

A NATION AT WAR

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUL 5 2010

President Obama and other senior US officials make constant reference to America being “a nation at war.” This is politically necessary to say and obviously the case because the US has nearly a hundred thousand troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan and reports combat casualties daily. More than a trillion dollars have been spent on this effort variously labeled the Long War, the struggle against violent extremism or, archaically, the Global War on Terrorism.

But critics on the American political Right and Left see the sacrifice as too narrowly focused, and thus not sufficiently engaging the entire nation. With an All Volunteer Force the burden of the war falls mostly on the troops and their families. It’s a fight for the professionals. Some soldiers and Marines have served four or more combat tours since 9/11. Reservists have been called to active duty and there is employment for contractors, but there is no conscription. The rest of us are involved only to the extent we pay taxes and pay attention.

President Bush pushed through tax cuts after 9/11, arguing that the economy needed the stimulus that some believed that tax cuts offered, and that the war’s cost, predicted to be modest, could be mostly paid with the surplus then built into the federal budget. The war, now in its ninth year, has joined the global recession, expanding health care benefits, and a dozen other causes in eliminating that surplus and driving government budget into significant deficit. Tax increases are certain although more likely for our heirs than for us.

The war, old news that it is, receives only modest coverage in the media. The Rolling Stones article on General Stanley McChrystal brought renewed attention, but mostly on the Washington based drama of the general’s removal from command. There is occasional TV news film on the dangers the troops face and the comings and goings of leaders. We see President Karzai in Washington or Secretary Gates or Vice President Biden in Kabul giving predictable speeches. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and upcoming congressional election are better covered. We know vaguely that the war is continuing because of reports of IED attacks on coalition forces and the killing Taliban and al Qaeda commanders on both sides of the Afghan/Pakistan border, but such information is mostly ignored background din to our other interests.

Should the war become a bigger part of nation’s life? The problem is America is a very big country and the war, no matter how it goes, will likely remain a relatively small one. The US military needs to recruit less than 200,000 men and women a year to maintain its current size, and easily does so. Conscription would have a pool of 4,000,000 males and females coming of draft age each year, way too many for any conceivable military requirement. Vietnam was a bigger war, but many men could and did evade the male only draft of the time without affecting seriously the military’s ability to gain sufficient soldiers. What the Vietnam draft did cause was political disaffection because some were required to serve and risk their lives while others were not. Only in World War Two did the US start to run out of soldiers, but not until we put 12,000,000 men in uniforms from a national population that was half the current size. Today we would no doubt have to draft females as well as males given the changes in societal norms. Thus a draft today would be selecting a very few from a pool roughly four times the size of World War Two’s. The All Volunteer Force is a solution to so many political problems that I cannot imagine that it will easily be abandoned.

Paying for the war with increased taxes is good public policy, but bad politics. It is good to test the public’s commitment to the war by forcing the public to pay for its costs out of current consumption. However, America is both a very big and a very democratic nation. Politicians know well that the public wants its cake, war or no war. Deficit

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spending allows politicians to push the war's costs away from current voters toward those down the road. Pleasing current voters is what politicians do best. Asking them to sacrifice their reelection interests for the public good is likely asking too much. This is especially the case when the war's biggest supporters, the Republicans, are also the biggest opponents of increased taxes. They want the war without the extra taxes, and so far they are getting it precisely that way.

Truth be told America is a nation barely at war. Making it a nation more at war would require a bigger and bloodier war. World War Two mobilized the whole society. In the Vietnam War we had more than 500,000 men deployed and lost 58,000 American lives. It is estimated that a million Vietnamese lost their lives as well. Who really thinks we need to be more at war than we are today? And what would that war look like?

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.