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CONTESTED

# **TERRAIN**

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## **Weapons and Virtues**

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BOOK REVIEWED:

James Fallows, *National Defense*  
New York: Random House, 1981.

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**J**ames Fallows's *National Defense* is a fine polemic, well-argued and well-written. Public discussion is bound to profit from it, especially since Fallows has something in his argument to offend everyone.

Fallows, like Senator Gary Hart, criticizes the defense establishment for "managerialism," including its reliance on complex, highly technological weapons that are costly and too often unreliable, and its neglect of the intangible military virtues—courage, honor, and fraternity—that are the historic foundations of soldierly excellence. The remedy, as far as weapons are concerned, is more "austere" armaments: lighter, simpler, and cheaper; therefore more maneuverable, more serviceable, and more numerous. It is not as easy to prescribe for the military's spiritual crisis, but Fallows contends that a return to conscription would be at least a good beginning.

On the whole, I agree with Fallows, but I find a basic defect in his reasoning. Fallows lays down a standard for military policy that amounts to a paraphrase of Clausewitz: "The only reason a nation raises armies is to defend the interests its policy defines. The only way to judge whether a military establishment is adequate is to ask whether it can sustain the commitments the nation has made." That statement seems to imply that the military is only a means to ends determined by others. In fact, of course, the relationship is trickier than that. "Where there are good arms," Machiavelli wrote, "there must be good laws," meaning that a prince cannot create a good army (for Machiavelli, one made up of public-spirited citizens) without making himself dependent on the people and stimulating their political activity. Such an army, in the not-so-long term, is bound to serve republican, rather than princely, purposes. Fallows's own argument for the draft includes similar considerations, and he recognizes that military means have an important influence on political ends. Since he chooses to imply the contrary, it may be that, like Machiavelli, he intends to beguile us. Fallows means that an "adequate" military is one appropriate to *all* the "commit-

ments" of the United States, foreign and domestic, and especially to our highest commitments, the democratic first principles of the realm.

An assessment of defense policy, then, involves a judgment of ends *and* means; it requires a critique of the political regime as a whole, the reality behind the appearances. Fallows, however, undertakes no such critique. He sticks to the limited terms of his study, and valuable though his work is, it does not address the most serious questions raised by national defense and by his own book.

Fallows is both an ardent advocate and an astute rhetorician, a lion and a fox, and both qualities make him a pragmatist. The cleverness is obvious: pragmatism is a familiar doctrine in America, the hard currency of intellectual respectability, and it is also ideally suited to flatten the "experts" who are Fallows's chief opponents. Fallows argues that the defense managers err because they rely on theory—or, in relation to nuclear strategy, on theology—rather than experience or common sense. Similarly, Fallows regrets that we lack a method for separating "the facts" from the assumptions—ideological, emotional, and intellectual—that "underlie different interpretations of the facts." In all of this, Fallows is trying to present himself as hard-headed and down-to-earth, a practical man beset by doctrinaires: he likens himself to Gulliver in Laputa.

I sympathize with Fallows because there *is* a good deal of Laputa in the defense establishment. Nevertheless, his rather sunny empiricism is more than a little inappropriate to the frightening world modernity has made. For all their bureaucratic tropism and their seemingly mindless addiction to gimmickry, the defense planners are not simply eccentric blunderers. They also make machines that *work* and are capable of enormities. What would Gulliver have made of the Space Shuttle? Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* speaks more truly to us than Swift's eighteenth-century satire: we do not worry about devices and schemes that fail; we are fearful of those that succeed too well.

Fallows's pragmatism, in other words, includes an element of nostalgia and a good deal of sentimentalism. He embraces uncertainty and unpredictability because these limits of knowledge seem to provide some protection against the worst dangers of technology and the cybernetic age. Fallows argues cogently, for example, against those nuclear strategists who warn that unless the United States adds new and elaborate weapons, the Soviet Union may calculate that it can win a nuclear war through a first strike that reduces our capacity to retaliate to tolerable levels. As Fallows observes, nuclear weapons are imprecise, imperfect, and largely untested. No one can be certain, or even very confident, of success in a first strike, and this unpredictability greatly reduces the likelihood of any calculated resort to nuclear war. Terrorism and limited, conventional war are far

more probable threats, he concludes, and they deserve more of our resources and attention.

All of this is true, but oddly unsatisfying. The risk of defeat and the likelihood of devastation have not kept political societies in the past from calculating that war, for all its dangers, was their best alternative. Nuclear weapons enormously increase the odds against war, but they do not rule out the gamble. Unlikely but possible, nuclear war dominates the military stage because it has terrors in proportion to its improbability.

Fallows's position is still more debatable when he appeals to the uncertainty of the future against the projections of the defense establishment. "The only thing resembling a certainty about future military contingencies," Fallows asserts, "is that we are likely to face threats we do not foresee." All long-term commitments are suspect. By the time we can build the Trident submarine or a nuclear carrier, new technologies or new political conditions may have made either or both obsolete. Fallows argues for smaller-scale, more immediately useful weapons where "foresight is less crucial." We need flexibility, "the greatest possible capacity to adapt to whatever the future brings."

There is good sense in this doctrine, but it also rests on a fundamental optimism that is at least questionable in our times. Fallows still seems to believe that there is nothing alarming or dreadful enough about the future to compel us to avoid it. As soon as one admits grim prospects into the argument, Fallows's own evidence turns against him. He observes, for example, that in 1939 no major power "had decided to pursue the weapon that would ultimately prove decisive, the atom bomb," and this, Fallows contends, demonstrates that we cannot hope to predict "the exact nature of military conflict in the 1990s." Yet while the example shows that military planners make major mistakes, it also indicates that the failure to anticipate the future can be fatal. Suppose, for example, that the United States had decided against the Manhattan Project, or that the Germans had begun their nuclear research a bit earlier: would we have been content with "whatever the future brings"? Fallows is right that, in prediction and in all political reasoning, error is *inevitable*. At the same time, his examples suggest that under modern conditions, error is not *affordable* beyond certain narrow limits, and that contradiction is fundamental to contemporary political life.

Like many other analysts of American defense policy, Fallows criticizes planning for the "worst case," a principle that leads the defense establishment to devise "extreme scenarios" and to overestimate Soviet strength, reinforcing the demand for "wonder weapons" to redress the balance. By contrast, he urges that we plan in terms of the likely case, the probable rather than the merely possible, and he ranges himself on the side of reason against morbid fantasy and bureaucratic self-interest.

Since Fallows was born in the late forties, he cannot be expected to be as

sensitive to the risk of being unprepared and underarmed as the generations that experienced the initial defeats of World War II and Korea. Yet even without the impetus of painful memory, Fallows ought to recognize that should we underestimate an enemy again, modern weapons would not give us the chance to recover from our errors. Military technology has changed some of the terms of prudence; since we lack a perfect military science, we feel compelled to assume the worst. Of course, this form of playing it safe entails the risk of an ever-increasing nuclear arsenal. The paradox, however, points to the fact that modern technology takes us beyond the limits of human reason and good will. The project of mastering nature, as Jacques Ellul observed, has led us to the point at which we are mastered by the lunatic logic of our own inventions. We can lessen the force of that terrible truism, but we cannot escape its cold madness without rejecting the goal of domination itself.

Pragmatism, however, is not suited to such a change of direction. It tries to keep the ship afloat, but it trusts the current. Fallows would do better to realize that the defense managers are not mistaken because they engage in theorizing, but because they theorize badly, just as the fault of the nuclear strategists is not that they practice "theology" but that they worship false gods.

**F**allows is at his best in arguing for a return to conscription precisely because his case leads him to his furthest venture into theory, even though that reconnaissance is still too hesitant.

In the first place, Fallows contends that we need the draft for the good of the military. The market reduces military service to a commodity, part of the category of wage labor. Soldiering, however, is not a "job like any other." It involves the willingness to risk, and possibly to sacrifice, one's life, and consequently runs counter to the principles of individualism. Giving up one's life demands devotion to one's friends, to one's country, or to the service itself; it requires seeing the self as part of a whole whose claims have priority. Military service is based on community and collectivity; it is, to that extent, a public or political vocation.

The market, by contrast, appeals to private motives, the interest of the part rather than the good of the whole. This is doubly necessary because, in the marketplace, the military must address manifest goals and desires. It must take Americans as they are, not as they might be, and our existing attitudes—especially our images of work—are dominantly private and self-concerned. In order to make the armed services "attractive," it has been necessary to minimize the conflict between civilian and military modes of life. As Fallows notes, for example, enlisted men today are far more likely to live off post with their families than they were in the past, and whatever the advantages of this change, it weakens the force of

shared experience and unit solidarity that grows out of barracks life.

The negative consequences of the market, Fallows points out, are most apparent among noncommissioned officers. A good NCO is a person of considerable ability who could command better pay and private rewards in civilian life. The armed services attract NCOs of quality by offering them the pleasures of rule and authority, appealing to unmistakably political motives. The privatization of the military, as Fallows comments, reduces the NCO, in any number of ways, from a political boss to something more like a foreman. It is not enough; NCOs are discontented, harder to attract, and harder to keep.

In the same way, the appeal to private motives strengthens the already robust careerism of the officer corps. Not that the volunteer military deserves much of the blame: Fallows recognizes, but underrates, the relation between careerist self-interest and the basic dynamics of American political society. Nevertheless, the volunteer military does tend to legitimate private motives and ambitions. It makes officers less ashamed to regard their troops (and their superiors) as instruments to be used; it makes the striver less of a pariah. Moreover, since the military recruits enlisted personnel with the promise of skills and experience that will lead to upward mobility in civilian life, it can hardly object if officers serve with an eye to possible employment in defense-related industries. If the assembly line is good, the executive suite must be better. The volunteer military, in short, undermines some of the last defenses of the military against the individualism of commercial society.

Fallows is at least as concerned, however, to argue that conscription would contribute to the political society as a whole. Military service, Fallows argues, is a democratic obligation, part of the duty to share the burdens of public life. Compulsion to serve is no less acceptable than the enforced payment of taxes to support the military, and it is more appropriate since market motives are inadequate foundations for military life.

In fact, military service involves more than the duty to pay—in coin or in service—for the “public goods” from which one benefits. That argument, which Fallows uses in answering libertarians, concedes far too much to the utilitarian notion that government, though different, is *analogous* to the market in delivering “goods and services” to basically passive, consuming citizens.

To serve in the military is to share in rule, albeit in a small way, and the duty to do so is entailed by citizenship as magistracy, as a form of ruling. Those who participate in making life and death decisions have a responsibility for what they decide. Citizens cannot be rightly insulated from the grimy or murderous human consequences of political decision because such protection debases deliberation and judgment, making it too easy for citizens to posture or to be frivolous about public matters. Suburban whites, given the volunteer military, can be almost as cavalier about war and peace as they are about the poor; democratic citizenship

should not allow us to be carefree about either.

Of course, only a minority of citizens will be in the military at any given time. As Fallows observes, however, even the memory of past service may add an indispensable dimension to public debate: "How rich and full a feeling for public education would the members of our school boards have if all of them had gone to private schools?" More important, those of us who can no longer, or cannot yet, serve can still be personally involved through the participation of those whom we care about.

That, as Fallows recognizes, is the best answer to those who fear that the draft would promote "adventurism." Conscription makes the public, and especially its elites, pay some part of the human price of bellicosity. (Middle-class whites would still pay too little, of course, since they and theirs would be the least likely to serve in the front lines, but that is no argument for making them *wholly* exempt.) Public involvement in military life does not rule out military adventures, but it does make criticism of such excursions far more likely. After all, the anti-war movement only became conflagrant during Vietnam after Johnson ended the deferment of college students. The volunteer army was, to a very considerable extent, intended to defuse protest against the war, and whatever the motives of its proponents, it certainly achieved that result. As Fallows argues, without the draft, American intervention in Vietnam might have cost more money, but it would have been less opposed, and for a decisionmaker, the two considerations may balance out. In fact, since bureaucracies fear criticism more than cost, a volunteer army probably makes intervention easier. The movement opposing American policy in El Salvador profits from the memory of the pain of Vietnam, but that remembrance is fading. We are likely to need other protections, and soon.

Fallows has even less difficulty answering the objection that conscription, while equalitarian in theory, discriminates in practice because only a fraction of any age cohort is actually required to serve. His response takes two forms: he prescribes a draft with no exemptions except the "truly disabled," and he observes that although conscription would take only a fraction of those eligible at first, the proportion serving would grow considerably in the middle and late eighties when there will be fewer young people from whom to choose.

Fallows's exemption-free draft appeals to me, but politically it is no sure thing, to say the least. Fairness ought to make Fallows remark that the strongest argument for conscription is derived from the prohibitive cost of trying to recruit an army from a smaller and smaller group of young Americans. The drive to conscript will gain its force from the practical necessities of the defense bureaucracy, not the democratic norms to which Fallows appeals.

Yet when that is conceded, the democratic case for conscription remains. In fact, Fallows rather understates his brief. He emphasizes the need to bring de-

mocracy *into* the military; he slights the possible contribution of military service *to* democracy.

Aristotle argued that there is a likeness between an army and a democracy, a proposition that deserves some attention. In an aristocracy, since ruling is the business of the elite, its private life and its public vision tend to coincide. It is, to that extent, like the traditional general who, from his vantage point, could see the army as a whole. The eye and the intellect perceive the same object. In other words, it is relatively easy for rulers in an aristocratic regime to follow their private impulses, or to presume that duty and interest coincide. (Of course, elites are often blind to political reality, but that is a comment on the nature of their regimes, not on the task of ruling such a political society on its own terms.) It is even more appropriate for subjects to pursue their private interests since they have no public obligations; one aristocratic survival in the American military is the legal fiction that only officers are "responsible."

In a democracy, by contrast, a citizen must apprehend the whole *without* actually seeing it. Even if citizens bear their share of ruling, they are only involved in public life for a fraction of their lives. Most citizens spend most of their time, even in participant polities, in private and parochial pursuits only distantly related to the political order. Nevertheless, citizens must make decisions about the good of the whole. This requires them to govern their private feelings and interests in the service of the collective. Democratic theorists, until quite recently, favored small states because, their feeling and the common good stand close together; it is easy to understand and experience what benefits us all. In such states, the governance of feeling can be less severe than it is in large states. Even in the *polis*, however, democracy requires sternness on behalf of the common good. Democratic citizens, especially in large and acquisitive states like our own, need to learn discipline and devotion, the ability to subordinate private feeling and immediate interest to the good of an unseen whole. In this sense, military service teaches (or can teach, at any rate) something essential in the curriculum of civic education.

Obviously, this is irrelevant to the intent of the armed services, which is only to train soldiers who will fight well, but this does not change the effect. Military service is not the only school of discipline, nor is its instruction enough to make a citizen. A democracy, however, cannot dispense with the teaching, and it had better be sure of its "moral alternative" before it abandons the instruction of military service.

Fallows recognizes all this, at least implicitly. One of his informants spoke directly to the point: in his experience, military service taught "the need to share, the need to follow orders" and encouraged a nonelitist sort of "natural leadership." The idea of a leadership that is not "elitist" sounded paradoxical to him, but the notion is close to the meaning of civic duty. Fallows himself admires the

military virtues because he sees how much they oppose the competitive individualism of American private life. As Fallows maintains, a great many Americans might have had little inkling how much they resented and found wanting in everyday life without the exposure, in the military, to different values and institutions. Discontent with American society, so often the unexpected consequence of military service, led some soldiers to stay in the military. Many more, however, brought those dissatisfactions back into civil life. Through conscription, a great many Americans were “forced to be free” of the doctrines and conceits of liberal society. At the same time, military corporatism is a good deal less threatening when taught to soldiers imbued with the creed of liberal society.

In fact, the strongest argument against the position I have been developing turns on the conflict between liberalism and military virtue. Liberalism contends that the classical ideal of citizenship, however admirable, is inapplicable in modern polities. Given the size and power of contemporary political orders, liberalism—the plural factions and cautious self-interest of Madison’s vision—is the best we can do, the only real alternative to totalitarianism. If so, then military virtue is dangerous *because* it encourages civic virtue, and so doing, generates demands that a liberal society cannot meet.

Obviously, Fallows does not agree with this view. He does, however, obscure or underestimate the antipathy between liberal doctrine and military value. Consequently, he underrates the extent to which the policies of which he complains are not mistakes but the logical outgrowths of a liberal regime.

**B**egin with a truism: liberal political philosophy does not admire soldiers. Life, liberty, and property, the liberal trinity, is virtually the antithesis of honor, duty, and country. The first premise of liberalism—that human beings seek, above all else, to preserve themselves and especially to avoid violent death—involves the consequence that military life is unnatural and aberrant, to be explained in terms of superstition or grandiose irrationality.

At best, liberalism classified military virtue as a survival from the dark past, useful only at the fringes of society and dangerous inside it. Hobbes grouped it with the revolutionary schemes of “needy men and hardy, not contented with their present condition” among the enemies of civil order, “for there is no honour Military but by warre, nor any such hope to mend an ill game as by causing a new shuffle.” Military excellence, consequently, threatens and corrupts political society, and the military itself is tolerable only if it is thoroughly subordinated. Hence, liberalism made obedience to orders, rather than honor, the highest norm of military life. Locke, that partisan of liberty, told soldiers to march to the cannon’s mouth if so commanded, and liberal theory agreed, until the twentieth century caused us to wonder if obedience was after all a sufficient grace.

Liberalism is warlike, but its chosen enemy is nature, not nations. Liberal theorists hoped that war between states would disappear with the progress of enlightenment and modern institutions, yielding to "constructive competition." Alike in this, liberalism and Marxism envisioned a movement from military to industrial forms of society. The military, like the political, would gradually disappear as coercion yielded to administrative manipulation.

Even if liberals had admired military virtue, moreover, they would have sought to reduce our reliance on it. Fallows faults worst-case planning, but liberal political theory—and with it, a good part of American political culture—is based on providing for the extreme case. Ancient political theory began with the ordinary case, with human beings in political society. Liberal thought, by contrast, began with isolated human beings in a "state of nature," an extreme scenario by any standard, and insisted on constructing public order on the worst-case assumption of radically private, self-interested human beings.

It did so, other reasons aside, because any other assumption seemed too fragile a foundation for public peace. Public spirit and political virtue, in the liberal view, are chancy at best and, fundamentally, are profoundly unnatural. Human beings, at bottom, are temperamentally lawless. Reliable public order cannot rest on human judgment and character. It must be founded on impersonal rules and mechanisms like the market which can transform private motives into public benefits. Order and the common good, in these terms, are products of the system, not qualities of the soul. Managerialism, consequently, is not some intellectual aberration: it is the liberal science of rule. The great faults which Fallows finds in managerialism—worst-case planning, recruiting a military on the basis of private motives, the devotion to technology—are rooted in the foundations of our political culture.

In one sense, modern military managerialism *does* represent a departure from historic liberalism. It has abandoned the belief that war will be ameliorated or disappear and the conviction that, in the meantime, it can be banished to the periphery of political society. Managerial liberalism assumes that war will be relatively permanent and pervasive feature of politics. Given that premise, it cannot quarantine the military virtues; it must dispense with them.

Since the military virtues really are at odds with the nostrums of liberal society, the managerialists are right, given their assumptions. Liberal political society can survive contemporary military conditions only if it can reduce the military back to the peripheral status it occupied during most of the nineteenth century or if it can conduct military affairs without military virtue. Fallows provides a powerful argument that it can do neither, with which I agree. If he is correct, however, his position calls for a political transformation more extreme than anything he has ventured to suggest.

The American military, after all, was never a warrior caste. Inevitably, it

has reflected a good deal of the bourgeois society in which it is embedded and on which it depends for soldiers and sustenance. The service academies seek to include a code of honor, but their classrooms teach engineering. The military has a certain resistance to contagion, but it has never been immune to the moral ailments of political society.

MacArthur's saying, "in war, there is no substitute for victory" is not substantially different from Jim Fiske's happy discovery, after a financial scandal, that "nothing is lost, save honor." What matters is winning, and although we prefer to win by honorable means, we will use dishonorable ones when necessary. There are time when winning *is* a supreme goal—in war against the Nazis, for example—because one's enemy is supremely evil, but such conflicts are the exception, not the rule. The American military, however, adopted the ethic of success because liberalism has little respect for losers, and it is difficult for Americans to accept the truth that there are victories which are hurtful and defeats which are honorable. After all, such terms speak of what benefits the soul and not the body, a language foreign to liberalism and to modernity. Yet lost causes abound in the military pantheon: even Americans, for example, admire Lee.

The traditional side of our culture, especially religion, teaches us to value the soul; Christianity, for all its hatred for war, teaches the heart of the soldier's honor—that it is noble to lay down one's life for one's friends. That aspect of our life is growing weaker, and with its decline, Fallows's hopes for the "intangibles" may go aglimmering.

Our appreciation for heroism, for instance, shows a decline in quality. We regard the hostages in Iran as "heroes," I suppose, because they endured captivity and threat without suffering moral collapse. By that measure, however, virtually every soldier in our past wars ranks as a hero, and I wonder whether either Gandhi or Dr. King would have been quite so compliant with his captors. Similarly, President Reagan informed us in his inaugural address that the American who goes to work every day is a hero, an unconsciously revealing image of work in America, but not an exacting standard of valor.

Plato had Socrates maintain that Athenians could do no better than to send their children to Protagoras, who taught that courage was a form of enlighthened self-interest. Plato was not endorsing Protagoras's ignoble view; he was passing judgment on Athenians, who could, presumably, do *worse* than Protagoras, but not better. American democracy may be in no better state than its ancient predecessor: perhaps managerial liberalism is the best that we can do.

If America can do better, it will not be sufficient to reform the military, although that might be a beginning. In the end, we will have to reform ourselves.