The Chickenhawk Argument

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CHEYNEY RYAN, OCT 7 2014

There should be a law, I thought. If you support a war, if you think it's worth the price, that's fine, but you have to put your own precious fluids on the line. You have to head for the front and hook up with an infantry unit and help spill the blood. And you have to bring along your wife, or your kids, or your lover. A law, I thought.

– Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (2009)

The term "chickenhawk" first appeared in the 1980s in relation to bellicose supporters of Ronald Reagan who had avoided military service in Vietnam or, in some cases, Korea. It reemerged after 9/11 with George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and their hawkish neo-conservative allies, most of whom had histories of avoiding combat service. These leaders called for a global War on Terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, they celebrated the virtues of sacrifice, yet they had not served, their own children did not serve, and they did not encourage their children to serve. War's sacrifices were something to be born by others.

A "chickenhawk," then, is someone who vigorously endorses a war and its sacrifices while diligently *avoiding* those sacrifices himself.

The term was controversial from the start. Critics on the right called it "a dishonest and incoherent slur," "a toothless epithet," a form of "bullying." Some on the left agreed. Matthew Yglesias remarked that "As a matter of logic, the chicken-hawk argument is weak." It's a "tempting rhetorical ploy that in practice proves almost nothing" (Yglesias, 2005).

I've maintained, on the contrary, that the chickenhawk issue is a real one (Ryan, 2009). It is not an incoherent slur or toothless epithet. It raises important ethical questions of war and personal responsibility, and fundamental political questions about the citizenry's connection, or lack thereof, to the wars fought in its name.

The chickenhawk argument engages a fundamental tenant of America's founding Civic Republican ideology–the ideology of the citizen soldier: wars should not be fought by professional members of standing army. They should be fought by ordinary citizens: governments should not wage war if citizens are unwilling to make that sacrifice, and citizens should not urge war unless they are willing to make that sacrifice (Bailyn, 1992, Royster, 1996, Schwoerer, 1974). For this ideology, waging war while avoiding its sacrifices is the height of political corruption–of the type the colonists identified with the British Empire (and its Hessian mercenaries). War without sacrifice was a sure ticket to endless wars for trivial reasons, as Kant stressed in his essay "On Perpetual Peace" (Kant, 1983).

American military arrangements always evidenced a tension between the citizen soldier model and the regular army model. Nevertheless, the citizen soldier ideal was dominant, especially during World War II. The celebration of the so-called "Greatest Generation" was built around the fact that every citizen who could willingly served, no matter how privileged (Brokaw, 2004). Shared sacrifice was the essence of democracy. I have called this politics *martial liberalism*: "martial," because its heart is the willingness to serve in times of war; "liberalism," because it offers in return the rights of citizenship (voting, social benefits like education, etc.).

The Vietnam War began the demise of martial liberalism by disconnecting citizenship and military service. Few

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young people wished to serve in that war, many future politicians including Bill Clinton avoided it. But the difference between Clinton and the chickenhawk is that Clinton avoided a war that he *opposed*, while the chickenhawk saw no contradiction between championing the crusade in Vietnam while avoiding its sacrifices themselves. Many forget that liberals like Edward Kennedy opposed the end of conscription and the creation of a professional military, on citizen soldier grounds. The draft was ended, though, because the privileged classes no longer wanted their children to serve in harm's way, regardless of the cause.

We live, I'd argue, in the twilight of martial liberalism. This contributes to its surreal quality. Not long after 9/11, a TV network held a "town hall" meeting with representatives of the Bush administration and an audience of young adults. At several points, calls for collective vigilance were met with vigorous and sustained applause.

One military man asked if the nation was truly ready for a "thirty year effort against terrorism"–and there were resounding calls of "Yes!"

There was the same loud response when another Bush spokesman evoked John F. Kennedy's words about "no sacrifice being too great in the cause of freedom."

They all cheered when a well-dressed young man from the State Department said, "Let's show the terrorists what Americans are made of!"

But one remark more than any other got the most applause. It was when, in response to one anxious young man's question, a Bush spokesman proclaimed, "No, we have absolutely no intention of reviving the draft!"

Yes, there are good reasons to oppose a draft. But if you thought fighting this war was such a great idea, why *wouldn't* you want to be drafted to fight it? In past wars, the draft was a cause for celebration by many. Young men were proud of being the first chosen. They'd be photographed by newspapers smiling while their families beamed proudly. Believe it or not, up to the mid-1960s, polls showed that the draft was consistently one of the most popular institutions in America. Polls showed that 90% of Americans approved of conscription. (Polls indicated that support for the draft was 90% in December 1965, dropping to 79% in August 1966, and to 50% percent by May 1968 (Useem, 1973).)

In the United States, "Support the Troops" is now unquestioned across the political spectrum. Everyone must "honor" them for their "sacrifices," while avoiding the question always asked in previous times: Would I make that sacrifice myself? Not long after the 2004 election a majority of Americans polled by CNN agreed that bringing "democracy" to Iraq by military means was a good idea. It then reported that 90% of Americans would refuse to die for that goal themselves. As I write this, the Obama administration has announced a new military initiative to counter the threat of ISIS and other expressions of radical Islam. Like the War on Terror, it has no clear end. Polls reveal ambivalence on the part of Americans. Of those who strongly favor the effort, including many politicians, including liberal politicians, the question is whether they will not just honor and support the sacrifices of others, but assume the sacrifices themselves (including encouraging their children to serve).

Civic Republican ideology held that the citizen soldier model would be a check on irresponsible war making. Thinkers like Kant took this to be obvious, and to some extent it is obvious. If I know that I will be taxed to pay for a bridge, I will think twice about whether it's worth it; if I know that I (or my loved one) will serve in the war, I will think twice about whether it's worth it. The same logic has been invoked in paying for wars. Civic Republican ideology was deeply suspicious of financing wars by borrowing, and the way to the Bush administration did for its wars. Prior to World War I, opponents of American intervention argued that the government should compute the cost ahead of time and send the bill to everyone, and only enter the conflict when enough money had come back. We now know that the links between war and democracy are not quite this simple. War fever among a populace can drive leaders to war against their better judgment. Moreover, the desire of a populace to vindicate its sacrifices can sustain a war beyond its time, or lead to punitive measures afterwards, as following World War I.

In sum, though, I think political prudence counsels against chickenhawk logic. But political prudence is not the only

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consideration.

The quote above is from Tim O'Brien, a Vietnam veteran whose book recounts his personal conflicts over the decision to serve. He speaks of there being a "law," but I take his point to be one of personal morality initially. Isn't there something wrong with someone that vigorously endorses a war, or any dangerous enterprise for that matter, then vigorously seeks to avoid its costs? Let us be clear on the point. The problem is not someone that opposes a war, and avoids its costs (though one might argue that, once society has made the decision for war, there is an obligation to share its cost regardless of one's initial view). Nor is the problem someone that vigorously supports a war, yet happens to avoid its costs–because he is physically unfit to serve, say. Chickenhawk cases are ones where people are perfectly capable of serving, yet do everything they possibly could to avoid service–for example, by seeking endless student deferments, like former Vice President Cheney. The fact that they do so legally does not affect things, in my view, especially when the deferments gained are themselves politically questionable, as with student deferments.

The key moral value here is *integrity*. Endorsing a war while avoiding its costs bespeaks of a failure to "walk your talk." This is one reason why the chickenhawk issue has great salience for political leaders especially. Integrity is a prized virtue in politics (Carter, 1996). In choosing who to vote for, we want to know that people will be true to their word, stick by what they say they stand for. And we feel this virtue is most demonstrated in those instances where individuals in their personal lives faced the choice of "walking their talk" or not. There was a further element in the Vietnam case. For a privileged person to support a war while avoiding its sacrifices meant that someone else, almost certainly a less privileged person, had to bear those sacrifices. There is an element of exploitation, then. This element is less evident when there is no longer a draft, but I think it is present nevertheless.

Someone who endorsed many of the sentiments voiced here was the late Congressman Jack Murtha, a veteran and critic of the Bush foreign policy. Integrity, in my view, implies the following principle, which I call the *Murtha Test*: You should endorse a war only if you would be willing to fight and die in it yourself, tomorrow. The problem with the chickenhawk is that he egregiously violates this test. The logic here is hypothetical. Few people actually face the choice of fighting in a war, fewer people still face the prospect of dying in one, and even those have no idea when it will happen. To me, though, such facts can make it all too easy to forget about the costs that our policies actually do impose on people, albeit people we don't know, in places and times we may be unaware of. The Murtha Test brings things down to earth, and closer to home. Would you still endorse a war–if you knew with certainty that you would bear its ultimate cost?

With the end of martial liberalism, we have entered a time of what I call *alienated war*. War, for citizens in countries like the United States, is increasingly something fought by other people, in far-off places, for reasons often obscure (though they are always characterized by their proponents as involving "our very survival"). The phenomenon is not new. In their own way, the founders of the United States were concerned with alienated war. They felt that British imperialist ventures were a form of alienated war, whose true costs were hidden from the British people–though not from peoples abroad that suffered from their consequences. Civic Republican arrangements envisioned a new approach to war, one that avoided political and moral corruption; and in so doing, held forth the prospect of a more peaceful future. It was in this spirit that many envisioned the United States as a "peace nation" (Deudney, 2004).

Concern with the chickenhawk syndrome aims to reclaim this cluster of concerns, though doing so remains an open project. I think its moral impulse is clear. Something like the Murtha Test should guide each citizen's reflections on policy. But its institutional implications are less clear. We cannot return to a draft, nor should we; the cost of personal liberty are too obvious. At the same time, I think everyone can recognize the dangers in military service becoming increasingly detached from the lives of those most positioned to impact policy. Perhaps the problem is cultural, more than institutional: constantly reminding ourselves of the true costs of war, and constantly asking ourselves if the aims are clear enough and compelling enough to justify it.

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