



The Humanities and the Army

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The Humanities are defined by Stanford University as, “the study of how people process the human experience,” and includes the disciplines of Art, the Classics, Literature, History, Linguistics, Music, Philosophy, Theology, Theatre, and other Liberal Arts areas. The study of Humanities in the United States is undergoing a well-documented crisis of neglect. Across the nation, fewer students are pursuing degrees in Liberal Arts fields. Concurrently, those educated in the Humanities suffer from underemployment in a society that has increasingly concluded that their skills are not applicable. Some will read this and say, “of course art and poetry aren’t relevant in ‘the real world.’” Their view is that science, engineering, medicine, and technical crafts are the fields that forge the future of the United States; not artsy daydreams. Yet, we are seeing increasing social harms born out of our illiteracy in the Humanities. Psychologists warn that the Millennial Generation is plagued by an unprecedented level of narcissism, leading Time Magazine to christen it, “The Me Me Me Generation.” While the Humanities look outward for answers, the Millennial Generation seems to be increasingly looking in; and only in.

A rise in narcissism shows the weakening of our ability as a society to leverage change through collective action. Those unwilling to concede personal demands trade compromise for coercion. In lacking a sense of common purpose, Americans are increasingly unable to see themselves as an operative member of a single national community. This is matched by a decline in empathy, the ability to understand the feelings of another, without necessarily feeling inclined to agree with them. When we fail to study the humanities, we enforce a shallow understanding of where we came from, what we are, and why we should care.

It is difficult to perceive how a disconnection from poetry, art, history, or philosophy; could possibly affect the Army. The Army is drawn from the American population, and is a reflection of the values of that population. The problems of American society will likely be replicated as problems in the Army. A society that struggles with sexual assault, racism, or bigotry foretells an Army that may struggle with the same. A society that is plagued by narcissism may become an Army that is plagued by the same. As the decline of the Humanities affects society, it may have equally grave consequences for the Army.

The Army relies foundationally on its touchstone values. Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage; are not scientific or technical. These values are entirely humanistic in nature. The Army Values form the foundation of trust between the American people and the US Army. In a mass media world, even isolated lapses of these Humanistic values threatens this trust. A decline in the Humanities could threaten our ability to rationalize the fundamental purpose of these values. Yet hope is not lost, because the Army has a unique opportunity to combat this decline. The Army has the ability to designedly reshape its internal culture in a way that societies cannot. The Army’s discipline and totality, as a way of life, affords it the privilege to develop Soldiers and leaders to become something that they may not have otherwise become. This is the crux of my case for more heavily recruiting from the Humanism-literate segment of our society, and for attempting to heavily introduce the Humanities into the Army’s leader development structures. In short: an issue is developing, and we have the ability to get out in front of it.

Many of us enter the service with an incomplete understanding of the humanistic ideas that have formed the Army into what it professes to be. The philosophy of the Just War theory underlies the methods we use in limited warfare. The ethics of the Enlightenment underlie our endorsement of service and our rejection of slavery, a boundary not recognized in all cultures. The manner of the Prussian Officer Corps underlies our own.



The politics of George Washington informs the Army's subordination to civilian authority; and the way in which our Army interacts with our Congress and our President.

We are all sworn to defend an Enlightenment-era treatise with our lives. Yet, how many of us have actually read the Constitution? In reading the Constitution; can we truly understand it without knowing the 17th Century philosophies at its core? In reading Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau; can we truly understand them without knowing how the Renaissance shaped their ideas; and so on?

Minds literate in the humanities can defeat some of the profound challenges that Soldiers, and thus the Army, regularly confront. The Humanities can give Soldiers clarity in everything from deeply personal ethical dilemmas, to vast human phenomena. If we use empathy, we will understand and then defeat our enemies. If we can instill our humanistic values, we will innately do the right thing when nobody is forcing us to. If we access the experiences of those Soldiers who came before us, we can feel a deep continuity of purpose through our lasting traditions. If we can get in touch with the things that give us a profound sense of wholeness; we will achieve a deeper resilience across the force. If we use history to understand how Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage have been formed by the crucible of time; we will change mere recitation into a deeply-felt way of life. The Humanities are not irrelevant fluff, and have a unique potential to strengthen the force.