

Bridging a Gap Between Knowledge and Experience: Civilian Views of Military Service

Philip Hayek (phayek@vt.edu)

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Abstract

Assume that knowledge can never exceed experience. In the case of studying the military and veterans' issues, then, how much can a civilian understand, or how much credibility might a civilian have to leverage when making claims about ideology, motives, or identity concerning veterans? Are the experiences of veterans insulated from the public in a way that deflects any possible judgment from outsiders, from civilians? Consider the value judgments concerning the military that reveal a certain binary opposition: I support the troops (read: thank god it's not me) or I'm anti-military (read: I wouldn't go if you paid me). Both positions have no hope of catching alive the idea of being a part of that military institution. Can anyone outside of the realm of experience observe, or "know," and therefore form value judgments about veterans?

In this paper, Enlightenment- and Progressive-era rhetoricians like Hugh Blair, Richard Whately, and Wayne Booth, among others, offer insights into how the attitude of the American public and the common sense we share plays a role in defining the tastefulness, or appropriateness, of discourse about veterans. A change in society's common understanding of what is tasteful will not only limit how ideas are formed, but these boundaries will disqualify any ideas or discourse outside of what is accepted as tasteful. The articulation of our nation's sentiment surrounding veterans is constricted not only by what is considered tasteful but also by a perceived and actual distance between civilians and military personnel. The burden of proof for arguments concerning the military and veterans rests on civilians who will never have access to the knowledge that experience places in the hands of veterans. Rhetorically, veterans share a common sense language that is removed from the general population, and therefore from popular opinion. Insights from rhetorical theory can be a productive starting point from which to study how veterans as a population resist any value judgments from civilians that fall outside the binary opposition of for or against.

Keywords: rhetoric, civilian-military discourse, common language

So far, rhetorical scholarship has hardly been concerned with the military as a subject and site of research and study. The commander-in-chief gets a fair amount of consideration as presidential rhetoric is explored in speeches from Lincoln to Obama, but the military that the president commands is left alone. Intellectuals like Noam Chomsky explore the logical fallacies behind US foreign policy, and philosophers like Jean Baudrillard take up representations of military engagements as topics. But there remains a gap in the academy's treatment and understanding of the thinking that is constitutive of military rhetoric.

If we assume that knowledge can never exceed experience, then in the case of studying the military and veterans' issues, how much can a civilian understand? How much credibility might a civilian have to leverage when making claims about ideology? About motives, or about identity concerning veterans? Are the experiences of soldiers and veterans insulated from the public in a way that deflects any possible judgment from outsiders, from civilians? Consider the value judgments concerning the military that reveal a certain binary opposition: I support the troops (read: thank god it's not me) or I'm anti-military (read: I wouldn't go if you paid me). Both positions have no hope of catching alive the idea of being a part of that military institution. Recently, last August, Steven Salaita published an article online at salon.com titled "No, thanks: Stop saying "support the troops." Salaita recognized that both positions; for or against; retain significance but lack substance and specificity. The negative reactions to Salaita's article were predictable, it was certain to rub some people the wrong way. But more important is to notice the conversation Salaita was attempting to initiate, a conversation about how civilians value and judge the military. I believe part of the reason some rejected his arguments is because he lacks the experience that could really offer him the knowledge and ethos needed to make value judgments about the military. This article reiterated a question I've been struggling with how to approach the military as a topic of research in rhetoric studies: Can anyone outside of the realm of experience observe, or "know," the experience of soldiers and veterans, and therefore form value judgments about veterans?

I wrote a paper in which I used Enlightenment- and Progressive-era rhetoricians like Hugh Blair, Richard Whately and Wayne Booth, among others, to gain insights into how the common sense we share plays a role in defining the tastefulness, or appropriateness, of discourse about veterans and the military. A change in society's common understanding of what is tasteful will not only limit how ideas are formed but these boundaries will disqualify any ideas or discourse outside of what is accepted as tasteful. The articulation of our nation's sentiment surrounding veterans is constricted not only by what is considered tasteful but also by a perceived and actual distance between civilians and military personnel.

Let me offer an example of this distance. For myself, I encounter this distance when I'm designing research approaches to the topic of the military. When exploring whether I can engage in ethnographic field methods to study a specific group within the military, I get cut off from the participant perspective of the participant/observer stance that anthropologists prescribe when studying and making arguments about a culture.

In a small research study I did last year I interviewed a couple upper classmen in Navy and Army ROTC tracks in the Corps of Cadets at Virginia Tech. I was curious about *their* perception of the distance between those students in the Corps of Cadets, especially those with a commitment to join the military after graduation, and the civilian students on Virginia Tech's campus. Sure enough these cadets articulated a shared knowledge, a common sense, that's fostered through equity of experience in the corps, experience that's outside the realm of civilian understanding. Take for example what one cadet said when asked if she noticed a difference between civilian students and students in the Corps of Cadets:

I think it's a divide in understanding and not realizing certain things that are important to the people in the military. A lot of older Americans know that if you're raising/lowering the colors you stand and put your hand over your heart, but most college students don't. And they'll walk right in the middle of it, and it just seems very disrespectful. I don't think they don't care, I think they just don't realize what's going on around them.

From the opposite, civilian perspective, I have met people who are "anti-military", who resent the demonstrations such as the flyovers by fighter jets at baseball games because it represents American aggression. One can see the divide that this Cadet discussed as a difference in knowledge and experience. I would argue for the casual observer to read the Corps of Cadets' physical language through the perspective of the cadets themselves, but is this possible?

The burden of proof for arguments concerning the military and veterans rests on civilians who will never have access to the knowledge that experience places in the hands of soldiers and veterans. Rhetorically, veterans share a common sense language that is removed from the general population, and therefore from popular opinion. Insights from rhetorical theory can be a productive starting point from which to study how veterans as a population resists any value judgments from civilians that fall outside the binary opposition of for or against.

Rhetoricians introduced the concept of "common sense," a long time ago, and this concept is taken up by other authors in modern rhetoric, if by different names. Vico's *common sense* was termed "spaciousness" by Richard Weaver, "ethical consensus" by Hans Georg Gadamer, and "prejudice" by Bernard Williams. Campbell offers "resemblance," Burke offers "identification," and Blair offers "taste," these to me, are all parts of a larger whole that begins when Vico terms his part a "common mental language," this common sense as a shared understanding of what is true, or good. Vico argues that common sense is the "criterion of practical judgment" (Rhetorical Tradition 868). This is in contrast to an extreme criticism, or a rhetoric of doubt. Rather, we are discussing here a rhetoric of assent. Vico calls rhetoric, "wisdom," delivered in words "appropriate to the common opinion of mankind," and that common opinion is this common sense, a common mental language.

The idea of a "common mental language" is interesting to me in the context of militaries and military culture. Take for instance the French Foreign Legion, a part of the French military that accepts foreign nationals as recruits, and as a result must foster an *esprit de corps* among soldiers who have very different experiences with how the military may have played a part culturally or socially in their respective countries. A common bond and allegiance, perhaps a common mental language, must be fostered through equity of experience and treatment in the legion. Similarly I saw in the Corps of Cadets right here on VT's campus demonstrating a shared physical literacy—marching, addressing superiors, saluting the flag, presenting and shouldering arms—which is taught relatively quickly within the first few weeks of becoming a freshman cadet and demonstrated on the drill field at "pass in reviews." But might this physical literacy be a part of a larger "common mental language," that's a result of their shared experience and that defines their values apart from civilians?

Back to rhetoric, Vico theorized "three stages of human culture, each with an analogous rhetorical trope: the age of the gods (metaphor), the age of heroes (metonymy: the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated), and the age of men (synecdoche: a part for the whole), with irony characterizing the decay of culture and community" (Schaeffer 10). Could we posit that rhetoric as it pertains to militaries—the rhetoric circulating, moving, creating and shaping the culture of the military as a way of being in the world—intentionally avoids irony and always struggles to remain within the

first three rhetorical tropes? Flag is country, soldiers are defenders or fighters, and the individual soldier stands for America: metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. Another example from my interviews with the Cadets supports this. When asked about the way cadets comport themselves on campus, the cadet responded: “Perception is reality, how you conduct yourself is who you are.” I understood this as an awareness of physical and mental discipline. She has received both in the corps, and it was clear from her appearance that she followed the letter and the spirit of this maxim. She took pride in holding herself to a higher standard in appearance and professionalism. Isocrates argued that training the body and the mind, so to speak, was an effort to shape the “entire self,” to train a model citizen, and how one looks and carries themselves, or comports themselves, all translates to how others will perceive that person’s “entire self”.

I asked another cadet about the how this comportment might contribute to a distance between military and civilian experience. He responded: “A lot of civilians tend not to have situational awareness, at least compared to what they force upon us freshman year. Things like that teaches you, know what’s going on around you. When you wear the uniform you have to hold yourself to higher standards. If you go around picking your nose as a civilian people are just going to laugh at you, if you pick your nose in uniform people are going to say, look at the cadet picking his nose, and they’re going to talk about cadets picking their nose. Every action you do correlates to the entire corps of cadets.”

Vico’s description of the sage, the good student, seems to me the description of the soldier who embodies the three rhetorical tropes: the flag *is* country, and his unit *is* a band of brothers, and a single soldier represents the entire military, the entire history of the nation associated with that military. When I interviewed students in the Corps of Cadets, they were all incredibly and similarly eloquent. They shared a common mental language. I recognized a *sensus communis* that influenced their eloquence—their rhetoric, the way they invented arguments to respond to questions about their experiences in the corps. This eloquence/rhetoric was taught by way of relying on a common mental language based on these rhetorical tropes.

So I’m still left with the questions of how to approach the study of military rhetoric when I don’t have access to the experience that breeds that rhetoric. We have to find those points of identification, and seek out the spaces of ethical consensus that might offer a civilian scholar insight into the common mental language that veterans share. This conference is a great opportunity to bring together humanist scholars who are attempting to bridge this gap.

Author

Before coming to Virginia Tech, **PHIL HAYEK** was teaching basic writing courses at DePaul University and Truman College in Chicago. Hayek received his BA in English and MA in writing, rhetoric and discourse from DePaul University. He is interested in studying discourses that take military actions as their topic in order to understand militaries, and particularly the United States military, as a rhetorical narrative. He is also interested in how the rhetoric of military discourses influences public, private, and political discourses. He believes that these different discourses are constitutive in the sense that the military finds its subject position within political and social rhetoric while simultaneously providing justification for these rhetorics. He would like to look at how rhetorical strategies and tactics function within and through the military, and how the presence of the military itself functions rhetorically in discourse.