

The United States of Militarism

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A century ago, the USA was a dynamic, forward-looking, freedom-espousing country that was focused on science and technology and its practical applications, as represented by Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. We were about to reelect a president, Woodrow Wilson, precisely because he had kept the country out of World War I. With the exception of the Navy, the U.S. military was small, and few Americans (Teddy Roosevelt comes to mind) boasted about the “manly” virtues of military service and war.

Here we are, a century later, in a country that has taken up militarism, a country which is increasingly reactionary, authoritarian, and backward-leaning, a country that leads the world not in innovation for ordinary people as in the days of Edison and Ford, but in weapons exports to the world’s trouble spots.

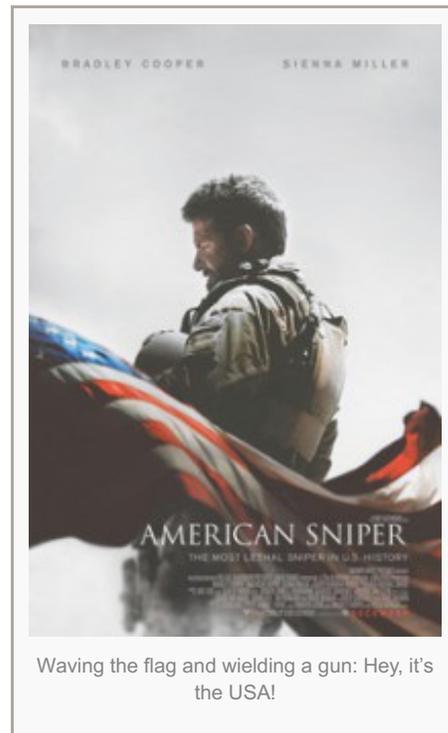
Anyone with a sense of history — indeed, anyone with common sense — should recognize that militaries are antithetical to democracy. Indeed, most Americans recognized exactly that in 1915. A true democracy has a military as a reluctant and regrettable choice, driven by the need to defend itself in a hostile and violent world. But over the last century a regrettable choice has become, not only requisite, but celebratory in the USA. Like so many amped up Teddy Roosevelt’s, striving to prove our manhood, America now believes military service conveys nobility. Heroic meaning.

Yet celebrating the military, nubilizing the military experience, finding purpose and meaning in continuous war, is the very definition of militarism.

Admittedly, American militarism is a peculiar strain. It’s not the Germanic kind in which a conservative aristocracy found its reason for being and its privileged position in military service. There are no Prussian Junkers who willingly revel in a martial code of honor and duty in war. Indeed, America’s aristocracy of wealth reserves the right to exclude itself from military service even as it applauds the sons and daughters of the lower orders who enlist to fight (and sometimes to die).

Again, it’s a strange militarism, militarism USA, one in which military service is indeed one of the few avenues for America’s working classes to rise by merit (tightly defined within a hierarchical structure that breeds and rewards conformity), and where a few generals actually attain a measure of cult status, however temporary (recent examples include Colin Powell, Tommy Franks, and David Petraeus). Yet celebrated generals come and go, even as America’s wars are continuous.

Indeed, we’ve become so accustomed to living with the drumbeats of war that we no longer hear them. It reminds me of a lesson an officer taught on World War I at the Air Force Academy. He played sounds of an artillery barrage for the entire 50 minutes of the lesson. When you first walked in, the noise hit you. Then you sort of forgot about it as he taught the lesson. Just before the end, he turned off the noise, and the silence spoke. You realized, just a little, what it had been like for troops in the trenches in 1916 living under artillery bombardment. And you also realized how quickly we can all become more or less accustomed to the drumbeats of war.



We're hearing them all the time today — it's the background noise to our lives. For some, it's even become sweet music. But war and militarism is never sweet music to a functioning democracy.

One final point: Some Americans react as if calling attention to the militarization of our society/culture is the same as being anti-military. Being against militarism and war is not being anti-military: more the reverse. There's a strange conflation or confusion there — and this conflation/confusion is a sign of how far militarism has gotten under our collective skin and into the nation's blood stream.