

# Introduction

## Warriors at the End of History

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What use was an army at the end of history? What would its soldiers be expected to do, and what kind of soldiers might they be? Many within the post–Cold War United States Army would have rejected the premise of the first question. Even though the Berlin Wall had fallen, and liberal capitalist democracy seemed triumphant, history, for them, had not ended and they talked instead of violent threats and of continuing geopolitical uncertainty and conflict. Some turned to the darker rhetoric of a clash of civilisations to map out the Army’s future role, while others even took to the domestic culture wars to find purpose.<sup>1</sup> Still, the question nagged at them. The Soviet Union had been an ideological foil for the United States since 1917 and the Cold War was the organising principle around which its contemporary army had been built, so the sudden disappearance of both was bound to cause disorientation and anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Army was finding it hard to navigate a broader societal shift. As the intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers has argued, the last decades of the twentieth century were, in many ways, an ‘age of fracture’ where the ideas that had organised American life began to fragment into smaller and less coherent pieces and where the narratives that had bound the nation together began to lose their force.<sup>3</sup> Put together, the ongoing fragmentation of social reality in the United States and the geopolitical shock of the end of the Cold War posed a profound challenge to the Army’s self-image as an institution that exemplified what was best about Americans.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> On the long-standing prominence of anti-communism in US foreign policy, see Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–2006* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008); Walter LaFeber, ‘An End to Which Cold War?’ *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 1 (1 January 1992): 61–5; Douglas Little, ‘Anti-Bolshevism and American Foreign Policy, 1919–1939: The Diplomacy of Self-Delusion’, *American Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1983): 376–90. On broader post–Cold War anxieties, see Penny M. Von Eschen, *Paradoxes of Nostalgia: Cold War Triumphalism and Global Disorder since 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Ironically, these questions emerged at a time when it seemed as though the Army, like the American military as a whole, had recovered its standing in American society and indeed attained new heights of respectability. It had put behind the tumult of the Vietnam era, as the advent of the All-Volunteer Force and a series of successful reforms had produced a high-quality force that attracted excellent recruits and was capable of remarkable feats on the battlefield. Indeed, even as the Soviet Union staggered through its final months and Pentagon leaders began to talk with some uncertainty about the post-Cold War world, the United States Army demonstrated logistical, operational and tactical virtuosity in assembling a vast force in the Saudi Arabian desert and using it to thoroughly defeat the Iraqi Army in a lightning campaign of just 100 hours of ground combat.<sup>4</sup> Given that the victory in the Gulf War was the culmination of thirty years of transformation and reform, it seemed almost unfair that the Army would immediately have to turn to face a different world than the one it had been preparing for.

Yet the institution had no choice but to turn to these questions. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama's claim that the end of the Cold War signalled the end of history may have been controversial, but it captured the spirit of the age and pointed to the dilemmas faced by an organisation whose central activity – war – was the very stuff that history was made of.<sup>5</sup> Deprived of an obvious opponent, suffering from a budgetary drawdown and buffeted by culture wars, the Army suffered from deep disquiet about its future direction. What sort of wars it might fight, what sort of threats would it face and what political leaders might ask it to do were open questions, and ones that Army leaders failed to answer convincingly.

Fundamentally, these questions were, like so many others of the politics of the late twentieth century, about identity. In their attempts to answer existential questions about the Army's role, Army leaders, policymakers and ordinary soldiers all offered competing visions of who and what the American soldier should be. Much as budgets, doctrine, force structure and equipment mattered greatly to the Army, and were often at the forefront of conversations about the future, all of these were undergirded by questions about people. Put simply, the Army could not

<sup>4</sup> Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1994); Tom Clancy and Fred Franks, *Into the Storm: A Study in Command* (New York: Putnam, 1998); James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

function without recruiting and retaining the right type of soldier and, as had been the case for nearly two decades, it had to do so without the aid of a draft to help fill its ranks. As the torrid early years of the All-Volunteer Force had demonstrated, questions about personnel could never be very far from conversations about the Army's future.

Of all the military services, the Army has long been the one most concerned with its demographics and with the identity of its soldiers. Writing in 1989, the analyst Carl Builder argued that when the Army talked about itself, it tended to emphasise 'the depth of its roots in the citizenry, its long and intimate history of service to the nation, and its utter devotion to country'. As Builder put it, if the Navy worshipped at the altar of tradition, the Air Force at the altar of technology and the Marine Corps at the altar of combat, then 'the object of the Army's worship is the country; and the means of worship is service to the country'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the particular character of debates over the Army's identity, focusing as they did on the Army as a unique institution that needed to stand apart from broader American society in some way, are significant, as they cut against the grain of a longstanding rhetorical tradition within the Army of celebrating citizen-soldiers, even when the actual Army was composed entirely of professionals.

*Uncertain Warriors* tells the story of how the Army confronted uncertainty over its role and identity in the decade between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the War on Terror. It traces the Army's response to these challenges by focusing on the central figure in the institution's relationship with broader society and its self-image: the American soldier. It examines how – in doctrine, policy, speeches and popular culture – Army leaders, political leaders and soldiers themselves contested and sought to define that identity. In an effort to find coherence in what seemed to be a world without coordinates, the organisation eventually settled on a vague yet loaded term to describe the American soldier of the twenty-first century: warrior.

While the meaning of the term was ambiguous, it was a world away from the rhetoric of citizen-soldiers that had previously dominated, and even from the sort of quiet and steady proficiency implied in the equally popular phrase 'profession of arms'.<sup>7</sup> Even if the citizen-soldier rhetoric

<sup>6</sup> Carl Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis: A RAND Corporation Research Study* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 20.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on military professionalism is vast. For an introduction, see John Winthrop Hackett, *The Profession of Arms: The 1962 Lees Knowles Lectures Given at Trinity College, Cambridge* (London: The Times Publishing Company, 1962); Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, reissue edition (New York: Free Press,

had been detached from the reality of a professionalised force, the fact that Army leaders had felt the need to invoke it said something about their broader vision of military service and the Army's relationship to the nation. The 'profession of arms' obviously emphasised the distinctiveness of the military experience, but it understood soldiering to be a vocation like that of the doctor, the lawyer or the accountant. By contrast, the 'warrior ethos' that emerged from attempts to resolve the contradictions inherent in the Army's post-Cold War position by its very nature emphasised that soldiers were a distinct group which stood apart from the rest of society because of the risks they faced and the constraints they lived under. The book demonstrates that when faced with the question of whether the Army should seek to widen or shrink the gap between itself and broader society, Army leaders effectively chose the former course of action, a decision whose consequences would reverberate for years to come.

Efforts to preserve the military's enhanced post-Desert Storm reputation meant both defending the professional ethos and technocentric focus of the organisation and resisting pressure to adapt to evolving societal norms relating to gender and sexuality, as Army leaders felt that conforming to these standards might damage the organisation's ethos and cohesion. In response to complaints both from within the ranks and from conservative politicians about a military that was becoming 'politically correct', Army leaders rolled out a warrior ethos programme, a new effort to revamp basic training and instil warrior values into its soldiers. The warriors produced by this programme would be ready for anything, from peacekeeping to high-tech conventional war, and would be able to deploy as part of expeditionary force to anywhere in the world at a moment's notice. Crucially, warriors would be ready to fight on arrival, no matter what their specialisation. At its heart, the warrior ethos was about affirming that the central business of the Army was war, not the countless peacetime tasks that often made up the mundane reality of the soldier's existence. Even as the official 'warrior ethos' was silent on questions of gender and mission, it sought to break down barriers between elite and non-elite troops by focusing on close combat as the ultimate measure of the soldier. However, not only did it require all soldiers to orientate themselves towards combat, it also legitimated a growing subculture that saw soldiers as part of a special group that was distinct from – and superior to – their fellow Americans.

1964); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981); Allan Reed Millett, 'Military Professionalism and Officership in America', A Mershon Briefing Center Report (Columbus, OH: Mershon Center of the Ohio State University, 1977).

Arguments over who the force should look to recruit and who would be allowed to serve may have stemmed from differing visions of the Army's future missions, but they also touched upon these broader debates about changing norms in American society. Similarly, questions about how the organisation could prepare its soldiers for a life of frequent deployments, and what could it reasonably call upon them to do once they were deployed, were at once strategic, organisational and political. Leon Trotsky once claimed that 'the army is a copy of society and suffers from all its diseases, usually at a higher temperature', something that surely holds true for the United States Army, even for the professional force of the All-Volunteer era.<sup>8</sup> Thus, given demographic changes and changing cultural norms around issues such as gender, sexuality and military service itself – the 'age of fracture' that Rodgers wrote about – the Army found itself at a crossroads in terms of the type of soldier it wanted to recruit and train, and how, as an organisation, it wanted to relate to its country more broadly. While public support for the military remained at historically high levels, and the public almost universally looked upon soldiers with admiration, questions about the character of the American soldier were also political flashpoints. As the historian Andrew Hartman has noted, the culture wars were in essence a debate over the idea of America, so an institution that saw itself not only as defending the nation but as its embodiment on the battlefield was bound to find itself caught up in some of these disputes.<sup>9</sup>

The Army was not solely or even primarily navigating its post-Cold War dilemmas by reference to social or cultural debates. Among military theorists, there was a growing sense that the character of war had begun to fundamentally change, and geopolitical shifts meant that the Army found itself embroiled in a debate over how it might reinvent itself in the face of new challenges.<sup>10</sup> Even in the immediate aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, while soldiers were being feted in the streets of American cities, Army leaders worried about what the future held. Senior leaders recognised that not every opponent would be as easy to fight as Saddam

<sup>8</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 211, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.237974>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Steven Metz, 'A Wake for Clausewitz: Toward a Philosophy of Twenty-First Century Warfare', *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 24, no. 1 (4 July 1994), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1685>; Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Hussein had been. Not only that, but the end of the Cold War deprived the Army of its mission of confronting the Warsaw Pact in Europe, meaning that the prospect of conventional warfare on that continent, which had preoccupied the force for much of the twentieth century, was now an exceedingly remote possibility. Accordingly, the Army had to reassess its priorities, especially as budget cuts began to constrain the choices of an organisation that had been lavishly funded during the final years of the Cold War. On one end of the spectrum, the Army was troubled by the fact that victory in the Gulf War seemed to be down to the precision bombing of American airpower rather than the skills of ground combat units; on the other, it faced a series of lengthy deployments to messy conflict zones with ambiguous missions. The Army simultaneously found itself on peacekeeping duty in places such as Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia, and being compelled to articulate a vision for how it would wage high-tech war in the era of the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’.<sup>11</sup>

The historian Brian McAllister Linn has argued that the study of militaries in peacetime is plagued by a tendency to look for the causes of future wars. This means that ‘peacetime armed forces are more accurately defined as the pre-war armed forces’.<sup>12</sup> However, foreknowledge of the wars to come ‘makes it relatively easy to pinpoint the weapons, the individuals, and the doctrines that proved important’. This can give a sense of inevitability to these histories, where everything is prologue for the main event that looms just off the stage. However, Linn notes that ‘for those who lack this historical hindsight, who are living through the aftermath of the last war, and who lack a clear vision of the future – the challenges of being a military professional in peacetime are much more complex’.<sup>13</sup> This book attempts to recover that sense of uncertainty and complexity that was inherent in the period that fell between the Cold War and War on Terror. In the absence of the sort of clear structuring narratives provided by these two conflicts, the Army had to articulate a strategy that was not so much based on countering specific enemies but that was, in the words of the 2001 ‘Quadrennial Defense Review’, ‘capabilities-based’, ready to be applied against any threat that emerged from an uncertain environment.<sup>14</sup> This post-Cold War era is particularly interesting both because

<sup>11</sup> The ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ concept posits that new technologies combine with doctrinal and tactical innovations to fundamentally alter the character of war.

<sup>12</sup> Brian McAllister Linn, ‘Military Professionals and the Warrior Ethos in the Aftermath of War’, in *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, 1988–2017*, ed. Mark E. Grotelueschen (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2020), 591.

<sup>13</sup> Linn.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Quadrennial Defense Review Report’ (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, September 2001), iv.

it was a strange kind of peacetime – one that saw several armed American interventions around the world – and because the absolute degree of hegemony enjoyed by the United States in this ‘unipolar moment’ was surely historically unparalleled.<sup>15</sup> The headaches that this primacy gave the Army may have been ones that previous generations of leaders would have wished for, but they were very real nevertheless.

This book argues that the Army had three major responses to the unique dilemmas of the post–Cold War world. First, because planners struggled to envisage what future conflicts might look like and what US strategic priorities might be, they focused on building an adaptable, expeditionary force that could deploy quickly to anywhere in the world to further US aims, which could often be wide ranging. Unlike the Cold War–era Army, with its large overseas bases that housed military families and communities, the aim of reform efforts was to make sure that soldiers could be deployed on short notice, ready to carry out a huge range of tasks, including, for the first time, peacekeeping missions. Even as the Army downsized to a smaller, more expeditionary force, leaders refused to alter the overall mix of forces, keeping large numbers of armoured units on hand, and emphasising the need for sophisticated and well-trained soldiers who could handle any mission rather than focusing on specialised units equipped for particular contingencies. In the long arc of American military history, this was an unusual move, as the commitment to maintain a small Army at high levels of readiness and modernisation contrasted with past practices of maintaining a skeletal framework that could be quickly expanded into a much larger army in wartime.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, given the way the successes of the post-Vietnam reforms had been validated in Operation Desert Storm, maintaining a slightly smaller version of the Army of the 1980s seemed to make the most sense to Army leaders at the time.

<sup>15</sup> Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Charles Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’, *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 23–33; Sidita Kushi and Monica Duffy Toft, ‘Introducing the Military Intervention Project: A New Dataset on US Military Interventions, 1776–2019’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (8 August 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027221117546>.

<sup>16</sup> Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York: Free Press, 1975); William A. Taylor, *Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016); Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); David R. Segal, *Recruiting for Uncle Sam: Citizenship and Military Manpower Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989); J. P. Clark, *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Second, in keeping with its preference for holding on to its existing force structure, the Army successfully resisted external pressures to rethink the nature of military service. The lesson of the Gulf War and the end of the Cold War had been that the All-Volunteer Force had worked.<sup>17</sup> Despite growing worries about a civil–military gap as a shrinking force made up of a less representative sample of the population concentrated more and more on large bases, half-hearted efforts to change the demographics of the military had little effect. The post-Vietnam notion that soldiers were inherently heroic was largely unshakeable and woven into American politics and popular culture.<sup>18</sup> Despite the changed strategic context and the new array of missions faced by the Army, calls to reintroduce the draft or move to a different model of military service fell on deaf ears, and even the Reserve Components of the Army became more professional and occupational in their outlook. Indeed, such was the emphasis on the ‘profession of arms’ that the concept of the citizen-soldier was effectively reduced to a rhetorical flourish deployed by military leaders and politicians in search of applause lines. Worries about recruiting and retention, which became more acute towards the end of the decade, did little to alter faith in the All-Volunteer Force.

Finally, if the Army successfully defended its model of military service, it had only partial success when it came to keeping the institution out of step with changes in broader society relating to gender and sexuality. Army leaders joined with other service chiefs to successfully oppose the Clinton administration’s efforts to allow openly gay troops to serve but did so in a way that betrayed a lack of confidence that their resistance to this change could endure forever. The Army, like the rest of the military, also resisted attempts to open combat roles to women, but – in the wake of the 1996 Aberdeen Proving Ground sexual assault scandal – efforts to roll back progress and re-segregate basic training failed. Not only that, but societal pressure and the more utilitarian question of what sort of skills would be needed for peacekeeping and non-combat missions, not to mention maintaining the Army’s sophisticated technology, combined to create space for a critique of military masculinity in surprising places. Thus, while the Army’s growing emphasis on a ‘warrior ethos’ that

<sup>17</sup> On the history of the All-Volunteer Force, see Beth Bailey, *America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Robert K. Griffith, *US Army’s Transition to the All-Volunteer Force, 1968–1974* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996); Bernard Rostker, *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Walter L. Hixson, ‘“Red Storm Rising”: Tom Clancy Novels and the Cult of National Security’, *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 4 (1 October 1993): 599–614.



emerged towards the end of the decade was in part a backlash against the perceived threat of 'identity politics', ultimately this project sought to produce an ethos that, while not quite gender neutral in its focus, looked very different from the more traditional warrior ethos that many had hoped the Army would promote.

Debates over military service, roles and missions, and identity sometimes moved through different terrain and involved different protagonists but usually boiled down to two duelling impulses. One was to emphasise that professional American soldiers were something akin to Spartan warriors, where every soldier was psychologically committed to the demands of combat, regardless of specialty or distance from the battlefield. The other impulse was directly in opposition to this notion of a hypermasculine 'warrior culture'. Those who pushed back against discourse about warriors were a diverse group ranging from those who wanted to reinstate an all-male draft to those who wanted to fully end the gay ban and open all positions in the Army to women. In spite of their differences, they all emphasised not only the need for the Army to be broadly aligned with the values of American society but asserted that those very values had martial virtues of their own, given the ambiguities of modern conflict.

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There is something ironic in the fact that a period which supposedly marked the final triumph of liberal democracy saw the return of the warrior: a pre-modern and even primordial figure. This is doubly ironic because, as Linn notes, professional soldiers began to supplant warriors in early modern society precisely because warriors tended to contribute very little in peacetime and were unreliable, being more focused on their own personal honour than broader political goals, and often terrorised civilians.<sup>19</sup>

Even if the definition of warrior has been remarkably stable across cultures and time, the manner in which people have deployed the term and, crucially, understood its moral valence has differed. For instance, the classicist Bret Devereux argues that, contrary to popular understanding, warriors were not in fact common in ancient Roman or even Greek society.<sup>20</sup> In warrior societies such as Sparta, individuals might conflate their own sense of masculine honour with that of the *polis*, but as Greek

<sup>19</sup> Linn, 'Military Professionals and the Warrior Ethos in the Aftermath of War', 595.

<sup>20</sup> Bret Devereux, 'The U.S. Military Needs Citizen-Soldiers, Not Warriors', *Foreign Policy*, 19 April 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/19/united-states-afghanistan-citizen-soldiers-warriors-forever-wars/>.

city-states evolved into more complex polities, the division of labour became more specialised, and the warrior identity predominated less.<sup>21</sup> The Latin term for warrior, *bellator*, was rarely applied to Roman soldiers, who were known as *milites*, which, as Devereux points out, ‘comes from the same mil-root as the word “mile,” signifying a collection of things (a Roman mile being a collection of a thousand paces)’.<sup>22</sup> Roman *milites* were part of a collective. Soldiers were paid by, and thus subordinated to, a higher authority, ‘a relationship that naturally placed them in groups raised by some other political entity – be it a king, parliament, or congress’.<sup>23</sup> For a soldier, fighting is an occupation carried out in service to a larger polity. In contrast, warriors are attached to war because it forms a central part of their own personal identity. This meant that even where societies required military service of all men, they did not expect them to be warriors. Soldiers become civilians again when they take off the uniform, but warriors can never truly retire. Even when the war ends, a warrior remains a warrior. Even when warriors fight in groups, they fight for individual reasons rooted in their own personal identity rather than for a greater cause. Thus, warriors are ‘definitionally a class apart, individuals whose connection to war sets them outside civilian society’.<sup>24</sup> Inevitably, such a group, focused as it was on martial rather than other virtues, would look upon civilians with contempt. For Devereux, the re-emergence of rhetoric lauding warriors is a dangerous development: one that portends a threat to a free and democratic society.

Even if actual warrior societies were far less common than the popular imagination allows, the celebration of the values associated with warriors, such as courage, honour and glory in battle, was certainly ubiquitous across time and space. By the end of the twentieth century, though, it seemed like the balance between veneration of that warrior ethos and societal disgust at the absurdity and tragedy of war had tipped decisively towards the latter impulse. In 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross commissioned a large-scale survey to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Conventions. This survey, ‘People on War’, consisted of interviews with 12,860 people across twelve countries who had endured the effects of modern war in recent years.<sup>25</sup> These interviewees,

<sup>21</sup> Moshe Berent, ‘Anthropology and the Classics: War, Violence, and the Stateless Polis’, *The Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2000): 257–89.

<sup>22</sup> Devereaux, ‘The U.S. Military Needs Citizen-Soldiers, Not Warriors’.

<sup>23</sup> Devereaux.

<sup>24</sup> Devereaux.

<sup>25</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, ‘The People on War Project: ICRC Worldwide Consultation on the Rules of War’ (Geneva: ICRC, 1999), iii, [www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/globalreport.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/globalreport.pdf).

both civilians and combatants, reflected on the psychological and social dimensions of war. In the words of one of the survey's authors, 'most of the respondents seemed to offer a sort of meta-narrative, telling of a kind of demoralization that appears common to all, fighters and civilians alike, regardless of the specific context and circumstances'.<sup>26</sup> They described war as a 'traumatic collective experience', not just because of the physical and psychological suffering they had endured, but 'connected with the awareness that war had lost its meaning as a social reality'. These interviewees spoke of being 'crushed by the absurdity and moral disgrace of the violent episodes they had been exposed to either as perpetrators, victims or spectators', and fighters emphasised their feelings of alienation and the impossibility of deriving any glory or nobility from armed conflict. Indeed, their experience of violence 'contradicted all principles, all representations, all values inherited from the past and traditionally associated with war'.<sup>27</sup> The depth of this disillusionment, which would have been intimately familiar to generations of scholars of war, seemed to suggest that, in the eyes of global public opinion at least, the warrior ethos had lost its utility.

There have, however, been attempts to rescue warriors from obsolescence. The international relations scholar Christopher Coker has argued that warriors have unfairly acquired a bad reputation in western culture in recent decades. Channelling Nietzsche, Coker argues that what separates warriors from soldiers is the question of will. Warriors are those who continue to fight, often with enthusiasm, even when the situation is impossible. For Coker, 'war is transformative' because it 'allows a warrior to tap into the vein of his own heroism. It allows him to lead an authentic life'.<sup>28</sup> Coker is less concerned with warriors as a distinctive class than he is with the warrior as an individual, and he argues that we have always been able to find warriors in the ranks of soldiers, even if their presence has been unevenly distributed. He argues that warriors operate in both the instrumental and existential dimensions and that modern warriors do indeed serve the state as well as their own needs. However, Coker's analysis is not so much a celebration as it is a lament. He complains that 'soldiers these days are expected to be like oncologists, whose professional speciality is studying cancer and whose professional vocation is fighting it. A soldier's profession may be fighting, but his vocation, society believes, should be to combat war, not glory in it'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert Holleufer, 'Heroic Memory and Contemporary War', *International Review of the Red Cross* 101, no. 910 (April 2019): 231.

<sup>27</sup> Holleufer, 231.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Coker, *The Warrior Ethos: Military Culture and the War on Terror*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 4–5.

<sup>29</sup> Coker, 9.

He argues that war has lost its grandeur and that, far from being resurgent, contemporary warriors have become disenchanted with what war has become, claiming that ‘war becomes soulless when it is more life-denying than life-affirming – a paradox which has haunted every warrior since Achilles’.<sup>30</sup> Where Devereux and the authors of the ‘People on War’ report see the warrior as a figure who should be confined to the past, Coker sees a society that is not honest with itself about what war is and what sort of values it requires. The contemporary re-emergence of the warrior ethos, in his view, is no more than a futile attempt to reinvigorate western appreciation for the ambiguous virtues of the warrior.

Coker derived some of his analysis from the work of the American strategist Edward Luttwak, who observed the developments of warfare in the 1990s and argued that the reluctance of western governments to accept casualties in war was not only a product of the low birth rate of post-industrial societies but of the fact that the goals of their military interventions were often quite limited and only weakly related to the sort of vital national interests that would bring about total commitment and a willingness to lose soldiers.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, standoff weapons, although expensive, offered governments a way to achieve their objectives without risking their own people, even if these tactics transferred risk to the civilian population on the receiving end of those very same weapons.<sup>32</sup> Luttwak coined the influential term ‘post-heroic warfare’ to describe this phenomenon. In this emerging way of war, there was no room for heroes or warriors.<sup>33</sup> Coker argued that ‘soldiers are becoming their technology’ and that this highly technocentric, risk-averse mode of fighting stripped war of ‘that “religious” element which made the confrontation with the enemy and oneself in battle an epiphany for some, almost a religious experience’.<sup>34</sup>

However, these narratives of post-heroic warfare and of a west that has lost its appetite for war cannot account for the fact that western societies have been content to see their small professional militaries endlessly deployed on combat missions that can and do produce casualties. The sociologist Anthony King has a more convincing explanation for the decline of heroism in modern warfare. Focusing on contemporary

<sup>30</sup> Coker, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, ‘Toward Post-Heroic Warfare’, *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 109–22.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and Its Crisis in Iraq* (London: Polity Press, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Luttwak’s argument provoked a debate among scholars of the military about the nature of heroism in contemporary warfare. See Sibylle Scheipers, *Heroism and the Changing Character of War: Toward Post-Heroic Warfare?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 12.

infantry tactics and cohesion, King offers an ethnographic account of the behaviour of the soldiers whose exposure to death and violence is similar to that faced by their predecessors throughout history.<sup>35</sup> He argues that, unlike the mass armies of poorly trained citizen-soldiers, modern professional militaries have little need for individual heroes. King argues that even if discourses of masculinity and patriotism still abound in these organisations, the actual source of cohesion and effectiveness is the shared ability to conduct tightly choreographed drills that require all members of the platoon to perfectly synchronise their actions in order to win the firefight. These drills, similar to those taught to professional athletes in team sports and inculcated through repeated and intensive training regimes, mean that technical competence in the minutiae of marksmanship and close-quarter battle drills is far more important than the willingness to jump out of a trench and single-handedly charge at the enemy in the hopes of inspiring comrades to follow. In this iteration of the professional military, there is still room for sacrifice and even heroism, but the basis for inclusion in the group has radically altered.<sup>36</sup> The point is not to rely on individual warriors having a near-religious experience in combat, but to have a well-drilled team capable of automatic reactions and acting cohesively as a single unit.

Even if we might still reasonably call these professionals warriors, given that the skill set they employ is incredibly specialised and that they still draw on many of the same martial virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, and loyalty as soldiers in earlier eras, it seems as though there is something qualitatively different about them in a way that separates them from the unhappy warriors that Coker describes. Indeed, the retired British general Sir John Kiszely has questioned the sloppy usage of the term, asking 'is a warrior just a military professional? Or is a warrior essentially a person with a strong habitual liking for fighting, an aggressive person whose job is to "destroy the enemy"?'<sup>37</sup> He argues that the term has 'a number of meanings and is potentially misleading', especially in the complex environment of 'postmodern war'.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, if there were tensions between those who feared the rise of a warrior class and those who thought that a warrior ethos would be vital

<sup>35</sup> Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> King also argues that the transformation of the armed forces has involved significant amounts of outsourcing and privatisation. See Anthony King, 'The Post-Fordist Military', *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 359–74.

<sup>37</sup> John Kiszely, 'Postmodern Challenges for Modern Warriors', *Army History*, no. 71 (2009): 24.

<sup>38</sup> Kiszely, 31.

for success in twenty-first-century conflicts, there was also a split between those who thought of warriors as masculine throwbacks to older forms of society and those who were effectively using the term to describe highly competent professionals whose business happened to be war. While its utility as a concept that delineated the military as a separate and special group was clear, 'warrior' was still an ambiguous term that allowed groups to ascribe different meanings to it and to use it to advance agendas that conflicted with each other.

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The following chapters trace how tensions between these conflicting imperatives animated discussions both within and outside the Army over the organisation's future in the post-Cold War world. This book takes a broadly thematic approach, investigating the most important venues where the American soldier's identity was contested and produced. By drilling down into specific issues such as public adulation of soldiers; gender and sexuality; peacekeeping; recruiting; technology and the soldier; and warrior culture, we can see more clearly how competing demands pulled Army leaders in different directions and produced articulations of 'warrior' identities that were riven with contradictions and tensions.

Chapter 1 examines the Army's post-Vietnam reconstruction of its image and explores how the triumphalism that followed the Gulf War encapsulated the notion that soldiers represented all that was best about the United States. The Army's reforms after defeat in South-east Asia and its attempts to build an All-Volunteer Force at the end of the draft were central to its self-image as a highly professional and competent force, dedicated to avoiding the mistakes that had led to defeat in Vietnam and malaise in the aftermath of that war. Even here, though, we can see how some within the Army worried about a force that was becoming too bureaucratic and too detached from the realities of war, as mid-ranking officers began to call for a 'warrior ethos' that would rededicate the Army to the essentials of its profession. This dissent, along with any doubts about the Army's post-Vietnam recovery, was quashed by the force's performance in Operation Desert Storm, where American soldiers displayed extraordinary skill and competence in winning a rapid victory. Crucially, Desert Storm also marked a moment when the broader American public joined in with celebrating the image of the volunteer soldier as an inherently heroic figure.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that, while that broader public regard for the military endured, the Gulf War's aftermath immediately saw a series of crises over who could serve in the Army. It begins with the Army's position in the 1993 debate over allowing gay personnel to serve openly in

the US military. In particular, the chapter focuses on how the Army sold a vision of soldiers as a separate and unique group that had to be allowed to disregard wider social norms in order to be able to operate effectively. Debates about women in the military played out along very similar lines; halting moves by the Clinton administration to open up more roles for women in the armed forces were met with complaints about cohesion and the sanctity of the 'band of brothers', even when sexual assault scandals made clear what the consequences of this rhetoric were. Here, though, we can see how conservative complaints about a 'kinder, gentler military' were beginning to lose their purchase. Despite calls to do so, the Army did not resegregate its recruit training and roll back other forms of progress for women. In dealing with these complaints, Army leaders turned to a discourse about warriors and argued that being a warrior in the late twentieth century was more complicated than it used to be.

Chapter 3 examines how some of those complexities played out on deployments, by tracing debates over peacekeeping operations, missions that the Army had firmly committed to by the mid-1990s. Peacekeeping meant different things to policymakers, Army leaders, public intellectuals and those who served on such missions. Army leaders were generally not enthusiastic about participation in these operations, but most recognised that their complexities were indicative of future trends in conflict. Similarly, personnel deployed as peacekeepers accepted the role, even if they often struggled to understand how best to navigate the grey zone between peace and war. Peacekeeping missions may have been a central, if sometimes unwanted, concern of the US Army in the 1990s, but they also exposed deeper fissures within the Army and broader American society about the organisation's proper role and the sorts of attributes that American soldiers would need in the twenty-first century and heightened the tensions between notions of the soldier as violent warfighter or armed humanitarian, citizen-soldier or professional warrior. Some even used the opportunity to ask again who soldiers should be, advocating for a greater role in peacekeeping missions for reservist citizen-soldiers or even a new class of putative short-service soldiers, drawn from the ranks of college graduates, that would renew the bonds between the Army and the society it served.

Chapter 4 directly considers the questions of military service and recruiting that became particularly acute by the end of the decade, as the Army struggled to meet its recruiting quotas and to retain personnel. At the same time, the new pace of deployments and the diminished number of bases meant that soldiers and their families increasingly had less contact with the civilian world. When the Army missed its recruiting targets in 1998 and 1999, this prompted renewed concerns over the health of

the All-Volunteer Force and its relationship with broader society. While Army leaders made heavy use of 'citizen-soldier' rhetoric and looked to movies such as *Saving Private Ryan* to promote these ideals, they fought back against attempts to change recruiting practices and terms of service to produce a more demographically balanced force. At the same time, tensions between the active duty Army and Reserve Components were at an all-time high, as both sides fought to maintain their position during budget cuts and Army leaders began to doubt whether these citizen-soldiers had the skills and training needed to succeed in the profession of arms.

Chapter 5 explores how technology and the drive for expertise helped foreclose some of these moves to rethink the nature of military service. While the Army as an institution was somewhat less enamoured of the putative 'Revolution in Military Affairs' than other services, there was nonetheless a move to digitise the force and acquire new precision weapons systems and communications platforms. This modernisation process envisioned soldiers being part of a sophisticated network of sensors, command nodes and weapons systems. Given the difficulties in recruiting and retaining such highly skilled soldiers, not to mention the proportion of the Army's budget that had been eaten up by research and development costs related to this transformation, Army leaders turned to private contractors both to operate and maintain some of the more sophisticated computer systems and to take over some of the more mundane parts of the Army's logistics and support services. These contractors would be expected to accompany an increasingly expeditionary Army overseas, as the result of this digitisation process was supposed to be a lethal force with a light footprint, capable of deploying anywhere in the world at short notice.

Chapter 6 examines the growth of the warrior ethos within the Army and ties it to this shift towards expeditionary operations. As the decade wore on, complaints both in the ranks and in the conservative media focused on how the Army's attempts to adapt to the post-Cold War world was producing a force bereft of the warriors it needed to succeed. Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki used his tenure to try to reinvigorate Army culture to make it more hospitable to warriors. Shinseki's attempts to produce unity via the introduction of the black beret as the Army's working headdress were immensely controversial and even counterproductive, as critics charged him with devaluing the service of the Army Rangers who had previously worn the beret and of handing out honour too cheaply. He had more success with his 'warrior ethos' initiative, launched in the final weeks of his tenure and carried on by his successor, General Peter Schoomaker. Reflecting doctrinal developments that been brewing since the late 1990s, the 'warrior ethos' programme



sought to directly embed that ethos within the Army, making it a central part of recruiting and training at all levels, while also affirming that close combat was both a fundamental task for all soldiers and the core undertaking that differentiated them from the rest of society. It may seem strange that an era that had begun with claims about the end of history ended with the Army invoking such a primordial term and telling its cooks and clerks that they, too, were warriors, but the sometimes existential anxieties unleashed by the Cold War's end could produce unexpected results and new ways to think about both the Army's identity and its purpose.