

September 6, 2013 7:24 pm

The west needs a replacement for the warrior spirit

By Mark Mazower

Warfare and welfare have long been connected, writes Mark Mazower



The memory of Iraq, and the anger that war still provokes, loom large over the defeat of the British government over Syria in the House of Commons, and the wrangling in the US Congress and the French parliament. The doubts surfacing in these legislatures suggest that public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic is a lot more sceptical than it once was about the efficacy of military action and more worried at the tendency of so-called surgical strikes to turn into unwinnable wars.

Also important is the fact that years of defence cuts have left military leaders exasperated at being asked continually to do more with less. The number of British regular service personnel, currently below 185,000, is shortly to be reduced to a 150-year low. The French government is proposing to cut more than 30,000 personnel over the next six years.

Sign up now



FirstFT is our new essential daily email briefing of the best stories from across the web

For a wider perspective on this, one could do worse than read Alfred de Vigny's meditation *The Warrior's Life*. First published in 1835, it is a classic of early French romanticism that asks a very modern question: what price an army that has outlived its usefulness?

When armies shrink, soldiers are the first to feel the effects. No one knew this better than de Vigny, who embarked on his military career just as Napoleon was defeated. Through the years that followed, the troops felt marginalised while their country turned its back on the glorification of war and fell in love with the idea of the civilising value of peace. The aristocratic de Vigny had no time for Napoleon. But he mourned the demise of the warrior's code – the notion of unswerving loyalty to the monarch, and the idea of duty and equality under arms.

That world now seems far away but *The Warrior's Life* is nonetheless prescient. In the US – unlike in much of Europe – the military is still idealised. But probe more deeply and, even there, behind the flag-waving, you will find a society with deep misgivings about the soldiering life. Fewer people want to become soldiers, polls tell us, or have any sense of an obligation to serve. This may be connected to the fact that soldiering is becoming less a matter of the battlefield.

Armed forces numbers are plummeting – at below 0.5 per cent of the population, they are lower than they have been for a century or more – and the ratio of support staff to frontline troops is rising. As armies turn high-tech and capital-intensive, spending per soldier has soared. At the same time the chances of being wounded or killed in battle have fallen dramatically: in Vietnam and Korea, American casualty tolls were in the tens of thousands; a mere 147 combat deaths were reported in the first Gulf war, and fewer than 1,000 in the conflict that followed the Iraqi invasion of 2003. Suicide and accident currently kill far more US service personnel than the country's enemies. Killing by drone seems the ultimate extension of these trends: where is the heroism, or the warrior spirit, in wielding a joystick?

Some American generals already worry that reducing killing to a risk-free video game will erode public support for the troops and intensify pressure on defence budgets. This pressure has gone furthest in Britain. But, despite Mali, it is also certainly under way in cash-strapped France. And even in the high-spending US, it may be in the offing. There has, so far, been a relatively slight fall in defence expenditures from the heights of the war on terror: But President Barack Obama's budget projects cutting it further, to 2.4 per cent of gross domestic product by 2023, which would be the lowest figure since the second world war.

Yet these changes do not affect only the soldiers. The late Charles Tilly demonstrated in a series of brilliant sociological studies the extent to which warfare and welfare have historically been tightly connected. Rulers who wanted citizens to fight learnt the hard way that they had to give them something more concrete and appealing to fight for than the privilege of dying in their name. That is why the advent of mass conscript armies, unified around allegiance to the nation, coincided with the dramatic 20th-century transformation in the nature of the state and the swift post-1945 expansion of social rights in the shape of public housing, healthcare and schooling.