

Onderstanding the American Military: Demographics, Personality Traits, Leadership Psychology, and Worldview

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Introduction

Since the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) the demographic composition of the American military once again came under intense scrutiny. Pundits and talking heads were quick to go to the news media and suggest that the military is racist, sexist, homophobic, and free of wealthy whites willing to fight the wars their fathers start.¹ Had these critics of the nation's military examined recent research they would have understood the demography, values, and psychology of the American military. Those facts present a very different picture than is often believed.

Beginning in the second half of the 20th century scholars began to analyze the psychology, values, and demographic characteristics of the professional military. This analysis brought some startling insights. In the preface to *The Professional Soldier* (1960), one of the earliest works on the subject, Morris Janowitz wrote,

The military face a crisis as a profession: How can it organize itself to meet its multiple functions of strategic deterrence, limited warfare, and enlarged politico-military responsibility? First, there is continuous technological change. Second, there is the necessity of redefining strategy, doctrine, and professional self-conceptions.

Maintaining an effective organization while participating in emerging schemes, such as nuclear test controls or regional security arrangements, will require new conceptions and produce new tasks for the military profession.²

Five decades later, these words still ring true. Despite unprecedented change in the international security environment, the profession of arms always appears in crisis. Perhaps Janowitz was wrong. Instead, the ever-present “crisis” may be the professional soldier’s eternal adjustment to an ever-changing strategic environment. Whatever the case may be Janowitz’s original question remains poignant.

In offering an alternative explanation of civil-military relations in the United States to the earlier work of Samuel Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State* (1957), Janowitz inaugurated what remains a hotly contested debate about the nature of the military within society and those characteristics that set it apart from the public it defends.³ While there is some consensus that suggests that members of the military are substantively different from society in its worldview, there is little agreement on exactly how different the military is and why.⁴ This chapter does not once and for all resolve the ongoing debate, but it seeks to offer a picture of the individuals who comprise the American military by examining their demography, psychology, and values.

Military Demographics

In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam Conflict the United States ended the draft in 1973 and moved to an all volunteer force. Then, as today, critics of the all-volunteer force claimed that the military would draw recruits from the poorest neighborhoods in the nation, while allowing elites to eschew military service as was often the case during Vietnam.⁵ Elite participation did decline, but the nation’s military is not drawn from the urban poor. In fact, the demographic picture of the US military is quite different.

Household Income

According to recent studies, military recruits came from households with an average annual income of \$43,122 (1999 dollars). That same year the average annual household income in the United States was about \$41,994.⁶ As a percentage of the 18-24 year old population, from which most recruits are drawn, average household incomes were between \$35,000-\$79,999 and \$85,000-\$94,999. These socio-economic groups were over represented among recruits while families at the highest and lowest end of the socioeconomic scale were underrepresented.⁷ Interestingly, the percentage of recruits from high income households has increased since 9/11 while the percentage of recruits from low income households declined.⁸ In 2005, 22.8 percent of recruits came

from the richest quintile while only 13.7 percent came from the poorest. Thus, the average enlistee is drawn from the middle class, not the urban poor. For incoming officers and military academy accessions, data was not available. Socio-economic status also correlates to other desirable variables such as work ethic, intelligence, and aptitude.⁹

Education

On average, the military is more highly educated than the rest of American society.¹⁰ Ninety-eight percent of military members hold at least a high school diploma, while the national average is 75 percent.¹¹ Enlistees and officers also score above the national average in standardized reading and math scores. Interestingly, Armed Force Quotient Test (AFQT) scores demonstrate that today's military enlistees are more intelligent than they were before 9/11.¹² In addition, as studies have shown, veterans enrolled in college have a grade point average above the mean.¹³ Thus, those who suggest that the military has lowered its standard to meet recruiting needs are incorrect. The opposite has occurred. Americans who choose to enlist or take commissions in the military are better educated and more intelligent today, than at any previous time (since the collection of data).

Race

In 2004, 75.6 percent of the adult population in the United States considered itself Caucasian. In 2006, 77.99 percent of 18-24 year olds in the United States described themselves as Caucasian.¹⁴ Of the recruits (enlisted) entering the military in 2004, 73.1 percent were Caucasian. Moreover, 75.43 percent of all active duty servicemen and women between the ages of 18 and 24 identified themselves as Caucasian.¹⁵ Thus, there is an almost 1 to 1 ratio of whites within society and the military. When broken into the subset white non-Hispanic (84.57 percent) and white Hispanic (15.43 percent), Hispanics represent slightly less than 10 percent of the total force—a slight underrepresentation.¹⁶

Blacks and Asians represent the two races with the highest and lowest levels of representation—proportionally—in the US military. Contrary to popular belief, in the years following the draft, blacks increasingly joined the military because of the fair treatment it is perceived to offer its members. By 1990, blacks made up about 20 percent of the military while accounting for only 13 percent of the total population. Seen as an egalitarian institution where skin color did not inhibit advancement, black enlistees and officers joined the military and self-selected to serve primarily in administrative, supply, and support roles.¹⁷ But in the years since 9/11, black participation in the military has declined, although it remains around 15 percent.¹⁸

Evidence suggests that this is a result of several factors. First, the rationale for joining the military is largely related to the open nature of military culture and the opportunities it provided blacks. As the Government Accountability Office notes, “Historically, many African Americans enlisted for tangible reasons and were more likely than White or Hispanic enlisted personnel to be in noncombat occupations and make a career of the military.”¹⁹ When viewed as an avenue for advancement, the military is less attractive during time of war and high operational tempo.²⁰ Second, the unpopular nature of the Iraq War and the strong affinity of blacks for the Democrat party agenda may also help to explain why black recruitment declined after 9/11.

Asians, on the other hand, have been given limited attention in the demographic literature.²¹ Why Asians are underrepresented is not well known. Thus, it must suffice to say that Asians comprise 3.6 percent of the military and 4.8 percent of the general population, a clear underrepresentation.²²

Region

Equally important to the variables described thus far is geographic region. Among the four geographic regions examined (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) the South and West account for 65 percent of all recruits with the South accounting for 42 percent.²³ Although the Northeast and Midwest account for 41 percent of the population (ages 18-24), 35 percent of recruits were drawn from these regions.²⁴ Research confirms the common belief that there is a strong “Southern military tradition” although Southerners do not dominate the leadership of the military as completely as they did early in the 20th century.

Gender

Historically, the military is a bastion of masculinity reserved for men. But wars have frequently provided women the opportunity to serve, for example, in the Women’s Air Corps (WAC) and as nurses, secretaries, and clerks. After World War II the military began to open its ranks. From 1980-2003, the number of women in the military doubled rising from 8.4 to 15 percent.²⁵ While this is certainly disproportionately low—women are slightly more than half the population—there is little effort to equalize the ratio of men and women in the military. Moreover, with few exceptions (combat arms) women are now serving in most career fields.

The most recent data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics offers one additional interesting point related to gender. Of the applicants for active enlistment in the four services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines), a higher percentage of females score in the “Tier I” category—on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)—than males. Simply stated, on average, females in the military are smarter than their male counterparts.

Population Density

One final variable offers substantive demographic explanatory power. Over 71 percent of military recruits in 2003 came from suburban and rural areas. Urban areas, which account for 40 percent of the population (ages 18-24), account for less than 29 percent of the military.²⁶ Proportionally, rural areas are the most overrepresented. Thus, the view that the urban poor are the nation's war fighters is unsubstantiated, although it is correct to suggest that "small towns pay a big price."²⁷

Composite Demographic Sketch

If a composite sketch of the average service member were drawn, *he* would be a white high school graduate from a middle class family in the suburbs or exurbs somewhere in the South or West. Again, this is based on statistical averages, not any single slice of the military, which may offer a very different picture.

Before turning to the recent literature on personality typology and military leadership psychology, a brief discussion of self-selection in the all-volunteer force is relevant to the broader discussion. Not only does an all-volunteer force attract certain personality types, but it also attracts adventurous, patriotic, and upwardly mobile Americans. As the Government Accountability Office has noted, above-average white males join the military and the combat arms in particular, because of a sense of patriotism and adventure. The post 9/11 spike in recruitment of white males from the highest economic quintile illustrates this point. But this does not suggest that these recruits do not join the military to learn skills and earn educational benefits, as is more commonly the case for blacks and women.²⁸

It is also worth noting that current estimates of the eligible population (ages 18-24) suggest that approximately seven out of ten youths in America are unfit for service because they have criminal records, cannot meet the minimum intellectual requirements, are physically unfit, and/or have a history of drug use.²⁹ Thus, the eligible population is highly winnowed before the decision to join the service is made; and, contrary to popular myth, the military does not accept the nation's degenerates who would otherwise spend time in prison.

Personality Typology and Leadership Psychology

Although psychologists began examining personality typology in the early 1930s, there is no universally accepted set of personality traits and methods for their measurement.³⁰ There are also no recent and publicly available large studies examining personality characteristics of military members. This leaves the researcher to extract and compile relevant data from numerous and often

incongruous sources to develop a composite sketch of the average military personality.

Within the rather small cadre of psychologists who study the military, there are a number of tools/methodologies used to develop personality profiles and measure leadership traits.³¹ Recent studies examining leadership success at West Point, completion of Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT), and completion of naval basic electrical and electronic training offer some unique insights.³²

As the demographic literature notes, military recruits offer three main reasons for joining the services: educational benefits and training, adventure, and patriotism. The value placed on each of these varies from individual to individual, but offers some initial insight that the psychology literature clarifies and expands upon. With this in mind, I now turn to personality typology and the traits that often set military members apart from their civilian counterparts.

Courage

In a study of West Point cadets, courage was the most highly valued virtue, which is consistent with anecdotal evidence and expected acculturation. For example, Army Field Manual 22-100 lists the Army's seven core values relative to leadership: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that courage is a personality characteristic that is more readily evident in members of the military, as well as a value that is cultivated and necessary for advancement to senior officer and enlisted ranks. One anecdotal example demonstrates the great value placed on courage. As General Oliver Smith, Commander of the Second Marine Division during the first years of the Korean War wrote,

During the Reservoir operation I was never concerned about the security of Koto-ri. When he was told to go hold Koto-ri, Lewie [Lewis "Chesty" Puller] never questioned whether or not he had enough men to hold it; he simply made up his mind to hold it. His very presence reassured men; and he circulated constantly. The men knew Colonel Puller's reputation, that he had emerged with credit from many critical situations, and here he was in the flesh exuding confidence.³³

As the most decorated Marine in American history, Lewis Puller was widely known for his personal courage. As the preceding quote demonstrates, it is a trait that has real world value. One marine Chaplain echoed a similar sentiment concerning the Marines under Colonel Puller's command saying, "You cannot exaggerate about the Marines. They are convinced to the point of arrogance, that they are the most ferocious fighters on earth—and the amusing thing about it is that they are."³⁴

Numerous quotes, similar in character could be drawn from a variety of sources chronicling the exploits of many soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. The importance, however, is to highlight the value of courage as a character trait, innate or learned, in all members of the military.

Risk-taking

Related to courage is a second personality trait—risk-taking. A long-term study sponsored by the Army, followed 675,626 soldiers likely to be deployed to the Persian Gulf during Gulf War I.³⁵ Consistent with studies showing a lack of prudence and high levels of courage among members of the military, results demonstrated a higher acceptance of risk-taking behaviors among soldiers who deployed during the war. Interestingly, these “risk acceptant” soldiers were also physically and mentally healthier than their Army counterparts who did not deploy.³⁶

Returning to the example of General Puller, while serving as a battalion commander in World War II and a regimental commander in Korea, Puller consistently established his command post far closer to the front lines than doctrine prescribed or other commanders practiced.³⁷ Puller’s risk-taking encouraged his peers and subordinates to take greater risks themselves. Thus, it is understandable that risk-acceptant behavior would be inculcated as a character trait among service members who are already more risk-acceptant than society-at-large.

Lieutenant Colonel (later General) Curtis E. LeMay acted similarly. During his first bombing raid over St. Nazaire in late 1942, LeMay implemented a new bombing technique that placed B-17 crews at an increased risk. To assuage the fears and instill risk-acceptance of 305th Bomb Wing crew members, LeMay flew the lead—a habit he regularly practiced. His courage and risk-acceptance led to the development of a highly successful bombing formation.³⁸

Hardiness

One personality trait is deserving of special attention because it plays a key role in fostering other desirable traits. Hardiness, that resiliency in the face of stress, which can make or break an individual’s will when facing seemingly impossible circumstances, is an important trait within the military.³⁹ While it is a trait found in abundance within the armed services, it is not one that is learned. As one author notes, “The data suggest that Americans attracted to attend a service academy display a set of values consistent with US military doctrine...”⁴⁰ Just how generalizable this study is across the services is unknown, but the demands of military life and work are likely to cause a strong self-selection bias toward hardy individuals.

The value of hardiness cannot be underscored enough. As with many of the other demographic variables and personality traits, the exhibition of one trait is often correlated to one or more additional traits. Thus, positive and negative traits tend to be mutually reinforcing.⁴¹

Prudence

Members of the military exhibit a *dearth* of this often important trait. As one study found, lower levels of prudence are seen in the military than in the general public.⁴² Such a finding is consistent with the personality traits expected. It is, however, interesting to note that senior military leaders are often risk averse and, as examples in the historical record demonstrate, are often reluctant to make decisions where the outcome does not have a high probability of success. The exact nature of prudence and its relation to the actions of senior vs. junior military personnel has not been studied. It could be because of “careerism” that senior officers are more prudent than junior officers and enlisted. Or, it could be the greater consequence of decisions that promote increasing levels of risk aversion. It could even be the difference in maturity between a senior leader and junior troops. Whatever the case may be, it is likely that senior officers will exhibit greater reluctance to take significant risks.

Composite Personality Sketch

A composite sketch of military personnel suggests that—on average—soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are courageous, risk acceptant, and hardy. They are not, however, prudent. Additionally, as the demographic data suggests, members of the military are also above average in intelligence, adventurous, and ambitious. While useful, more information is needed to develop a better understanding of the military. This leads to the next topic—leadership psychology.

Leadership Psychology

Related to the subject of personality typology is the study of leadership psychology, which may offer additional insight into military decision making. In one of the most recent studies to look at military leadership (2009) the authors administered the NEO-PI-R Personality Inventory to a group of military officers who rated the leadership abilities of their peers.⁴³ This is of particular relevance because it may offer some insight into the personalities of senior leaders who will be making decisions at the highest levels, now and in the future. As previous research has demonstrated, peer ratings are a highly reliable predictor of officer success.⁴⁴

The five personality traits included in the NEO-PI-R inventory are: neuroticism (anxious, insecure, moody, and negative), extraversion (affiliative and social),

openness to experience (nonconforming, autonomous, and imaginative), agreeableness (caring, cooperative, and tolerant), and conscientiousness (dependable and achievement oriented). Participant responses yielded interesting results. Those ranking high in extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness were rated as effective leaders. Those who were seen as neurotic were not. The effects of agreeableness on leadership success were inconclusive.⁴⁵ These results suggest that current and future decision makers are positive in their outlook, which feeds into the military's "can do" persona and the optimistic outcome most military personnel expect when conducting operations. They also suggest that leaders are likely to see obstacles as something to be overcome, rather than a limiting factor. The optimism that precedes conflict should not be underestimated. In most recent conflicts, pre-war thinking among senior leaders suggested higher casualties than occurred (risk aversion), although accompanied by guaranteed success. Junior officers often expected a quicker victory than was the case.

Some additional conclusions can be drawn from the study's findings. First, effective leaders (and those most likely to be promoted to senior ranks) tend to be less emotional than ineffective leaders. Second, effective leaders are also likely to defer to others and cooperate rather than compete. This second finding is also supported by anecdotal evidence frequently repeated within the military. It is often suggested that general officers do not reach senior rank by taking risks, but do so by moderating positions and seeking consensus. Portraits of a number of past service chiefs and Joint Chiefs of Staff are consistent with this conception, while portraits of the nation's great warrior-commanders looks very different.⁴⁶ In most cases, they rarely overlap.

Composite Leadership Sketch

Military officers most likely to be promoted and, therefore, influence the leadership styles of subordinates are extraverts open to new experiences and conscientious of their decisions. They are also likely to seek consensus before making a decision, while avoiding risks that offer high costs and low rewards. Separate, but related, they are likely to minimize casualties while relying on technological advantage.

Worldview

In returning to the civil-military relations literature, it is, in part, for the purpose of examining the worldview of the officer corps, a topic often overlooked. The worldview held by officers and enlisted is decidedly different from that of the American public. These differences are exacerbated when compared against certain variables such as geographic region or race.

For those unfamiliar with the study of worldviews, one author describes a worldview as the answer to three questions. Who are we and where did we come from? What's wrong with the world? How can it be fixed?⁴⁷ Different worldviews answer each of these questions in their own unique way.

A clear majority in the military adhere to a decidedly Judeo-Christian worldview, which holds a strong belief in a higher power, absolute truth, the real presence of good and evil in the world, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil.⁴⁸ This clear moral compass leads many in the military to look at American society as degenerate and lacking in those qualities that once made the nation great.⁴⁹ It is the military, according to many officers and enlisted, that exemplifies moral rectitude. Military sociologists such as Charles Moskos have lamented the seemingly growing separation between the broader society and the military.

Religion

Military officers are more likely to participate in religious services than are enlisted servicemen and women, but this is largely due to the high proportion of young single men in the enlisted ranks.⁵⁰ As civilians, young men are also less likely to attend religious services than are their elders. What separates the military, officers and enlisted, from the rest of society is the clear predominance of an identifiable right and wrong.⁵¹ For elites who govern the country, attend Ivy League universities, and run large firms on Wall Street a secular worldview is much more common. The notion of “personal truth” is antithetical to the nature of the military profession yet the ability to determine one's own truth is highly appealing for many elites.⁵² As Huntington described it, “The military ethic consequently is a constant standard by which it is possible to judge the professionalism of any officer corps anywhere anytime.”⁵³ This same ethical consistency is applied to society writ large, which is often found wanting in the eyes of the military.

The moral ambiguity that is so important to many elite decision makers is often in short supply when examining the military. Thus, the decisions a military leader is likely to make are constrained by a clear sense of black and white—absent shades of gray. As the nation continues to rely on an all-volunteer force, the current worldview will likely persist and may become more prevalent.

Politics

The strong affiliation that many members of the military have with the Republican Party is a marked example of a Judeo-Christian worldview set to politics. It is an affiliation that crosses the officer/enlisted barrier, but is most pronounced in the officer corps and, more specifically, the Air Force.⁵⁴ During the 2008 presidential election, servicemen and women supported Senator

McCain by a strong majority, despite the unpopularity of a “Republican war” that has taxed the military and its families for more than six years.⁵⁵

The strong affiliation to the Republican Party is often dismissed as an alignment of convenience since Republicans favor military over social spending, but this answer fails to demonstrate a fundamental understanding of the strong moral and ethical disposition that governs military life and thinking. As Huntington noted more than fifty years ago, the military mind exemplifies “conservative realism.” Highly skeptical of intrinsic good, the military strongly adheres to President Reagan’s motto of “Trust, but verify.” Believing that man is a fallen creature and wicked by nature; the military is suspicious of grand proposals for creating world peace. As mentioned earlier, optimism is a core trait for successful leadership. It could be said that the military has a large number of skeptical optimists. When it comes to politics, the ideology of the Republican Party is more consistent with this outlook than that of the Democratic Party.

Conclusion

The portrait painted in the preceding pages is one that describes the average soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine, but may not look like anyone in particular. It is a portrait based on the results of demographic data, surveys, historical, and anecdotal evidence. Thus, it has limitations.

Without revisiting the entirety of his groundbreaking work, the evidence suggests that Samuel Huntington’s description of the military in 1957 remains valid half a century later. It also suggests that the all-volunteer force is increasingly selecting an above average group of young men and women to serve the nation. Conservative politically and morally, the American military remains largely male, white, and young. Its members are courageous, hardy, risk-takers who show a lack of prudence. Extroverted and open to new experiences, the military is likely to eschew grand schemes of world peace as it looks skeptically at the nation’s adversaries. In the end, its leaders are slow to act and quick to seek consensus. If the historical record is accurate, it is much the same today as it has always been.

Notes

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10. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *2006 Population Representation in the Military Services* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006).

11. Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Population Representation in the Military Services-Appendix B* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006).

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14. Defense Manpower Data Center, *Historical Data Tables* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006), Table D-22.

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17. David Segal & Mady Segal, “America’s Military Population” *Population Bulletin* (December 2004) Vol. 59. No. 1, 18-25.

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