

Taking on a nightmare

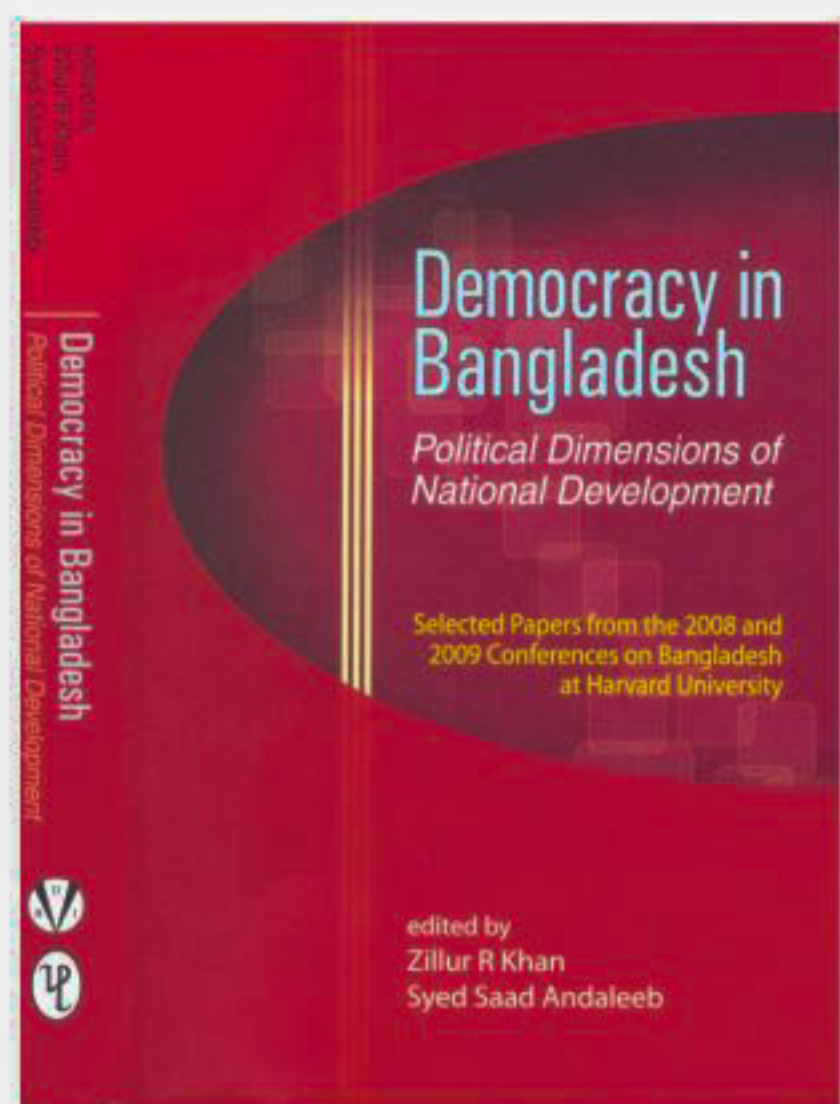
Shahid Alam writes on a litany of well-known facts

At first glance, the title of the book, Democracy in Bangladesh, might appear to be an oxymoron. That is because what passes for liberal pluralist democracy being practised in Bangladesh, and has been for the last twenty-odd years, is a travesty of the spirit and, in instances, of the institutional practice, of the political ideology. Zillur R Khan and Syed Saad Andaleeb, have, nonetheless, undertaken the onerous task of compiling eight essays and presenting them as suggestions for improving the dismal situation. And the papers have offered copious ideas on a number of issues. Many are sound, but the authors have essentially placed the cart before the horse. Unless the abysmal political culture prevailing in the country is turned around for the better, and the spirit of liberal pluralist democracy is ingrained in the mindset of the general population, none more crucially than in the political activists, all the holy advice and pronouncements will have little impact on the political system obtaining in the country. Prior to the current lot, a good number of writers have given their considered thoughts on the subject, others are continuing to do so. Countless scholarly speeches have been, and are being, made, but the caravan of dysfunctional politics keeps rolling on. Zillur Khan, Professor Emeritus of the University of Wisconsin, USA, and Saad Andaleeb, Distinguished Professor of Business School at Pennsylvania State University, USA, have selected eight papers presented at two conferences on Bangladesh organized at Harvard University in 2008 and 2009. Their hope is that the book will engender further discussions among researchers and policymakers on the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. Well, one can always hope! If that sounds a tad cynical, well, experience over the last twenty-odd years makes it difficult not to be, and also since so many reports on matters of good governance, healthy political culture and suchlike have been gathering dust in some government office or the other without having been given much of a glance by those who should have been giving them much more than a cursory look. The caravan of dysfunction, meanwhile, rolls on. Therefore, it might be too optimistic to hope that the papers contained in Democracy in Bangladesh will fare any differently. To reiterate, the mindset requires a major overhaul. And the true spirit and norms of liberal pluralist democracy have to be established in Bangladesh.

For the record, the chapters presented in the book, in numerical order, are "Democracy and Security" by Zillur R Khan, "Can Proportional Representation Help Stabilize Democracy in Bangladesh?" by Nazrul Islam, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace accord:

Autonomy and Related Issues" by Zakia Afrin, "Bangladesh in the Twenty-First Century: Democracy, Development, Terrorism and Its Counter-Forces" by Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "Development, Democracy, and the NGO Sector: Theory and Evidence from Bangladesh" by Sabeel Rahman, "NGOs, Clientelism and the Makings of Social Change" by Joe Devine, "Rethinking Regional Cooperation: From Conflict Mitigation to Integrated Development" by Tariq A Karim, and "The Dynamics of Refugee-Related Violence in South Asia" by Navine Murshid.

One fails to find the aptness in the



Democracy in Bangladesh
Political Dimensions of National Development
Eds Zillur R Khan and Syed Saad Andaleeb
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inclusion of the last two chapters in this volume. Only by a considerable stretch of imagination can one draw any semblance of relevance to democracy and politics in the purely international relations/foreign policy-oriented article by Tariq Karim. And this view even after acknowledging that, almost always, foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. Navine Murshid's article, as she says, is "on how the relationship between the host country and refugee groups becomes violent." For a good part, it is as she says, but, more to the point, it has very little to do with the political culture or the state of democracy in Bangladesh. Neither author, moreover, has made any conscious effort to link his/her topic with the state of the polity in this country. Karim's paper contains this contentious statement: Homer-Dixon's thesis, propounded in 2000, draws attention to the onset of significant climate change, and moves Karim to pronounce that, in

doing so, Homer-Dixon was "far ahead of his times, and almost prophetic in his pronouncement." Surely, such pronouncements and the putative dire consequences of appreciable climate change had been made much before the year 2000 and by a number of people!

The book contains a litany of well-known facts relating to Bangladesh that many have uttered or written on. Typical is Zillur Khan's mention of accountability, transparency, mutual tolerance, integrity, effectiveness and responsiveness in electing and selecting decision makers in order to ensure national security and sustaining democratic governance. Point taken, but the measures suggested to attain them, or to remove or mitigate obstacles in obtaining them, are also frequently suggested grandiose comprehensive schemes, wonderful in an ideal or near-ideal situation, something that is some distance away from the one obtaining in Bangladesh. Again, we have to return to getting the horse of a democratic mindset in good working order first before letting it pull the cart of all those admirable suggestions, and allow the spirit and norms of liberal pluralist democracy take over the body politic of Bangladesh.

Nazrul Islam comes up with the idea of introducing the system of proportional representation as a way out for Bangladesh from its political funk. Proportional representation is theoretically a good idea, but I am not sure if Islam has argued convincingly enough that it could work in Bangladesh. He acknowledges that it is not an easy system to implement, but he believes that it could work in this country because Bangladesh has shown "ingenuity by devising the system of Caretaker Government", that "because of revolutionary changes in the media technology...people are more informed in general and more aware about better functioning of political systems elsewhere in the world" and "are therefore now more receptive to new ideas and new suggestions." Well, at least we are aware of the conundrum now surrounding the caretaker government issue, although we can safely take with a big pinch of salt the idea that the masses are aware of the sound functioning of political systems around the world any more than they did before the media technology revolution. Usually it is better to arrive at conclusions based on ground realities!

Zakia Afrin sketches out the multifarious problems relating to the Chittagong Hill tracts, and, in keeping with a trend, comes up with a broad gamut of suggestions to improve the situation. Naureen Fink begins with a careless statement: "For better or worse, Bangladesh has been presented a rare opportunity to renovate its institutions of democratic governance and reassert its

foundational values." Now, the opportunities presented could not but be for the better, could it, although, one can envisage it to be for the worse if some devilish being out to get this country had concocted those opportunities in a way that they could only be counter-productive if implemented. Fink worries about religious extremism taking over this country, but is convinced, with some trepidation, that the people of Bangladesh will not allow that to happen. However, her uncertainty manifests itself through her rather sweeping remark that "Bangladesh may have replaced Pakistan as a haven for Southeast Asian terrorist groups." Her observations on one aspect of religious education, though, warrants serious consideration: "The nationalists-secularists in Bangladesh...have often failed to engage more frequently with religious communities to understand or challenge their rhetoric. Consequently, religious study has been neglected by the upper echelons of society and its propagation has been left to those who have little access to mainstream education or broad social exposure."

Sabeel Rahman argues that "the abandonment of political activism on the part of NGOs has, in the case of Bangladesh, led to a macro level crisis of democratic institutions and the public sphere." He arrives at this conclusion after having earlier stated that "the dramatic prominence of NGOs in developing countries can be dangerous for the goal of achieving an accountable and responsive political system and a robust consolidation of political citizenship in the developing world." One would have thought that Bangladesh lies firmly in the developing world and that it requires an accountable and responsible political system! In fact, NGOs have, as Rahman suggests, had fallout with both the governmental sector and donors. Their political partisanship, especially in the 1990s, have left them suspect in the eyes of mainstream political parties.

Joe Devine, in his far more down-to-earth and pragmatic assessment of NGOs, draws attention to this last point. Referring to the break-up of the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), he says that the "main catalyst to the break-up was a basic disagreement among a few of the country's top NGO leaders about if and how to engage with the main political parties during the 2001 national elections." Devine's is one of the very few down-to-earth thoughtful articles contained in Democracy in Bangladesh. The state of liberal pluralist democracy in Bangladesh needs a massive shakeup that encompasses ground realities.

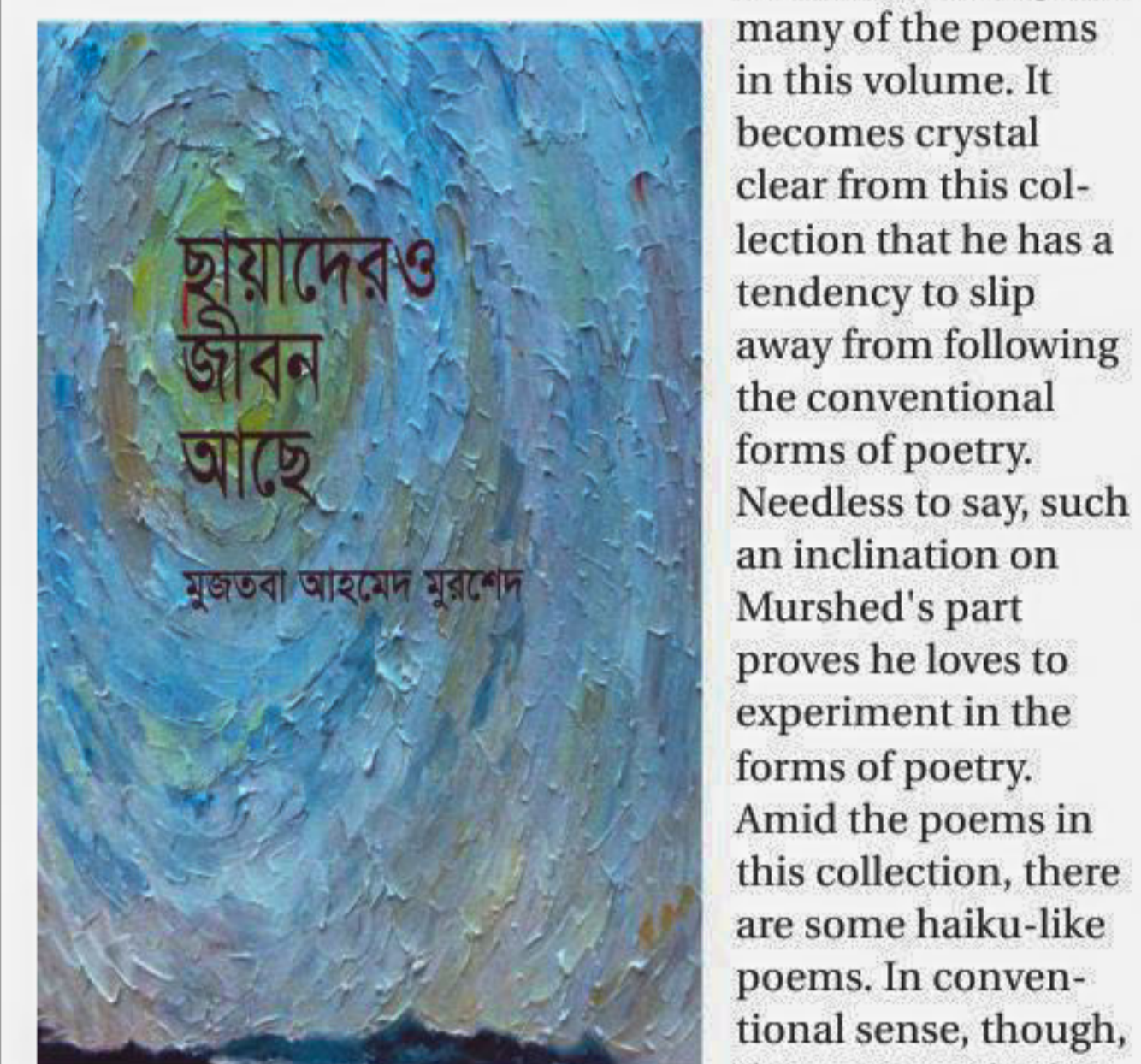
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Poetry powered by nostalgia and reverie

Tusar Talukder is charmed by new verses

'A poet is a man speaking to men', the most quoted and solemn definition of poetry by William Wordsworth, was the only line I was recollecting while going through the poems in the latest collection of Mujtoba Ahmed Murshed titled *Chhayadero Jibon Achhey*. Of course, there lie some relevant reasons for recollecting the axiom. Firstly, there is Murshed's facile diction and, secondly, there is the conversational tone of his poems. As a poet of the 1990s Mujtoba Murshed has been ably developing a reader-friendly diction for his poetry that is completely his own. He generally says directly what he intends to say. Therefore, there are few symbols in his poetry. But it is also true in the case of a poet that he/she can never compose poetry without symbols. Consequently a poet subconsciously uses some symbols in which the inner themes are expressed in subtle manner. Murshed is also enslaved to his subconscious or unconscious layer of mind. Nonetheless he is not much interested in making his poems intensely symbolic.

Chhayadero Jibon Achhey includes forty four poems in which readers will find a great variety of subjects being dealt with, such as the poet's favourite personalities, happenings in everyday life, memories of the past, love-haunted moments and so on. However, the poet comes



Chhayadero Jibon Achhey
Mujtoba Ahmed Murshed
Dhrubapada

across as nostalgic in many of the poems in this volume. It becomes crystal clear from this collection that he has a tendency to slip away from following the conventional forms of poetry. Needless to say, such an inclination on Murshed's part proves he loves to experiment in the forms of poetry. Amid the poems in this collection, there are some haiku-like poems. In conventional sense, though, these are not haikus. But because of their length and rhythm, they can be looked upon as haiku. It goes without saying,

though, that these tiny poems bear very grave and meanings which we do not normally find in short-length poems of a shorter length. And I simply assert that readers can easily be flabbergasted by reading those short-length poems, which I believe have a chance of living long.

Now, let me travel into the realm of his poetry. The collection opens with the poem, *Chhayar Jibon* (Shade's Life) which delineates how shades, being de-linked from bodies, perform various types of activities, similar to the activities of human beings. Consequently the poet composes:

Shadows have minds
They also love
Being intensely passionate they go deep down into the water of the oblong lake

They also laugh.....shadows have life too.

While translating the lines I did not follow their chronological order. I have merely skimmed through the lines to provide the readers a glimpse of the poem. How Murshed became so nostalgic while weaving a good number of poems is proved through such compositions such as *Purono Thikana* (The Previous Address), *Roddure Station* (The Station Blazing with Sunlight), *Shesh Busta-o Phirbe* (The Last Bus Will Also Come Back), *Jonmodin* (Birthday) and so on. Sometimes we find Murshed as a stern escapist when we browse the poem *Shob Sheshe Shopnoi Shotti* (At the End Dream is True) in which he is assailed by doubts and says what he sees today might be unseen tomorrow. Eventually he keeps his faith in dreams which he thinks are true.

Thus his romantic vision comes to the fore through some of his poems. He has also penned a number of poems in the memory of some of his favourite personalities, namely, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, poet Mahbul Alam Choudhury, and Che Guevara. Again he clarifies his philosophical standpoint in a number of poems such as *Jibon*, *Vabhnar Chorachor*, *Noishobdamakha Shobdoguchcho*, etc.

Mujtoba Murshed has a wonderful poem regarding *Banalata Sen*. Through this poem, the most celebrated character, *Banalata Sen*, created by *Jibanananda Das* seeks to come out of darkness because she has passed ages in it sitting face to face. Now she desires to be bathed in sunlight. Mujtoba Murshed dramatically presents this character. Here are a couple of lines translated for readers to make out his dramatization:

All of a sudden
Banalata calls with her sweet voice.....Jibanananda
I am that girl of yours, Banalata Sen
I desire to be happy singing the song of humanity

Mujtoba Ahmed Murshed's poetry is enmeshed in dream-like thoughts which take us to his self-made world. His poetry, without any distortion, encapsulates a moral vision which helps us find an ideal world free of all kinds of anxieties and fears. And undoubtedly, most of the thoughts in his poetry have that soothing power to refresh us. He regales us with his most impressive style of verse making. To sum up Murshed's poetry, the very beginning lines from Adrienne Rich's famous poem *Our Whole Life* ought to suffice:

Our whole life a translation
the permissible fibs...

Thank you for your service, sort of

Andrew J. Bacevich goes critical about America's military

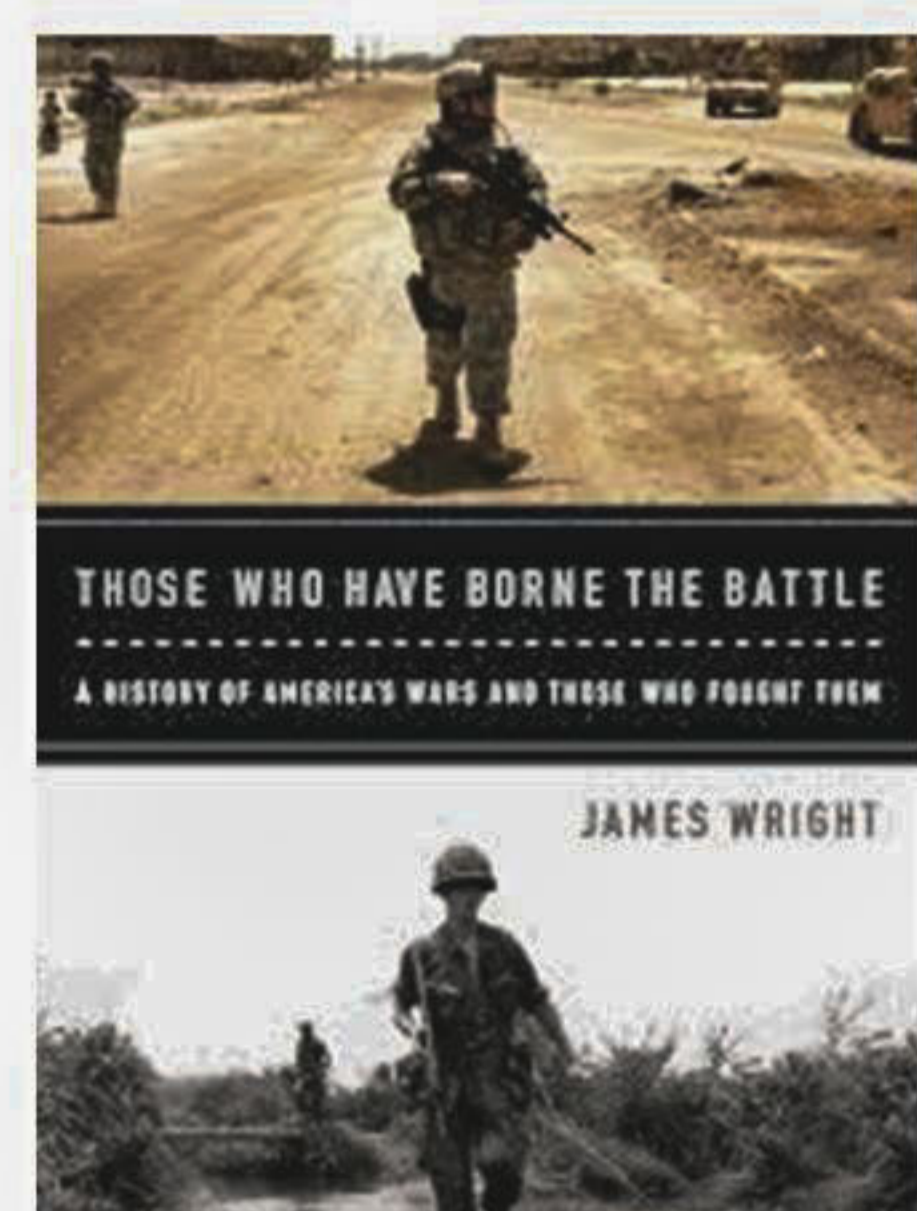
The familiar narrative of the American military experience traces the long, occasionally glorious, always bloody march from Lexington and Concord to Iraq and Afghanistan. *Those Who Have Borne the Battle* amends that account by adding two subjects of acute contemporary relevance: how the United States has raised the forces with which it wages war; and how, in the aftermath of battle, it cares for and remembers those who fought.

James Wright brings to his story unusual qualifications. Raised by working-class parents in Galena, Ill. (the adopted home of Ulysses S. Grant), he enlisted in the Marine Corps at age 17, back when a stint of military service was almost a rite of passage for young men. Upon completing an uneventful tour of duty, he went on to college and then attended graduate school during the Vietnam War, which he ardently opposed. After earning a Ph.D. in history, Wright embarked upon an academic career at Dartmouth. There he remained for 40 years, eventually becoming college president in 1998.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Wright began periodically visiting military hospitals, not standard fare for an Ivy League president. His encounters with severely wounded soldiers and his discomfort with present-day civil-military relations spurred him to write this book. "We pay lip service to our sons and daughters' war," he says, "even if the children of some 99 percent of us are safely at home." With the United States more or less permanently at war, Americans profess unstinting admiration for those serving in uniform. Yet the gap between soldier and society is wider than at any time in our history.

On whom does the nation rely to defend itself? The standard answer, going back to the Revolution, was: "its citizens." A deeply rooted dislike of standing armies and a generous evaluation of the citizen-soldier's fighting prowess sustained this tradition through World War II. The GI's who fought the "Good War" were not professionals. Representing a cross-section of society, they simply wanted to finish the job, go home and get on with their lives.

After World War II, however, Washington concluded that "go home" no



Those Who Have Borne the Battle
A History of America's Wars and Those Who Fought Them
James Wright
PublicAffairs

longer constituted a policy option. The exercise of global leadership and the practice of relying on citizen-soldiers proved incompatible. Before 1940, Wright observes, "Americans mobilized in response to war rather than in expectation of war." After 1945, this reactive approach did not suffice: The United States required forces held in readiness for immediate combat.

If there were any doubts on that score, the Korean War removed them. For Wright, Korea defines "the missing chapter, the absent lesson" of American military history. It also served as a precursor of what was to come. Korea, he writes, was "a presumptive war, one aimed at a presumptive threat, and one with changing goals." War was becoming amorphous undeclared, lacking clear objectives, with victory as such no longer the goal. Americans conscripted to fight such no-win wars disliked them intensely. So too did those watching on the home front.

If Korea sounded the death knell of the citizen-soldier tradition, Vietnam killed it once and for all. Wright repeatedly refers to the events of the Vietnam War as "tragedies," an odd characterization suggesting some sort of cosmic inevitability. In fact, American policymakers chose to fight in Vietnam. They willed the war, which was at the very least a catastrophic blunder and arguably qualifies as a crime. Still, on one essential point Wright is surely correct: As this ill-advised, mismanaged war divided the nation, with substantial numbers of citizens turning against the armed forces, "it was no longer possible to pretend that military service was an obligation of citizenship in which all shared."

Out of the wreckage of Vietnam came the so-called All-Volunteer Force, at first the subject of indifference, then with the passage of time widely acclaimed. In places like Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States still fights ambiguous no-win wars in pursuit of elusive objectives. Yet in contrast to the reaction to Vietnam, the public finds these conflicts tolerable. Not required to serve or to sacrifice (or even to cover the costs incurred), Americans have effectively off-loaded responsibility for national security onto a small warrior elite, whose members, according to Wright, "are embraced as heroes, even as we do not really know them."

Nothing is too good for these heroes when they come home, politicians and pundits alike agree although the prevalence of homelessness, unemployment and post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans belies the rhetoric. Still, as military service has become a matter of personal choice, status, as well as privileges, has accrued to those willing to serve. Back when citizenship included (in theory) a responsibility to contribute to the country's defense, those who served were merely doing their duty. Gratuities offered in return for wartime service tended to be belated and even grudging. During the Great Depression, Bonus Marchers impoverished World War I veterans petitioning for early payment of a promised \$500 bonus learned this the

hard way: In 1932, United States Army regulars under the command of Gen. Douglas MacArthur used tanks, tear gas and bayonets to send them packing. The following year President Franklin Roosevelt let it be known that "no person, because he wore a uniform, must therefore be placed in a special class of beneficiaries."

Any politician expressing such views today would risk being tarred and feathered. On the list of what the nation is said to owe its veterans, reward has taken its place alongside remembrance.

For James Wright, both ends of the arrangement how we constitute our forces and how we honor those who serve contain much that is unseemly and disconcerting. A public disengaged from military service has lost an important check on Washington's inclination to use force, with the result that the troops professed to be held in high regard are repeatedly misused and abused. Meanwhile, the vacuous symbols like bumper stickers and pregame ceremonials that have supplanted substantive engagement between citizens and soldiers invite mockery and derision.

How to remedy this situation is less clear. Wright concedes correctly in my view that a revival of conscription is politically implausible. His alternative approach to reconnecting soldiers and society waging war on a pay-as-you-go basis has considerable merit. "There should be no military action authorized by the United States," he writes, "that does not include income- and corporate-tax surcharges ... sufficient to cover all of the operating costs of the war" and to create "a trust fund to provide for lifetime support for those who serve and sacrifice in the war."

No war without taxes. That sounds like a proposal around which fiscal conservatives and left-leaning proponents of equality could rally. But don't hold your breath.

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