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From *Radical Philosophy Review* 13:2 (2010): 173-180. This essay is part of a symposium on Cheyney Ryan's *The Chickenhawk Syndrome: War, Sacrifice, and Personal Responsibility* (2009). Ryan's reply to his critics can be found on pp. 181-89.

From Combat Boots to Civilian Shoes: Reflections on *The Chickenhawk Syndrome*

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In January 2004, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) began in Chicago a traveling exhibit of the costs of the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.¹ The centerpiece of the exhibit *Eyes Wide Open* was a display of 534 pairs of combat boots, symbolizing the American lives lost in this war. Each pair of boots had a name tag and was placed several feet away from the next pair so that the boots together created a field of human sacrifice (similar to the field of tombstones displayed on the cover of Cheyney Ryan's *The Chickenhawk Syndrome*). I saw the AFSC exhibit on September 11, 2004, in Indianapolis, where 1007 pairs of combat boots (now adorned with American flags) were placed at Monument Circle, an imposing war memorial in the center of downtown. An added feature of the exhibit was that the civilian Iraqi deaths were symbolized by a pile of hundreds of civilian shoes of many different sizes.² My objection was that the "eyes wide open" primarily focused on the combat boots, while the civilian shoes occupied only a marginal place in the visual field. I held that the reverse vision should have been created: a huge mountain of over twenty thousand shoes should have allowed only a marginal view of the combat boots.³ My main objection to Ryan's book is similar. He argues that the lack of preparedness of most Americans who have supported recent wars to make personal sacrifices for these wars is "a form of national hypocrisy that verges on the obscene" (p. 5). In my view, the real moral obscenity is not that most Americans are

¹ See <http://www.afsc.org/eyes/ht/d/sp/i/38782/pid/38782>.

² For a short report of the event, see Lisa Bloom, "Voices of Dissent," *The Bloomington Alternative*, 9/12/2004. Posted at <http://www.bloomingtonalternative.com/articles/2004/09/12/7614>.

³ This is the approximate number of Iraqi civilians that had died by this time as the result of the Iraq War. See <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>. It includes only violent deaths, not deaths caused by deteriorating health conditions.

“chickenhawks,” but that they turn a blind eye to the mountains of bloody and empty civilian shoes created by their wars.

Ryan views the phenomenon of the chickenhawk as the most morally disturbing feature of “alienated war” in America. What characterizes this type of war (see pp. 15ff.) is that most citizens and even many politicians are detached and isolated from the military violence executed in their name. Alienated war is a comforting mix of illusion and reality. One aspect of the alienation is that America’s use of high-tech weapons creates a clinical image of war as the surgical removal of evil, shielding the public from the brutalities and inhumanity of war.⁴ Another aspect is that the use of high-tech weapons also (seemingly) has reduced the need for long wars with massive troops, leading to the belief that wars can be fought without any serious negative material repercussions for most American citizens. Debt financing of war adds to this comforting belief. The most important enabling factor of alienated war has been the end of the citizen-soldier tradition and the emergence of the volunteer army, discussed in detail in the second chapter of Ryan’s book. Fighting a war now appears a matter of personal choice, so that one can support a given war and honor its warriors without feeling any commitment to fighting it oneself. In other words, the volunteer army invites the chickenhawk mentality.

Alienated war greatly facilitates resort to military force, and so the political establishment has promoted alienated war. Consumerism and alienated war are compatible, and so the public at large has done little to actively resist alienated war. The unexpected protracted nature of the Iraq war, however, began in 2006 to push the limits of alienated war in terms of its economic costs, human costs, and need for more troops, leading to a gradual erosion of public support for this war and a divided response of the political establishment. Calls for a renewal of the draft went nowhere because it would have eliminated the comforts and political benefits of alienated war. It is in this light that we must understand Ryan’s claim that “if the *only* way to make the United States more prudent were to revive the draft, I would support it” (p. 19). In fact, he holds that the draft due to its coercive nature is the wrong way to overcome alienated war and would not change much to begin with because it would leave most of the eligible people undrafted (as it did in the Vietnam era). More importantly, on his account the discussion about the draft is a diversion of a real issue. Ryan writes: “The draft diversion equates the question ‘should we be more serious about sharing the sacrifices of war?’ with the question ‘Should we reinstitute the draft?’ Since everyone’s answer to that is ‘No,’ equating the two issues means that the former one is forgotten” (p. 20).

⁴ For an elaboration of the “aesthetic” of alienated war, see Andrew J. Bacevitch, *The New American Militarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 20-23.

To focus our attention on the first question, Ryan proposes the Murtha test, named after late Congressman Jack Murtha. The test is that “ you should endorse a war only if you would be willing to fight in, even die in, the war yourself (or have your loved ones do so)” (p. 4). Unlike some others who have expressed sentiments similar to the Murtha test, for Ryan the aim of this test is not to end alienated war and somehow return to an earlier time of a “martial liberalism” (pp. 199-202) when citizenship and preparedness for sacrifice in war were two sides of the same coin; rather, the purpose is to fully acknowledge that most of us are no longer prepared to die for war and that it is immoral and unfair to let only some citizens take on all the sacrifices of war. Accordingly, Ryan concludes *The Chickenhawk Syndrome* with the following words: “The older ideal held that patriotism found its purest expression in war. Our task is to fashion a new kind of patriotism that finds its purest expression in peace and its promotion” (p. 203).

I share Ryan’s conviction that alienated war is a basic instrument of American military hegemony, but I have serious doubts that the Murtha test and its exposure of the chickenhawk mentality can do much to get us out of this situation. One obvious problem concerns the efficacy of moral criticism: Can we shame people into no longer supporting American military hegemony? Still, I am sympathetic to Ryan’s claim (pp. 27ff.) that moral criticism has a role to play in progressive politics. Another problem is that the Murtha test itself, reflecting the ethos of martial liberalism, is much less convincing with regard to how the American public should respond to recent wars than Ryan takes it to be.

Undoubtedly, it would be morally hypocritical to support a given war, favor conscription, and proclaim that one would not be prepared to fight this war and risk becoming its casualty. But what is the basis for the charge of hypocrisy once the fighting is done by a volunteer force? Suppose that a private security company (PSC) is contracted by the American government to overthrow a government in some African country that denies American companies cheap access to its abundant oil resources. The PSC soldiers are well-trained and well-paid, victory is swift, the number of PSC casualties is limited to a few dozen, and a regime is installed supportive of American corporate interests. Now, further suppose that many Americans support the act of aggression in a time of dwindling and increasingly costly oil supplies. They cheer the unfolding of the war on their giant flat screen televisions, marveling at their high-tech weapons, and place the corporate flag of the PSC, as well as the American flag, in their yards in honor of the fallen PSC fighters. Would these Americans be hypocrites if they would have no intention of joining the PSC? I see no basis for this charge as long as we assume that the PSC fighters indeed volunteered and were adequately informed of their assigned task. The non-fighting Americans can without moral inconsistency say that they support the PSC war, that they are pleased that some people chose to become PSC fighters and risk death, and that they would not want this job for themselves. Even moral praise for the job choice of the PSC soldiers

would not be hypocritical as long as it would not be articulated in terms of the soldiers having a non-contractual duty to sacrifice for the common good of the nation.

Ryan may seem to rebut this objection in his response to what he calls the division-of-labor objection to the Murtha test. The latter objection is that since we accept that we may be in favor of many practices, such as firefighting and garbage collecting, without having the intention to perform them ourselves, “why should my favoring a war have anything to do with my becoming a soldier myself?” (p. 160). Ryan’s answer is that war, unlike firefighting and garbage collecting, is “a *political* act.” He elaborates: “War is a social project, pursued in the collective name, a project in which all are implicated so that one cannot be hired out to others” (p. 161). This argument confuses two things: War as a collective enterprise implies that all those who support it are responsible for its anticipated consequences. So the Americans in favor of the hypothetical oil war share a responsibility for the people murdered by the PSC fighters (I say “murdered” rather than “killed” since the war was an act of aggression). A denial of this responsibility would be hypocritical. Or, if, say, the puppet regime, unlike the prior regime, would not use the oil revenues for healthcare in their country, then it would be hypocritical to deny any responsibility for the resulting increased child mortality rate. However, war as a collective undertaking does not necessarily imply that all those who support it also must execute it or be prepared to do so. After all, their support might be given with the understanding that volunteer fighters will execute the war. Of course, there are many weighty and decisive objections to using PSCs in fighting our wars, but my point is that hypocrisy is not one of them.

The current American practice of fighting war and counterinsurgency is, in a way, a hybrid of the PSC model and the conscription model, and to the extent that Americans embrace this hybrid model, Ryan’s charges of hypocrisy have merit. Favoring war, refusing to fight oneself, and accepting current practices that involve, in effect, involuntary re-enlistment is hypocritical, as is to support in the same way recruitment that seeks to attract members of the most vulnerable economic groups in society on basis of the (exaggerated) promise of career opportunities alone. Moreover, it would be hypocritical to embrace martial liberalism for others and deny its validity for oneself. Or, one would be hypocritical to continue to support a war one refuses to fight when not enough volunteer fighters would be available. Ryan himself notes that we currently have a hybrid model (pp. 86-91), but what he does not seem to appreciate fully is that the charge of hypocrisy can be avoided by favoring a better paid and genuine volunteer army with a corporate ethos rather than an ethos of sacrifice and duty.

What is said and done in civilian life has always been morally disconcerting from the perspective of the theatre of war. Alienated war worsens this, and Ryan’s book is full of

examples of appalling moral insensitivity on the side of public figures, especially former president George W. Bush, with regard to the suffering caused to our soldiers by recent American wars. More unique with regard to the moral failings of the chickenhawk is that he, on Ryan's account, "is a freeloader: he endorses a war because he sees it as bringing great benefits, yet he imposes the *burdens* that those benefits involve on someone else" (p. 154). On the face of it, this argument seems implausible. Is the person who enjoys ocean fish a freeloader because she "imposes" on professional fishers the rather dangerous task of catching her fish? Or what about the person whose home and children have been saved by firefighters? Is he a freeloader by not wanting to become a firefighter himself? Does it not suffice to pay a fair price for fish and adequate taxes for the fire department? Similarly, as long as the supporter of war who is unwilling to fight himself pays his taxes for the war, it seems that the charge of freeloading does not hold. Admittedly, many Americans do not even seem to be prepared to pay for their wars, and here Ryan's charge of freeloading is valid, but the main thrust of his argument is that the chickenhawk as freeloader is not willing to make the personal sacrifice of fighting.

Perhaps this latter argument would be convincing if it were the case that the risks and sacrifices of fighting in war were of an altogether different order and magnitude than those of deep sea fishing or firefighting. Ryan seems to think so, claiming, for example, that it might be the case "that if people truly appreciated the connection between war and death, no one would ever want to be part of it" (p. 104). Similarly, he stresses that soldiering "requires dying – in ways firefighting and policing do not," because "soldiers can be ordered to do acts that carry an absolute certainty of death" (p. 164). I suspect that Ryan's perspective here is more influenced by the realities of the mass conflicts of the twentieth century than the current wars fought by the United States.

Consider some data. The first alienated war was the Gulf War (1990-91), and its strikingly low human (and even economic) costs for Americans no doubt colored the public's perception of the kind of sacrifices required for fighting wars in the high-tech age. Remarkably, more active duty military personnel died due to illness in 1991 (when the actual fighting of the Gulf War took place) than to hostile action (308 and 147, respectively).⁵ Even the Iraq War, and recall that this war was rejected by the American public after a few years due to its increasing human and economic costs, had in its most violent years a rather low number of hostile military deaths as compared to the figures of earlier wars fought with a conscription army. The invasion of Iraq mirrored the success of the Gulf War, involving 139 hostile deaths, but the insurgency soon led to an average of around 50 hostile deaths per month over approximately the next five years

⁵ See Table 5 of "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics," CRS Report for Congress, Updated September 15, 2009. Posted at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf>.

(the number sharply declined after June 2008).⁶ Still, this is about 10% and 1% of the hostile deaths of the Korean War and the Second World War, respectively, conflicts that lasted shorter than the Iraq War during its most violent years.⁷ Another way of bringing out how the sacrifices imposed on active duty personnel have changed is that there were more deaths among them in 1981 (2380) than in 2007 (1953), even though not a single American soldier died in hostile action in 1981 and 2007 saw the highest number (847) since the Vietnam War. The main reason for the decline is a sharp reduction in the number of accidental deaths (from 1524 to 561).⁸ Or, consider that the fatality rate (number of yearly deaths per 100,000 workers) among active duty military personnel in 2007 (1.37 million) was about 60 in terms of hostile deaths and about 40 in terms accidental deaths, while it was (in 2008) 129 for fishers and workers in the fishing industry and 116 for logging workers.⁹

These data ignore the wounded, and one striking feature of the Iraq War has been its significantly higher ratio of wounded/deaths than in prior conflicts, partly due to the nature of the conflict and improved emergency medicine. They also ignore the long-term psychological costs of battle (PTSD). Still, it seems that these data put, at least somewhat, into question Ryan's contention that Americans who support war and are not willing to fight themselves are freeloaders. The strength of Ryan's argument also depends on how soldiers themselves view their profession, what motivates them, for example, to re-enlist in a time of war, and how their view might have changed since the emergence of the volunteer army. Ryan indirectly addresses this issue by discussing how the army has tried to solve recruitment problems during the past decade (pp. 44-56). This discussion suggests that enlistees are increasingly motivated by such considerations as financial and educational opportunities, building character ("army strong"), and experiencing the world. No doubt, soldiers might be misled in this regard or mislead themselves, but to the extent that soldiers don't view their preparedness to serve in moral terms of duty and sacrifice, the charge of freeloading is further weakened. This is not to say that we should see military service as just another job, but what makes the comparison wrong is not that military service stands out in terms of sacrifice and injuries as compared to other jobs, but that this 'job' involves a rather broad legal permission to kill. Finally, it may be

⁶ See Table 14 and Table 13, respectively, of the May 14, 2008, version of the report cited in note 5. See also <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/ByMonth.aspx>.

⁷ See Table 1 of the report cited in note 5.

⁸ Ibid, Table 5. Other factors are a decreased size of the military (about 30%) and significant lower homicide rates and natural death rates.

⁹ See "National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2008," pp. 4-5. News Release of the U.S. Department of Labor, August 20, 2009. Posted at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf>. The data are preliminary and slightly higher than the 2007 numbers. Of course, it is morally imperative to reduce occupational injuries, and their high number is an indictment of corporate capitalism. My only point here is to contest that in terms of fatalities the American military "job" is altogether different from all other jobs.

noted that the further introduction of robotics in war might fundamentally change the nature of American warriors and their sacrifice.¹⁰

My criticisms of the Murtha test suggest that the American public's rejection of martial liberalism is less blatantly morally inconsistent with its support of recent wars than Ryan takes it to be. Nonetheless, Ryan is correct that the current public attitude of "support our troops" is shallow and "a substitute for a real ethic of personal responsibility" (p. 17). Indeed, the very fact that so little attention is paid to the moral question of who should fight our wars is a hallmark of alienated war. Ryan also too quickly concludes that the public's rejection of martial liberalism leaves it in fact with no moral basis for supporting war as such, but his book is certainly a formidable challenge for anyone who holds that the voluntary army is, or can be, a just institution. This challenge extends to those on the left who reject American military hegemony but also hold that limited resort to force is at times justified, such as to prevent genocide. They must come up with a convincing moral answer to the question, "Who should fight these wars?"

Finally, let me return to my claim that the *Chickenhawk Syndrome* errs in its almost exclusive focus on combat boots and the price of war for Americans themselves. During the time period of alienated war, say from 1990 until the present, about 5000 American soldiers have died due to hostile action. Conservatively, tens of thousands of enemy soldiers have also died, often as a result of excessive force. But what is most morally disconcerting is that during this same time period hundreds of thousands of civilians have died as a result of American military interventions. Reasonable people can disagree about the exact numbers and the permissible scope of "collateral damage." Reasonable people can also differ about the degree of American responsibility for the civilian deaths caused by the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s. Or, they may disagree about who should be held most responsible for the failure to restore quickly essential services in Iraq after the invasion or for the failure to prevent and stop the carnage that soon ensued, resulting in a violent civilian death toll of at least 100,000 within the next five years, as well as even many more refugees and premature deaths due to a lack of resources. What reasonable people must acknowledge, though, is that war as a collective enterprise makes us responsible for what American soldiers are doing and how our wars impact others. All too often, it is assumed that American soldiers occupy the moral high ground, and Ryan's book does not seem to an exception with its discourse of their sacrifices. Above all, we should have seen widespread and vehement debates concerning the civilian toll of our wars. And we should have seen shame regarding this toll, or, at least, profound doubt or deep

¹⁰ See P.W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

sadness. But we have seen little of this. The greatest moral obscenity of alienated war is not hypocrisy but the public's moral blindness with regard to its civilian victims in a time when their suffering and death is easy for all to see. It is on this blindness that moral criticism as an aspect of progressive action should focus.