

Sic Semper Fidelis and Tempus Fugit: American Military Nationalism and the European Theatre of the Second World War

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While there continues to be rich and diverse historical debate surrounding various elements of the study of nationalism, there are relatively few scholars that attempt to examine the effects and manifestation of nationalism within the military community.¹ This is part of a larger reluctance by students of what Richard Kohn refers to as “new military history” to concern themselves with the social aspects of war fighting—moving beyond traditional questions of “were soldiers patriotic?” to the more difficult questions of “what did they think?” or “why did they fight?”² This dearth of socio-historical scholarship is particularly evident with respect to the details of combatants involved in the Second World War, an event often seen as the culmination of nationalistic militarism under the rubric of National Socialism. If one accepts that *nationalism* can be taken to mean the impetus created by allegiance and service to one’s state, and that since the late 18th century the nation-state has become a key component of the construct of individual self-identity, it should be possible to detect the projection of that allegiance through the discourse found in war.

In order to explore American military nationalism in World War II, I will begin by examining the components of American civilian nationalism—specifically in the context of the mobilization

¹ I would like to thank Professors Jack Blocker (Huron University College) and Jonathan Vance (Canada Research Chair , Conflict and Culture at The University of Western Ontario) for their assistance and support in the drafting of this paper.

² Richard H. Kohn, “The Social History of the American Soldier: A Review and Prospectus for Research” *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (1981), 553-554.

for war after 1942. With this as a point of contrast, I will develop a theory for how traditional nationalism and the rigors of combat ought to react with one another. Before entering combat, American nationalism existed as a mixture of positive and negative constructions, consisting of idealistic motives for waging war tempered with a desire to destroy the Other responsible—whether directly or indirectly—for attacks on America.³ However, by examining the writings of soldiers preparing for the 1944 invasion of Normandy—specifically poetry submitted to the United States Army publication *Stars and Stripes*—as well as letters submitted well into the European campaign, it will be possible to discern a difference in the components of military nationalism. As well, once combat had been endured for extended periods of time, the positive aspects of nationalism quickly fell away only to be replaced by more pragmatic and immediate concerns. Where nationalistic motivations for fighting could be found, they were wrapped in distinctly personal language relating to returning home, and concerned more with tangible results than abstract concepts of peace and humanitarianism.

Before discussing the characteristics of American nationalism in the second-quarter of the 20th century, it is necessary to more fully outline what specifically is meant by the term “nationalism.” The sometimes-heated historical discussion on the definition of nationalism was changed dramatically with the introduction of Benedict Anderson’s characterization of nations as

³ I am borrowing here David Armitage’s concept of “positive” and “negative” ideologies in nationalistic constructions with regard to the British Empire. Armitage argues that positive arguments are more successful in motivating people to action around a common cause over long periods of time. See David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 63.

“imagined communities.” Anderson’s distinction of nationalism as something that should be “treated...as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’, rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’” divided the field of study. The writings that preceded Anderson were dominated by a modern perception of nationalism-as-political movement, where those that followed held a view of nationalism as being inherently rooted in individual and social consciousness.⁴ By removing nationalism from the field of political theory and instead attributing it to personal allegiances and the construction of self, Anderson’s definition made prior attempts to differentiate between “nationalism” and “patriotism” largely irrelevant: both are personal, and both represent allegiance to *patria*. It is on Anderson’s foundation that our definition of nationalism is built, where certain motivators—either “positive” and geared towards constructive goals or “negative” with the objective of combating a real or perceived Other—impelled individuals to action, often at the behest of an overarching State.⁵ This social- and state-driven nationalist framework attempted to give directed form to the imagination of individual citizens. In so doing, these motivators often took on the role, in words borrowed from Chris Hedges, of a nationalist “myth” that, while “largely benign in time of peace...ignite a collective amnesia in war.”⁶

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In the aftermath of the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the American nationalist myth awoke in a

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), see Introduction. For our purposes, Anderson’s conception of nationalism as being fundamentally rooted in individual consciousness is far more important than his specific thesis on the development of nationalism in Europe and South-East Asia.

⁵ On conflict with the Other as the focal point of modern nationalism, see Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*,” trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

⁶ Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 45-46.

4 | significantly more negative form than its previous iteration during the First World War. Where the previous conflict had been largely characterized as, according to Charles Alexander, “[being] about saving civilization, spreading democracy over the world, and fighting a war to end all wars,” this new conflict seemed about little more than defeating the enemies of the United States, specifically Japan.⁷ Efforts were made by the federal government to construct individual’s wartime nationalism around a more positive framework, even if this was commingled with the negative objective of destroying the Axis powers. These goals included the preservation of the concepts of human rights and liberty threatened by the Axis states, as well as more personal appeals to the general concept of the “American way of life” that ought to be afforded to foreign nationals in free societies.⁸ This was presented in a series of films entitled “Why We Fight,” produced by Frank Capra. “Prelude to War,” initially used to train US troops and later released publicly by the government, painted a picture of two worlds: the slave and the free. The duty rested on those members of the Free world to oppose the tyranny of the usurpers of power that controlled the Slave, before it was too late.⁹

These abstract concepts were part of a larger effort to countervail the individual nature of nationalism and was embraced by the private sector, who recognized that, writes Robert Westbrook, “Americans were alert to the need for solidarity in

⁷ Charles C. Alexander, *Nationalism in American Thought, 1930-1945* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1971), 192.

⁸ Robert B. Westbrook, “The Mirror of the Enemy: Japanese Political Culture and the Peculiarities of the American Patriotism in World War II,” in *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism*, edited by John Bodnar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 223.

⁹ “Prelude To War,” *Why We Fight*, produced by Frank Capra, 52 minutes, Vintage, 1943. 1 DVD.

wartime and to the special difficulties that an ‘individualistic’ people like themselves had in sustaining such a collective sprit.”¹⁰ IBM’s “We-All” advertising campaign contained the following message in a January 10, 1942 that ran in *Time* magazine:

WE-ALL

The Japanese attack on the United States instantly changed our trend of thought in this county. Before that attack some of us thought in terms of “I”, others in terms of “we”. Neither of those terms expresses our feelings today. “I” represents one person. “We” may mean only two or a few persons. Our slogan now is WE-ALL, which means every loyal individual in the United States. We are facing a long, hard job, but when the United States decides to fight for a cause, it is in terms of WE-ALL, and nothing can or will stop us.

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President Roosevelt, our Commander-in-Chief, can be certain that WE-ALL are back of him, determined to protect our country, our form of government, and the freedoms which we cherish.¹¹

Thus were efforts made to mobilize the American collective spirit for war. Lines at recruiting stations had formed by the early hours of December 8, all with the goal of enlisting to fight America’s enemies. Conscription was suspended for several weeks as unsolicited applications for military service deluged the government. Civilians offered the state their support for the war effort through blood donations, war bonds, and salvage operations,

¹⁰ Westbrook, 228.

¹¹ Westbrook, 229.

all while the federal government appealed to individual nationalism and supported the construction of a national mythos. Included in this social-nationalist framework was the increased trust of national leaders including Roosevelt, Eisenhower and Patton.¹² “Life in wartime becomes theatre,” writes Hedges. “All are actors. Leaders, against the backdrop of war, look heroic, noble.”¹³

6 | At the same time, the American population reacted to the government’s need in war with characteristic individualism—the primary motivator for purchasing war bonds was the desire to save for after the war, not nationalism¹⁴—this is not incompatible with our individualized conception of Anderson’s imagined nationalism. Rather, actions were taken within the context of the state’s projected national goals—individualism remained but, as with IBM’s slogan, the motivations of “we” were subsumed into the national mythos of “all.”

This overarching nationalist construction, while infused with positive abstractions of protecting liberty and spreading justice, was largely built around the negative desire to simply destroy American’s attackers; whether directly—in the form of the Japanese—or through their German and Italian allies. Once the draft began, the motivation for fighting in armed forces took on different forms: some, like Italian-American Paul Pisicano, saw it as a matter of “false patriotism.” “You never enlisted to defend America,” he says.¹⁵ Others, like Don McFadden, viewed the war as an event that “pulled [America] out of isolation and pulled us out of

¹² V.R. Cardozier, *The Mobilization of the United States in World War II* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1995), 207-211.

¹³ Hedges, 54.

¹⁴ Cardozier, 211.

¹⁵ Studs Terkel, *“The Good War” An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 138.

the Depression.... It was just an interesting time to be alive, and history was being made. There was a feeling of optimism. It will be a better world—afterwards, you know.”¹⁶

However, in the combat of World War II—a war rife with nationalist imagery projected from all sides—the nationalist constructs of motivation fell apart. As S.L.A. Marshall writes, “men who have been in battle know from first-hand experience that when the chips are down, a man fights to help a man next to him.... Things have to be that simple.”¹⁷ The abstract ideals of fighting for freedom, democracy, or America itself quickly gave way to the immediate concerns of the combat environment. It was a liminal experience; a threshold-state between before combat and after, with the overriding concern of the moment being fear. Fear is the dominant force on all battlefields, whether fear of death or the “randomness” of the war’s events.¹⁸ Efforts made to combat the all-pervasiveness of fear through training and leadership could not fully countervail the violence of the front.¹⁹ “Fear,” says Hedges, “brings us all back down to earth.”²⁰ The WE-ALL of the American home front gave way to the most immediate relationships and camaraderie between those in a similar situation. “The reason you storm the beaches is not patriotism or bravery,” says veteran Paul Douglas. “It’s that sense of not wanting to fail your buddies. That sort of special sense of kinship.”²¹ It was neither the devotion

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¹⁶ Terkel, 145.

¹⁷ S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1947), 161.

¹⁸ Cited in Gregory A. Daddis, “Understanding Fear’s Effects on Unit Effectiveness” *Military Review* 84, no. 4 (2004), 23.

¹⁹ Daddis, 24,26. It would be anachronistic to refer to the implementation of combat teams and the use of group pressure, as this was largely a result of Marshall’s work after World War II.

²⁰ Hedges, 40.

²¹ Terkel, 3.

to the nationalist cause or individual drive that impelled the American soldier on the European battlefield. Rather, it was what Marshall calls his “herd instincts,” the desire to share experiences with fellow soldiers.²²

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Outside of acute combat experiences, soldiers were left to develop a new sense of national identity in the absence of the abstract concepts present before the war. So lacking was the battlefield in overly positive ideological content that for some troops their fighting became exclusively about destroying the enemy. This strongly negative motivator was only strengthened by characterizations of the Other that painted the German as “cold, diagrammatic, pedantic, unimaginative, and thoroughly sinister” with an “instinct for discipline” that made them especially dangerous.²³ The detailed characterization of the enemy contrasted sharply with the American troop’s proclivity towards a feeling of anonymity amidst sixteen million other men.²⁴ This tendency toward a loss of individuality only served to augment the small group loyalties forged in battle, leading to expressions of self through recognition of group achievements, and reinforced through the actions of men like General Patton who, for morale purposes, encouraged the giving of “credit” to soldiers in the field. Credit served both to reinforce identity and to provide a connection to those outside the liminal experience—while the soldiers in the combat zone had forsaken the abstract for the real; they still knew that they could contribute to the nationalist myth in America itself.²⁵ Nationalism was never wholly absent for the

²² Marshall, 141.

²³ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 137, 120-121.

²⁴ Fussell, 70.

²⁵ Fussell, 157-158, 155.

American soldier. National identity was inseparable from one's own sense of self. Any overarching *meaning* that could be applied to that identity was replaced with allegiance to Shakespeare's "band of brothers." Emphasis was on the pragmatic concerns of daily life, attaining credit for the accomplishments of one's unit, and the eventual return home. Little time was spent concerned with the abstract causes of freedom and liberty. While these were not wholly absent, their undiluted presence in forming the self-motivation for fighting was to be found only in a small minority. | 9

American military newspapers provide the historian with an excellent opportunity to examine the outward projection of the type of identity discussed above. Papers published by the armed forces acted as a safety valve through which soldiers could communicate with one another and offer, if not discuss, opinions on the war.²⁶ While one may suspect these papers—published by the armed forces themselves—of being little more than vehicles for propaganda, the letters and poems published included complaints, views for political debate as well as controversial critiques of the armed services itself.²⁷ In order to examine the thesis that American combat troops in the European theatre of World War II placed a high emphasis on pragmatic considerations and tangible concerns, with rare incidence of nationalist motivation, I have chosen to examine the US Army's *Stars and Stripes* newspaper.

Staffed by professional reporters operating with "a minimum of official control," *Stars and Stripes* sought to establish itself as the newspaper specifically "for the soldiers" by sending correspondents—who were expected to actively take part in

²⁶ Michael Anglo, *Service Newspapers of the Second World War* (London: Jupiter Books, 1977), 13.

²⁷ Anglo, 53, 84-85.

combat operations—out with troop deployments.”²⁸ In order to examine both the discourse of soldiers before and entering combat, as well as after having engaged in significant campaigns, two editions were studied. The first edition of *Stars and Stripes* originated in Northern Ireland and began publishing on December, 1943 with the intention of servicing both those soldiers who were serving in England and rallying for the eventual move to the continent.²⁹ While the Belfast edition provides an excellent view of soldiers’ opinions before the invasion of Normandy, *Stars and Stripes’* Liege edition, starting in January of 1945, affords a view of the members of the First and Ninth armies taking part in the protracted engagement of the Battle of the Bulge.³⁰

As *Stars and Stripes* did not yet publish letters in 1943, the sole vehicle for the expression of soldiers’ opinion was a feature entitled “Army Poets.”³¹ From December 6, 1943 to June 5, 1944—the invasion of Normandy—the paper published 70 such poems. Of these poems, 19 (27%) contained language or imagery that was reminiscent of positive military nationalist rationale for engaging in war. Few represent this better than Sergeant Clement Lockwood’s “Call to Dreamers,” which reads:

We issue a call to the dreamers,
To men who will dream and will dare,
A clarion call to the stalwart

Whose castles are built in the air—
A call to the men of vision,

²⁸ Bud Hutton and Andy Rooney, *The Story of the Stars and Stripes* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1946), 9, 34.

²⁹ Hutton and Rooney, 22.

³⁰ Hutton and Rooney, 127.

³¹ Save for the publication of comics, on which there is a wealth of scholarly research.

To those who are freest of all,
To the strong and the true and courageous,
To them we now issue a call.

The forces of hatred are marching
And slaughtering men as they go,
And the ramparts constructed to halt them down
Are crumbled and aged and low.

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It is not for the men that we sorrow,
For each must come to his end,
It's the dream for a better tomorrow
Which is threatened we seek to defend.

Dreams are the facts of the future,
Miracles yet to be born,
And men who would lose them will borrow
A future both dark and forlorn.

So we issue a call to the dreamers,
The men of the rank and the file,
Who will fight for the things they believe in
And go to their deaths with a smile.

To arms! for the battle is raging
And war's not the horror it seems,
For it's better to die than to live in a world
That is barren and empty of dreams.³²

Nearly all nineteen poems contained similar positive imagery of America as a protective force. “Vow” refers to the United States as filling “the whole world with peace and joy”³³

³² Clement L. Lockwood, “Call to Dreamers,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 2, 1944.

³³ Peter Alfano, “Vow,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 8, 1944.

where “Dedicated to our American Comrades” states “If we would fight for truth and right/We must expect some scars/And we must learn to bear the Stripes/If we would wear the Stars.”³⁴ Surprisingly, no works within the period under examination contained explicit examples of negative conceptions of the Other, or an over-riding desire to destroy the enemy. This is undoubtedly attributable to the fact that the majority of writers had yet to see combat, a process that would accentuate hostility towards Germany. The large majority of published works—51, or 73%—did not manifest any overt demonstrations of nationalism. Rather, these soldiers were already concerned with more tangible considerations. Recognition of the contribution of non-Army or non-combat forces was achieved through works with titles such as “A Toast to ‘Little Friends,’”³⁵ “Lightnings in the Sky,”³⁶ “Army Clerks,”³⁷ and “Salute to the Engineers”³⁸ and “To An Army Nurse.”³⁹ A significant number of submissions—11 poems, or 16%—tackled the issue of being away from home; often these works dealt with the consequences of war, or with the need to complete the mission quickly, as in Staff Sergeant Phil Scheier’s “Order of the Sack”: “Ever onward, Pvts. Breger and Hubert/Sic Semperis [sic] Fidelis and Tempus Fugit/Which simply means to this ole Sad Sack/The sooner we win—the quicker we’ll go back.”⁴⁰ The remaining poems fall into general humor and observations, best

³⁴ Anon, “Dedicated to our American Comrades,” *Stars and Stripes*, February 17, 1944.

³⁵ Clement L. Lockwood, “A Toast to ‘Little Friends,’” *Stars and Stripes*, March 24, 1944.

³⁶ Anon, “Lightnings in the Sky,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 13, 1944.

³⁷ Anon, “Army Clerks,” *Stars and Stripes*, April 19, 1944.

³⁸ Johnnie, “Salute to the Engineers,” *Stars and Stripes*, May 1, 1944.

³⁹ Jay E. Greene, “To An Army Nurse,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 4, 1944.

⁴⁰ Phil Scheier, “Order of the Sack,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 7, 1944.

conveyed in the title of Corporal Joseph Robinson's "Lament of a Powdered Egg."⁴¹

By the start of *Stars and Stripes*' Liege, Belgium edition on January 20, 1945, the "Army Poets" feature had been replaced by "The B Bag: Blow It Out Here": a daily assortment of letters from soldiers and support staff. The presence of letters rather than poetry allows for a more accurate judging of the intentions and feelings of the writer, and thus affords a more complete portrait of the American nationalist consciousness in battle. There was a significant shift in the tone and content, with nearly 95% of the 277 letters sampled between the first publication date and March 18, 1944 containing no overt ideological or nationalistic themes. Rather, the trends towards recognition of colleagues continued, such as P.F. Oshea's "Bastogne Action," wherein he recognizes those forces that relived the 101st Airborne Division with "there are a hell of a lot of guys, including myself, who want to shake your hand for making that rescue."⁴²

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Where elements of nationalist thought did arise, it nearly always lacked the overarching positive images of sacrifice for values that existed prior to the war. Instead, of the 14 letters—amounting to 5% of the total number examined—that referenced concepts of a "better America" following the conflict, almost all were placed within a context of the war a burden; America's task, while perhaps noble, was to be accomplished so that one could return home. Chaplain Walter Boal's "Bravery" describes a soldier who, after losing three of his brothers in combat, is offered a rotation home. "No, Father," replies the soldier. "All I want is to find out how mother is. I want to be over here so I can do my part

⁴¹ Joseph W. Robinson, "Lament of a Powdered Egg," *Stars and Stripes*, April 6, 1944.

⁴² P.F. O'Shea, "Bastogne Action," *Stars and Stripes*, January 25, 1945.

and take my brothers' part. Dad served in the last war and we are doing our bit now so that America might be a better America and that we might all return to our loved ones soon."⁴³ Even letters that dealt exclusively with nationalism, such as Herbert Wheeldin's "Stuff for Goebbels," held that the primary goal was not noble, but was rather to win: "every patriotic American has subordinated his political beliefs to the general needs of the nation, which is to win the war."⁴⁴ Letters dealing with the need for a lasting peace after the conflict abounded, totaling nearly 18% of those studied. "When Germany is defeated," says Alfred Peipies, "we should put a statue of Hitler in all large cities of every country...an image of him hanging by the neck at the end of a rope—the epitaph reading: This man Tried to Conquer the World, 1939-1945. Who knows, maybe this statue idea will promote an everlasting peace."⁴⁵ Rarely were these letters as concerned with any abstract goals of the war as they were preventing it from reoccurring. This single factor alone represents one of the most significant shifts between the discourse found in troops communication before entering combat, and after.

While this initial research has only illustrated trends; further analysis and questions are required if one if to accurately understand and map the motivation of American combat troops. Research opportunities exist for students who wish to interrogate additional military newspapers in an effort to discern from the military discourse the component parts of soldierly identity construction. The data studied above supports the conclusion that the "nationalism" of the American soldier involved in the European theater during World War II differed significantly from traditional

⁴³ Walter M. Boal, "Bravery," *Stars and Stripes*, February 24, 1945.

⁴⁴ Herbert Wheeldin, "Stuff for Goebbels," March 15, 1945.

⁴⁵ Alfred Peipies, "Lest They Forget," *Stars and Stripes*, February 25, 1945.

forms found in the United States. Trends of individuality were emphasized through the fear of combat, with new allegiances formed to smaller groupings such as units. Mutual reinforcement developed as an important component of self-identity, as did desires to return home and complete ones tour. Where motivation for engaging in war did enter into the discourse, it was not the naked positivism that could be viewed in training films and read in military papers before the invasion of Normandy; rather, the good that would come from war was superceded by the pressing need to prevent further sacrifice. The human psyche was changed in combat, and the Andersonian individual nationalism largely divested itself from the abstract arguments used to provide ideological gravitas to the war effort. Motivational nationalism became about friends, comrades, and the “Band of Brothers.” All were American, but what it meant to be American was not found in abstract conceptions. The reality and fear of the combat theatre prevented this, with the overarching framework of nationalism—both positive and negative—extant outside the armed forces and, to a much lesser extent, within the Army before deployment forsaken for the more pressing concerns of the battlefield.

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