Self Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era

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JOHN J. MIDGLEY, JR.*


The moral and ethical implications of military structure and doctrine are seldom primary concerns in discussions of security policy. President Carter sought to emphasize the importance of moral and ethical considerations in foreign policy when he spoke of "a quiet strength based not merely on the size of an arsenal, but on the nobility of ideals."1 Yet, the ethical status of the nation's armed forces — the ultimate instruments of foreign policy — usually receives far less public scrutiny than technical or budgetary issues. In a well-researched and provocative study, Cincinnatus2 explores the manifestations and causes of what he considers the ethical and moral decay of the United States Army in Vietnam. He also offers some policy prescriptions to remedy the Army's alleged ills.3

The approach and the conclusions of Cincinnatus's study are not entirely new. Richard Gabriel and Paul Savage offered a similar description of the Army's post-Vietnam travails in 1978, observing that "[t]he [U.S.] Army in Vietnam had literally destroyed itself."4 Several other civilian and military authors have also attempted to explain the Army's defeat in Vietnam in moral

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2. The author invokes the pseudonym of the respected Roman citizen-solider L. Quinctius Cincinnatus, who was given dictatorial powers by the Senate to repel the invading Aequi in 458 B.C. Cincinnatus completed his mission, voluntarily surrendered his authority to the Senate, and returned to his farm. R. E. DUPUY and T. DUPUY, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MILITARY HISTORY 34 (1970). A report in The New York Times revealed that the author is Dr. Cecil B. Currey, a professor of American military history at the University of South Florida. The publisher reportedly used the pseudonym to enhance the book's credibility by concealing Dr. Currey's service as a reserve chaplain and lack of experience in Vietnam. Mitgang, Chaplain is Revealed as Author of Book on Vietnam, N.Y. Times, May 4, 1981, at 15, col. 1.
4. See R. GABRIEL & P. SAVAGE, CRISIS IN COMMAND 7 (1978) [hereinafter cited as GABRIEL & SAVAGE].
or ethical terms. Nevertheless, *Self-Destruction* is an interesting addition to the literature, although not for the reasons the author intended.

By relying heavily on internal Army reports and publications, and by quoting anonymous personal interviews with Vietnam veterans, Cincinnatus adds some new dimensions to the evidence used by these earlier authors. He uses a conceptual framework for explaining the alleged moral decay of the officer corps which can be distinguished clearly from that of other authors. However, flaws in this framework lead Cincinnatus to policy recommendations which are neither compelling nor practical. Thus, despite its considerable expository value, *Self-Destruction* is likely to produce only "a quiet yawn" within the military hierarchy.

*Self-Destruction* asserts that American military leaders did not adequately know the enemy. This inadequacy prevented them from adopting the tactics and strategy needed for victory; the result was defeat in Vietnam. Cincinnatus concludes that an ethical malaise within the professional officer ranks caused this failure.

The author takes an approach which is highly anecdotal and loosely organized. However, several clear lines of argument emerge. After a brief history of Vietnam, Cincinnatus argues that the Army's ignorance of the strategy and tactics of guerrilla warfare was a central factor in the failure of the war effort. While not recounting many specifics from the lessons that should have been learned, he observes that the Army's role in the Indian Wars, and the histories of particular units could have provided valuable guidance to generals willing to learn. He charges that military leaders neglected the thoughts of Sun Tzu and Mao Tse Tung who had systematically laid out the precepts of guerrilla warfare in detail. Moreover, these leaders were equally oblivious to the social and cultural sensitivities of the Vietnamese people. As a result, according to Cincinnatus, the Army reaped a reward of "'AWOL's, fraggings, drug problems, combat refusals and the resignation of its best and brightest.'"

Cincinnatus notes, however, that a significant amount of military literature on the war was available and widely read. Works such as Taber's *War of the Flea* were circulated within military organizations. The large number of

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5. Among the best of these studies are, S. LOORY, DEFEATED (1973) [hereinafter cited as LOORY] and W. HAUSER, AMERICA'S ARMY IN CRISIS (1973).
6. CINCINNATUS, supra note 3, at 168.
7. Id. at 9.
8. Id. at 184.
9. Id. at 37-41.
10. Id. at 35.
11. Id. at 40.
military officers quoted by Cincinnatus demonstrates that the subtleties of counterinsurgency were understood at a conceptual, if not operational, level by a significant fraction of military professionals. Cincinnatus himself claims that "literally hundreds" of senior officers serving in Vietnam believed that the general Army approach to the war was flawed. Thus, Cincinnatus' claim that ignorance led to poor military policy is contradicted by his own evidence.

Cincinnatus' characterization of the Army's failure to know the enemy reveals two fundamental weaknesses in his analytical framework. First, Self-Destruction portrays an anthropomorphic Army which makes decisions and changes directions autonomously in spite of some of its leaders who apparently understood the problems they faced. Examples of this characterization are presented throughout the book. These examples are most highly developed in Cincinnatus' argument that the war became a laboratory in which soldiers could gain experience and technicians could produce new weapons and equipment. Cincinnatus solidly documents the incidents and policies that produced these conclusions. Although most observers would agree the military presents formidable bureaucratic obstacles to effective control, when Cincinnatus searches for the cause of the Army's misdirection, he settles on the personal attributes of General Westmoreland. The implication of this argument is that a commander "more interested in, or more capable of controlling such things" would, in future conflicts, overcome the bureaucracy and wage war more effectively. Cincinnatus' theory that better individual leadership would automatically produce a better Army neglects the possibility that structural reforms may be necessary for a successful leadership climate. Other writers have argued that the nature of the current military structure, rather than the quality of the leaders within it, is responsible for the symptoms of the ethical decay detailed in Selj-Destruction. Cincinnatus is less persuasive than these other writers because he thoroughly documents the frustrations of many officers who attempted to change the direction of military policy in Vietnam.

A second serious shortcoming in Cincinnatus' Welanschauung is his lack of appreciation for the incremental and evolutionionary nature of military policy development in Vietnam. Self-Destruction consistently portrays the military's approach to the war in Vietnam as the invention of Generals Westmoreland and Dupuy, as if American policy originated with Westmoreland's assumption of command in 1964. It contains no significant discussion of the military and diplomatic perspectives formed about the war as early as the Geneva Final

13. Cincinnatus, supra note 3, at 52.
14. Id. at 65-69.
15. Id. at 69.
16. Id. at 69.
17. Gabriel & Savage, supra note 4, at 84.
18. Cincinnatus, supra note 3, at 64.
Declaration or Dulles's attempts to establish SEATO. These early perspectives are important, for they might help to explain, even if they do not excuse, the attitudes and actions of key decision-makers. Cincinnatus not only avoids incorporating these perspectives into his analysis, he discounts their value by asserting that the leading military men were simply too close-minded and too self-assured. Regardless of their personal psychology, American leaders were required to operate in an evolving political environment which had to shape their views to some degree. The effects of these external factors are difficult to analyze; Cincinnatus has apparently left the task to future scholars.

The notion that the Vietnam War was lost because of the incompetence and unethical behavior of individual leaders forms the second major thesis of Self-Destruction. In a strictly military sense, the statement is a tautology since commanders are traditionally considered personally responsible for the successes or failures of their units. Charges of poor leadership in Vietnam are certainly not new. Ten years ago, for example, Colonel David Hackworth, who left the Army in 1971 after commanding troops in Vietnam, publicly argued that ineffective leadership was the root cause of the Army's plight.

Cincinnatus observes that no general officers resigned in protest against military policies in Vietnam. He also points out that the highest duty of a commander is to inform the political leadership when military means are inappropriate for the state's political ends. Thus, he concludes that the silent acquiescence of senior officers resulted in inadequately equipped and poorly organized units which were unable to function in the national interest. Cincinnatus appears to believe that a military debacle would be less likely if general officers were willing to resign their commissions when confronted with objectionable policy alternatives.

This view, while intrinsically appealing, is short-sighted and simplistic, because it does not explore the relationship between moral judgments and professional military judgments. Cincinnatus retrospectively condemns practices, such as search-and-destroy tactics and the excessive use of artillery fires, but he does not make clear whether military leaders or their civilian superiors cast these or other military policies in ethical terms. The military efficacy of these methods, and the professional judgments which produced them, can be legitimately criticized. Cincinnatus, however, provides no ethical touchstone for military policy, and this missing standard makes the analysis of any

19. For a general discussion, see G. Kahin & J. Lewis, The United States in Vietnam (1967) [hereinafter cited as Kahin & Lewis].
20. Cincinnatus, supra note 3, at 106.
22. Cincinnatus, supra note 3, at 60.
23. Id. at 55-60.
specific policy completely subjective. Yet, this analysis is of central importance because military policy was shaped by the decisions of leaders acting on their perceptions of military capability and necessity as well as by ethical concerns. Gabriel and Savage note, for example, that some officers may have chosen not to resign because of their desire to effect policy changes from within the military structure. Self-Destruction provides no ethical yardstick for measuring these kinds of motivations.

Cincinnatus proposes that the failure of military policy to support the national interest was the only objective basis for officer resignation. However, these interests with respect to Vietnam constantly evolved and shifted. Cincinnatus notes that President Johnson and General Westmoreland were in agreement on the Army’s mission. But, by 1968, little agreement existed on war aims or Army missions anywhere in the government. Cincinnatus is silent on the proper course for military leaders confronted with imprecise political goals, although this problem represents the reality faced by senior military leaders in Vietnam.

Cincinnatus argues that a tendency for Army officers to assume a managerial role, rather than a more traditional combat leadership role, under General Westmoreland, produced an excessive reliance on statistics and high technology. In the public mind, statistics and high technology characterize the Vietnam war. Cincinnatus offers the macabre “body count” as the best example of the unethical manifestations of military leadership in Vietnam. The abuses cited are well documented and the discussion of misapplications of technology also contains some valuable lessons. However, a more balanced account might have given some weight to the pervasive influence of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, whose early efforts to introduce quantitative techniques produced much of the trend criticized in Self-Destruction.

Substantive change was impossible for the Army, according to Cincinnatus, because commanders were isolated from the actual situation in the Vietnamese countryside. Commanders, in this isolation, developed an unsuccessful pacification program and prolonged ground operations. The documentation of these arguments is interesting and compelling, but Cincinnatus returns to the theme of personal incompetence to explain the Army’s ills. However,
his sources, especially Kinnard,\(^{32}\) (who is quoted no fewer than twenty-six times in *Self-Destruction*) indicate that many officers were fully cognizant of the actual situation facing the Army. If his sources are correct, Cincinnatus has documented a policy that developed as a result of informed judgments rather than ignorance. Pacification and nation building did not fail because leaders misunderstood the policies, but because — for reasons unexplored — the leaders were unable to make the policies work. The difference in interpretation carries significant implications for military policy; but Cincinnatus neglects them.

*Self-Destruction* prescribes a variety of solutions to prevent the Vietnam misfortune from recurring.\(^{33}\) While his prescriptions range from enlarging the role of the Army Reserve to revising the military efficiency reporting system, Cincinnatus apparently attaches the greatest importance to two specific initiatives.

First, he calls for a computer based effort to assemble and codify the lessons of the Army's military experience.\(^{34}\) According to Cincinnatus, such a compilation would aid military planners in making the cost of involvement in specific regions clear. Further, this information would enhance the early training of recruits. Cincinnatus aims his second major recommendation at improving the ethical and moral quality of the officer corps. He suggests the establishment of a Defense Ethics Institute modelled after the Defense Race Relations Institute, to promote steady changes of attitudes and long-term improvements.\(^{35}\)

Neither initiative would seem to hold much promise if Cincinnatus's characterization of the Army's ills is correct. He presents evidence that computer based efforts do not, in fact, work. *Self-Destruction* cites scores of military and civilian studies, including efforts by computer-equipped organizations, which were never translated into effective policy. Cincinnatus seems to shift positions on this idea. He first argues persuasively against the application of technical solutions to political and sociological problems; he then retreats to the position he originally opposed. This shift is both mystifying and disappointing.

The notion of a Defense Ethics Institute seems equally unpromising, although it reflects Cincinnatus's view that military ethical problems are rooted in the weak ethical values of individual military leaders. Gabriel and Savage possibly characterize the situation more correctly as a failure of the Army as an organization to develop an ethical *milieu* supportive of individual

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33. CINCINNATUS, *supra* note 3, at 165-89.
34. *Id.* at 169.
35. *Id.* at 180.
ethical concepts. Cincinnatus's failure to address the organizational and structural obstacles to ethical conduct is a predictable consequence of his dependence on personal interviews in his research.

Even if his premise is correct, Cincinnatus's analogy between ethical and racial problems is flawed. Loory has noted that the awareness fostered by the Race Relations Institute was productive only when accompanied by major structural changes. Following these suggestions the Navy, for example, made over two hundred specific program changes in its attempts to defuse racial tensions in the early 1970's. Ethical awareness unaccompanied by similar initiatives could turn the potential for progress into a purely academic discussion. By failing to make the proposal for institutional change within the Army, Cincinnatus vitiates much of his recommended policy.

Self-Destruction is a useful overview of the problems faced by the Army as a result of the Vietnam War. The excellent bibliography will be useful to researchers with access to military libraries. Cincinnatus's view of military problems is insightful, but his inability to prescribe practical solutions is testimony to the difficulties confronting military policymakers. Self-Destruction is a thought provoking work of real importance. Any reader concerned with the role of military professionals in the formulation of national policy should read it.