lives for their country,

the assumption being that the sacrifice is one that they have chosen for themselves. But while workers may die in the course of construction, no one “gives” his or her life for a bridge; the loss is an accident to be regretted, not a sacrifice to be honored.

In discussions of this matter, some have challenged the notion that soldiers can be ordered to die. Obviously, soldiers are not ordered to die in the same way that, say, suicide bombers are compelled to die. But to conclude from this that soldiers are not in some larger sense ordered to die is a mistake, as the words of our generals confirm. When General George C. Marshall ordered American troops to defend the Philippines at all costs, he made a special point of remarking to his colleagues on the burdens posed “by a command to other men to die.” The real issue, as theorists like Michael Walzer and George Kateb have noted, is that the obligation to die that soldiers possess is difficult to square with a certain liberal individualist picture in which the ultimate basis of all political arrangements is a basic regard for oneself. Reflecting on the “absolute obedience” required by the military, John Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government* notes the anomaly in the fact that while a superior officer can command a soldier “to march up to the mouth of a cannon . . . where he is almost sure to perish,” that same officer is prohibited from demanding “one penny of his money.”

Joining an army means being willing to sacrifice oneself when called. It may well be that very few soldiers are called to do this, but all soldiers, by joining the military, consent to being so called; they agree to give up their life if need be. What the PPI maintains is that if *this* is what we are asking of soldiers—that they give up their life if need be—then we should be willing to do it ourselves. I have added the proviso “tomorrow” to mark the fact that the minute you become a soldier you could be asked to die tomorrow. Responsibility for going to war, then, is not simply about assuming a risk of dying, it is about being willing to die when called to do so.

I have been speaking of what people “agree” to do and what they are “asked” to do when they become part of the military, but this language is deeply problematic for characterizing modern war. Until recently, almost all modern wars involved some form of conscription that called young men to service whether they liked it or not; refusal

to serve meant substantial jail time. A professional military of the kind we have now involves more consent, but there is still the issue of how much economic factors compel the disadvantaged to enter the military. Insofar as society does compel people to enter the military and to make the ultimate sacrifice, I should think that this makes the imperative all the stronger that supporting a war should mean being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice oneself. The issue here is not whether you should ask someone to do what you would not do yourself, but whether you should compel someone to do what you would not do.

### **Reconnecting War and Personal Responsibility**

How might we reawaken the sense of personal responsibility towards war that I've argued animated some of the Founding generation and that I've formulated as the PPI?

Our leaders and their families could set the standard. In previous wars, the children of presidents were some of the first to step forward to serve, on the principle that fighting a war should engage everyone, great and small. It has been remarkable to me that despite the administration's projections that the current war on terrorism could last 30 years, and despite President Bush's general call to service in his speech marking the one-year anniversary of September 11, not a single family member of any top administration figure has stepped forward to enlist in the military or to serve in any other way, even though from President Bush on down almost all of them have military-age children. Perhaps the only thing more remarkable is that nobody finds this remarkable, a testament, I think, to the disconnection of war from personal responsibility.

I've suggested that the social basis for this disconnection lies in the absence of anything like universal conscription. But it does not follow that the solution lies in returning to conscription. First of all, changes in military technology and policy have rendered unnecessary the kind of large numbers that would need to be drafted. So even if we had a draft, the chances of being drafted would be so small that they probably wouldn't impact the average person's experience of war. A second and more important point is that the draft is a substantial violation of individual freedom, certainly more substantial than

any other claim of community requires. Any program of instituting military service, perhaps as part of a more general community service program, must be ready to address this problem.

What we need is a debate about how to reconnect going to war and personal responsibility. Nixon's actions to end the draft elicited very little debate, in large part, I'm afraid, because so many of the public figures who might have initiated such a debate were happy to have their children spared the risk of serving. The last significant extensive public discussion of these matters occurred in the late 1940s at the start of the Cold War, around the adoption of the first peacetime military conscription. Several of the issues I have raised were prominent in that debate, including America's traditional anxieties about the creation of a standing army. But as Aaron Friedberg observes in his *In the Shadow of the Garrison State*, the debate was concluded by the mid-1950s and, I would add, it has never really been revisited. Given that we are in the middle of the war on terrorism and that a war against Iraq looms on the horizon, surely it is time to revisit some of these difficult issues.



*"Would you mind talking to me for a while? I forgot my cell phone."*

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