

Tomgram: William Astore, We're Number One (in Self-Promotion)

tomdispatch.com/post/175337/tomgram:_william_astore,_we%27re_number_one_%28in_self-promotion%29/

Can you believe that, in certain circles, support for obesity is becoming an American birthright (as in “the freedom to be...”) and a political position? Like various radio and TV shock jocks, Sarah Palin [has been attacking](#) Michelle Obama’s anti-obesity initiative as yet another example of “the nanny state run amok.” (It’s enough to make you hyperventilate on the couch while watching “Law and Order” reruns!) Meanwhile, Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell [let loose](#) a blast at the National Football League for postponing a Philadelphia-Minnesota game because of an upcoming blizzard. “We’re becoming a nation of wussies,” he thundered. (It’s enough to make you text and tweet up a storm from that same couch!)

A question arises: Doesn’t anybody have anything better to do? I mean, aren’t there a few more salient problems to attack in our American world, like the [decline and fall of just about](#) everything? Take the U.S. military, about which -- as [TomDispatch regular](#) and retired Lieutenant Colonel William Astore points out -- American presidents (and the rest of our political crew) can never say enough hyperbolically praiseworthy things. Well, bad times are supposed to be great for military recruitment. But even if a flood of gays and lesbians sign on as soon as Do-Ask-I’ll-Tell [becomes official policy](#), there are other long-term impediments to producing an effective fighting force.

In April 2010, for instance, a group of retired top brass and others [released a report](#) claiming that 27% of Americans between 17 and 24 are “too fat to fight.” “[Within just 10 years](#), the number of states reporting that 40 percent of their 18- to 24-year-olds are obese or overweight went from one [Kentucky] to 39.” No reason to focus on that, though. After all, it was so last year.

Just as the year ended, however, the [Education Trust](#) issued a report indicating that nearly a quarter of all applicants to the Armed Forces, despite having a high-school diploma, [can’t pass](#) the necessary military entrance exam. This isn’t Rhodes Scholarships we’re talking about, but not having “the reading, mathematics, science, and problem-solving abilities” to become a *bona fide* private in the U.S. Army. We’re talking the sort of basic that, according to an Education Trust spokesperson, makes it “equally likely that the men and women who don’t pass the test are [also] unprepared for the civilian workforce.”

Last month, as if to emphasize the seriousness of the problem, [Shanghai’s students](#) came in number one in the Program for International Student Assessment, a [well-respected test](#) given to 15-year-old students in 65 countries in reading, science, and math skills. U.S. students came in a glorious 17th in reading, 23rd in math, and 31st in science. In today’s dispatch, Astore asks whether the U.S. military is actually “the finest fighting force in the history of the world.” Then there’s that other question: These days, can anyone call the United States the finest nation in the world with a straight face? The fattest? Maybe, though we’re behind [various Pacific island nations](#) for that honor. The least well educated? Not yet, but heading that way. Maybe it’s time for Congress to launch a No-Nation-Left-Behind program -- for us. Think about it while you’re eating [those s’mores](#) Sarah Palin is plugging. (To catch Timothy MacBain’s latest TomCast audio interview in which Astore discusses the military nightmares of a fading empire, [click here](#) or, to download it to your iPod, [here](#).) *Tom*

Freedom Fighters for a Fading Empire

What It Means When We Say We Have the World’s Finest Fighting Force

By [William J. Astore](#)

Words matter, as candidate Barack Obama [said](#) in the 2008 election campaign. What to make, then, of President Obama’s pep talk last month to U.S. troops in Afghanistan in which he [lauded them](#) as “the finest fighting force that the world has ever known”? Certainly, he knew that those words would resonate with the troops as well as with the

folks back home.

In fact, this sort of description of the U.S. military has become something of a must for American presidents. Obama's predecessor George W. Bush, for example, boasted of that military as alternately "[the greatest force](#) for freedom in the history of the world" and "[the greatest force](#) for human liberation the world has ever known." Hyperbolic and self-promoting statements, to be sure, but undoubtedly sincere, reflecting as they do an American sense of exceptionalism that sits poorly with the increasingly interconnected world of the twenty-first century.

I'm a retired U.S. Air Force officer and a historian who teaches military history. The retired officer in me warms to the sentiment of our troops as both unparalleled fighters and selfless liberators, but the historian in me begs to differ.

Let's start with the fighting part of the equation. Are we truly the world's greatest fighting force, not only at this moment, but as measured against all militaries across history? If so, on what basis is this claim made? And what does such triumphalist rhetoric suggest not just about our national narcissism, but Washington's priorities? Consider that no leading U.S. politician thinks to boast that we have the finest educational system or health-care system or environmental policies "that the world has ever known."

Measured in terms of sheer destructive power, and our ability to project that power across the globe, the U.S. military is indeed the world's "finest" fighting force. Our nuclear arsenal remains second to none. Our air forces (including the Navy's carrier task forces, the Army's armada of helicopter gunships, and the CIA's fleet of unmanned aerial drones prosecuting a "secret" war in Pakistan) dominate the heavens. Our Navy ("a global force for good," according to its [new motto](#)) rules the waves -- even more so than old Britannia did a century ago. And well should we rule the skies and seas, given the roughly one trillion dollars a year we spend on achieving our vision of "full spectrum dominance."

But this awesome ability to exercise "[global reach, global power](#)" hardly makes us the finest military force ever. After all, "finest" shouldn't be measured by sheer strength and reach alone. First and foremost, of course, should come favorable results set against the quality of the opponents bested. To use a sports analogy, we wouldn't call the Pittsburgh Steelers "the finest team in NFL history" simply because they annihilated Penn State in football. Similarly, we can't measure the success of today's U.S. military solely in terms of amazingly quick (if increasingly costly and ultimately dismal) "victories" over the Taliban in 2001 or Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces in 2003.

To carry the football analogy a few yards further, one might ask when our "finest fighting force" had its last Super Bowl win. Certainly, 1918 and 1945 (World Wars I and II) were such wins, even if as part of larger coalitions; 1953 (Korea) was a frustrating stalemate; 1973 (Vietnam) was a demoralizing loss; 1991 (Desert Storm in Iraq) was a distinctly flawed win; and efforts like Grenada or Panama or Serbia were more like scrimmages. Arguably our biggest win, the Cold War, was achieved less through military means than economic power and technological savvy.

To put it bluntly: America's troops are tough-minded professionals, but the finest fighting force ever? Sir, no, sir.

We're Number One!

Americans often seem to live in the eternal now, which makes it easier to boast that our military is the finest ever. Most historians, however, are not so tied to nationalistic rhetoric or the ceaseless present. If asked to identify the finest fighting force in history, my reaction -- and I would hardly be alone in the field -- would be to favor those peoples and empires which existed for war alone.

Examples immediately spring to mind: the Assyrians, the Spartans, the Romans, the Vikings, the Mongols, and the Nazis. These peoples elevated their respective militaries and martial prowess above all else. Unsurprisingly, they were bloodthirsty and ruthless. Unstinting ambition for imperial goals often drove them to remarkable feats of arms at an unconscionable and sometimes difficult to sustain cost. Yes, the Spartans defeated the Athenians, but that internecine quarrel paved the way for the demise of the independent Greek city states at the hands of Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander (soon enough to be known as "the Great").

Yes, the Romans conquered an empire, but one of their own historians, Tacitus, put in the mouth of a Celtic chieftain this description of being on the receiving end of Roman “liberation”:

"The Romans' tyranny cannot be escaped by any act of reasonable submission. These brigands of the world have exhausted the land by their rapacity, so they now ransack the sea. When their enemy is rich, they lust after wealth; when their enemy is poor, they lust after power. Neither East nor West has satisfied their hunger. They are unique among humanity insofar as they equally covet the rich and the poor. Robbery, butchery, and rapine they call 'Empire.' They create a desert and call it 'Peace.'"

Talk about tough love.

The Romans would certainly have to be in the running for “finest military” of all time. They conquered many peoples, expanded far, and garrisoned vast areas of the Mediterranean, North Africa, and what would become Europe, while their legions marched forth, often to victory (not to speak of plunder), for hundreds of years. Still, the gold medal for the largest land empire in history -- and the finest fighting force of all time -- must surely go to the thirteenth century Mongols.

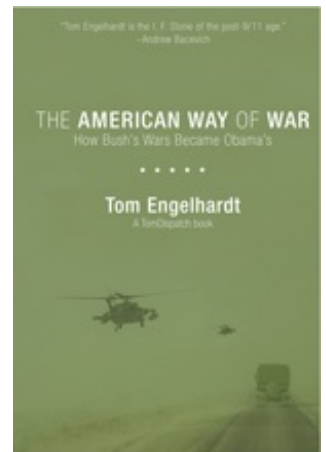
Led by Genghis Khan and his successors, Mongol horsemen conquered China and the Islamic world -- the two most powerful, sophisticated civilizations of their day -- while also exerting control over Russia for two and a half centuries. And thanks to a combination of military excellence, clever stratagem, fleetness of foot (and far more important, hoof), flexibility, and when necessary utter ferocity, they did all this while generally being outnumbered by their enemies.

Even the fighting power of the finest militaries waxed and waned, however, based in part on the quality of those leading them. The Macedonians blossomed under Philip and Alexander. It was not simply Rome that conquered Gaul, but Julius Caesar. The Mongols were at each other's throats until Genghis Khan united them into an unstoppable military machine that swept across a continent. The revolutionary French people in their famed *levée en masse* had martial fervor, but only Napoleon gave them direction. History's finest fighting forces are associated closely with history's greatest captains.

Measure that against the American military today. General David Petraeus is certainly a successful officer who exhibits an enviable mastery of detail and a powerful political sense of how to handle Washington, but a Genghis Khan? An Alexander? A Caesar? Even “[King David](#),” as he's been called both by admirers and more than a few detractors, might blush at such comparisons. After all, at the head of the most powerfully destructive force in the Middle East, and later Central Asia, he has won no outright victories and conquered nothing. His triumph in Iraq in 2006-2007 may yet prove more “[confected](#)” [than convincing](#).

As for our armed forces, though most Americans don't know it, within U.S. military circles much criticism exists of an officer corps of “[tarnished brass](#)” that is deficient in professionalism; of generals who are more concerned with [covering their butts](#) than leading from the front; of instruction at military academies that is [divorced](#) from war's realities; of an [aversion](#) “to innovation or creativity... [leading to] an atmosphere of anti-intellectualism” that undermines strategy and makes a hash of counterinsurgency efforts. Indeed, our military's biting criticism of itself is one of the few positive signs in a fighting force that is otherwise overstretched, deeply frustrated, and ridiculously overpraised by genuflecting politicians.

So I'm sorry, President Obama. If you wish to address the finest fighting force the world has ever known, you'll need a time machine, not Air Force One. You'll have to doff your leather Air Force-issue [flight jacket](#) and don Mongolian armor. And in so doing, you'll have to embrace mental attitudes and a way of life utterly antithetical to democracy and the rights of humanity as we understand them today. For that is the price of building a fighting force second to none -- and one reason why our politicians should stop insisting that we have one.



Buy the book.

“The Greatest Force for Human Liberation”

Two centuries ago, Napoleon led his armies out of France and brought “liberty, equality, and fraternity” to much of the rest of *ancien régime* Europe -- but on his terms and via the barrel of a musket. His invasion of Spain, for example, was viewed as anything but a “liberation” by the Spanish, who launched a fierce guerrilla campaign against their French occupiers that sapped the strength of Napoleon’s empire and what was generally considered the finest fighting force of its moment. British aid to the insurgency helped ensure that this campaign would become Napoleon’s “[Spanish ulcer](#).”

The “Little Corporal” ultimately decided to indirectly strike back at the British by invading Russia, which was refusing to enforce France’s so-called continental blockade. As Napoleon’s army bled out or froze solid in the snows of a Russian winter, the Prussians and the Austrians found new reasons to reject French “fraternity.” Within years, Napoleon’s empire was unsaddled and destroyed, a fate shared by its leader, sent into ignominious exile on the island of Saint Helena.

Like Napoleon’s fired up revolutionary troops, the American military also sees itself as on a mission to spread democracy and freedom. Afghans and Iraqis have, however, proven no more eager than the Spaniards of two centuries ago to be “liberated” at gun (or “Hellfire” missile) point, even when the liberators [come](#) bearing [gifts](#), which in today’s terms means the promise of roads, jobs, and “reconstruction,” or even cash [by the pallet](#).

Because we Americans believe our own press releases, it’s difficult to imagine others (except, of course, those so fanatic as to be blind to reality) seeing us as anything but well-intentioned liberators. As journalist Nir Rosen has [put it](#): “There’s... a deep sense among people in the [American] policy world, in the military, that we’re the good guys. It’s just taken for granted that what we’re doing must be right because we’re doing it. We’re the exceptional country, the essential nation, and our role, our intervention, our presence is a benign and beneficent thing.”

In reporting on our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Rosen and [others](#) have offered ample proof for those who care to consider it that our foreign interventions have been anything but benign or beneficent, no less liberating. Our invasion of Iraq opened the way to civil war and mayhem. For many ordinary Iraqis, when American intervention didn’t lead to death, destruction, dislocation, and exile, it bred “deep humiliation and disruption” as well as constant fear, a state of affairs that, as Rosen notes, is “painful and humiliating and scary.”

In Afghanistan, Rosen points out, most villagers see our troops making common cause with a despised and predatory government. Huge infusions of American dollars, meanwhile, rarely trickle down to the village level, but instead promote the [interests](#) of Afghan warlords and foreign businesses. Small wonder that, more than nine years later, a majority of Afghans [say](#) they want to be liberated from us.

If the U.S. military is not “the greatest force for human liberation” in all history, what is? Revealingly, it’s far easier to identify the finest *fighting* force of history. If put on the spot, though, I’d highlight the ideas and ideals of human dignity, of equality before the law, of the fundamental value of each and every individual, as the greatest force for human liberation. Such ideals are shared by many peoples. They may sometimes be defended by the sword, but were inscribed by the pens of great moralists and thinkers of humanity’s collective past. In this sense, when it comes to advancing freedom, the pen has indeed been mightier than the sword.

Freedom Fighters for a Fading Empire

The historian John Lukacs once noted: “There are many things wrong with the internationalist idea to Make the World Safe for Democracy, one of them being that it is not that different from the nationalist idea that What Is Good for America Is Good for the World.”

In our post-9/11 world, whatever our rhetoric about democratizing the planet, our ambitions are guided by the seemingly hardheaded goal of making Americans safe from terrorists. A global war on terrorism has, however, proven anything but consistent with expanding liberty at home or abroad. Indeed, the seductive and self-

congratulatory narrative of our troops as selfless liberators and the finest freedom fighters around actually helps blind us to our violent methods in far-off lands, even as it distances us from the human costs of our imperial policies.

Though we officially seek to extinguish terrorists, our actions abroad serve as obvious accelerants to terror. To understand why this is so, ask yourself how comforted you would be if foreign military “liberators” [kicked in your door](#), shouted commands in a language you didn’t understand, confiscated your guns, dragged your father and brothers and sons off in cuffs and hoods to locations unknown, all in the name of “counterterror” operations? How comforted would you be if [remotely piloted drones](#) hovered constantly overhead, ready to unleash Hellfire missiles at terrorist “targets of opportunity” in your neighborhood?

Better not to contemplate such harsh realities. Better to praise our troops as so many Mahatma Gandhis, so many freedom fighters. Better to praise them as so many Genghis Khans, so many ultimate warriors.

At a time of feared [national decline](#), our leaders undoubtedly prescribe military action in part to comfort us (and themselves) and restore our sense of potency and pride. In doing so, they violate the famous phrase long associated with the Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm.

William J. Astore, a retired lieutenant colonel (USAF) and professor of history, is a [TomDispatch regular](#). He welcomes reader comments at wjastore@gmail.com. To listen to Timothy MacBain's latest TomCast audio interview in which Astore discusses the military nightmares of a fading empire, [click here](#) or, to download it to your iPod, [here](#).

Copyright 2011 William J. Astore