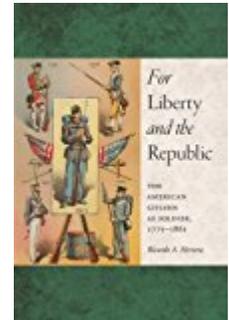


Ricardo A. Herrera. *For Liberty and the Republic: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861.* New York: New York University Press, 2015. 272 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-1994-2.



Reviewed by Kevin Vanzant

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In *For Liberty and the Republic: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861*, Ricardo A. Herrera examines war in a free society through the experience of the citizen-soldier. Herrera takes up this inquiry from the American Revolution to the Civil War, covering multiple North American wars and including countless soldiers, many of whom volunteered for service during this period, considering themselves to be citizens first and soldiers second. Herrera argues that there was a close link between society and those who served in the military. During this time, American soldiers took ideas from their experience in a republican society and looked to apply them to their military service; they were, in Herrera's words, the "military component of American republicanism" (p. 26). A better understanding of the American soldier from this period then is also a better understanding of American society itself. The two were inextricably connected. You cannot fully understand one, Herrera maintains, without the other.

For this task, Herrera employs ideology. Citing the historian Michal Jan Rozbicki, Herrera sees

ideology as a "set of ideas" that makes "a sensible and coherent order out of the myriad of differing and often contradictory ingredients that make up people's experience" (p. 25). Ideology gives order, in other words, to human experiences too complex to be understood on their own terms alone. A soldier, among other things, leaves his family, risks his life, and then, potentially, is asked to take the life of another human being. No lack of complexity here, so soldiers inevitably are going to need some ideological framework to make sense of their actions. For Herrera, the dominant ideology for the soldier during this period, as was the case with American society at large, was republicanism. It provided soldiers with a way to understand what they were doing from year to year and war to war, amounting in Herrera's view to a "multigenerational *mentalité*" of the American soldier (p. 24).

Herrera identifies five prominent threads of republicanism and dedicates a chapter to each. Chapter 1 ("virtue") looks at the mainstay republican themes of self-interest and the common good.

For many American soldiers, war was a proving ground for their virtues. Were they willing to sacrifice their lives for something greater? Many soldiers, as demonstrated repeatedly in their personal correspondence, saw their service in exactly these terms. Chapter 2 (“legitimacy”) observes that many soldiers viewed their service conservatively as defensive actions for freedoms they already had and dared not lose. This chapter also notes at the same time the opposite motivation among marginalized groups, who sought a change to their social status through their military service. Anything but conservative, they welcomed the opportunity to push social change. Chapter 3 (“self-governance”) interprets the frequently reported shortcomings of the American soldier (a lack of discipline and deference, among others) as evidence of individuals who had imbibed the language of freedom and predictably resisted the “self-abnegation demanded by military discipline” (p. 87). Chapter 4 (“God’s will and national mission”) overlaps with chapter 1 a good bit, as soldiers again saw their service as part of something bigger, in this case endowing it with a religious purpose. Their republican freedoms rightfully belonged to everyone and God supported the extension of those rights across the globe, even through conquest if necessary. In this chapter, Herrera recognizes the increasingly racial connotations of this imperial mission as it developed during the nineteenth century. In the final chapter (“glory, honor, and fame”), Herrera focuses on the admitted pursuit of personal glory among many soldiers, which reeked of self-interest at first glance, making it quite suspect within a republican ideology. He demonstrates, however, that soldiers carved out in their military service an exception to the rule, since in this case the greater good was so well served by these particular “selfish” ambitions.

For Liberty and the Republic is impressively researched. Herrera reviews countless personal writings of soldiers. His paragraphs, more often than not, are full of quotations from these

sources, allowing the voice of the soldier to come through clearly and effectively. There can be little doubt that republican principles were everywhere in the personal writings of American soldiers, but Herrera’s command of the sources and the way he uses them does create some problems at times. He fills his paragraphs with short quotations but never presents any of these sources in their entirety. As a result, his argument decides what we learn about these sources, and at times, his argument runs the risk of being too conclusive for its own good.

Was it always a regression to a republican norm, for instance? Herrera acknowledges the existence of some dissent in his sources but does not develop these tensions adequately. He quotes one soldier, for instance, who disapproved of some tactics by army recruiters that went beyond a call to virtue in order to “get up the volunteer excitement” (p. 39). It seems, for one recruiter at least, virtue was not a sufficient motivator and other human attributes, for logistical reasons if nothing else, had to be appealed to. What were they, one wonders, and was this an isolated example? In the 1650s in England, for instance, commonwealth thinkers faced the same problem: virtue alone did not raise armies and win wars anymore. As a result, they began rethinking republicanism’s harsh indictment of self-interest, ultimately approaching an ideology akin to possessive individualism and anticipating Bernard Mandeville’s eighteenth-century *Fable of the Bees* (1714).[1] Was there none of this in the soldiers’ writings under examination here? Herrera also alerts the reader to some of the soldiers’ frustrations about a lack of civilian support. One complained, with a sarcastic tone: “we poor Dogs shall retire with broken Constitutions and Empty purses” because of the “Ingratitude” among their “*Virtuous* countrymen” (p. 43). Another soldier went even further complaining of “the *Slavery* of American soldiery” (pp. 48-49). I could not help here but think of Henry V’s “St. Crispin’s speech” and its reference to all the “gentlemen in England now a-bed” who would

think themselves “accursed” for sitting out the battle. That reaction is one possibility, of course. If you are the one making all the hard sacrifices, as soldiers often are in war, then you may well feel like a hero, to be sure. But, if house of the person who is sitting out the battle is really big and that bed is really nice, it is also possible for the soldier to feel less like a hero and more like a fool. Herrera points out that in some cases soldiers were paid so little that it actually bolstered their claims to virtue because it proved that they could not possibly be in it for the money. Was there not more in these letters along the lines of the Civil War mantra: “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight?” Did this resentment never bubble over and cause soldiers at times to cast a critical eye toward some of the tenets of republicanism? If it were in fact, as Herrera maintains, always a wholehearted return to republicanism for the American soldier, then the publication of a few documents in their entirety would have been helpful additions. Without it, the reader is left to wonder if some of these possible fissures are being underplayed to emphasize the book’s central argument.

It is striking then, given the control Herrera exercises over his sources, how much of the quotations that he supplies are in themselves contradictory, or at least, non-determinative. For example, he writes a good bit about the back and forth between military volunteers (the citizen-soldiers) and army regulars. The volunteers, from their perspective, found the quick obedience of regulars distasteful and not sufficiently republican. The regulars responded in kind with their own republican counterattack. To them, the militiamen were “unduly concerned about their individual rights” and thereby the ones short on patriotism (p. 20). Their liberty loving mien was selfish and signaled an unwillingness to sacrifice for their communities. The regulars, from this perspective, were the real republicans. Or, for a second example, take the splintering of the country during the Civil War. Did either the South or the North identify more with republicanism than the other? Not

at all, as it turns out. Confederate soldiers, as Herrera notes, “saw themselves as loyal republicans” just as much as Union soldiers. Or, finally, take Herrera’s second chapter. He finds evidence that some soldiers saw themselves as “agents of conservatism” while others looked instead to be brokers of change and “of creation” (p. 84). Louisiana’s Native Guard, for instance, the city’s free-black militia, tried to take up arms for the Confederacy. They were turned away. A clear point of conflict here, it seems, in what the war meant to these two groups, but in the book, they are both presented as exemplars of republican values. If everyone, it seems, is a republican, then what exactly can republicanism tell us? In this, Herrera seems to be offering comfort to the many critics of the term, who see in its omnipresent applicability limited analytical value, rather than supporting his own argument that republicanism, in this case, does still provide a “coherent organizational framework” worth considering (p. 6).

Establishing the presence of a republican ideology in the writings of so many American soldiers has merit, though, however broad. Herrera establishes in his study that republicanism supplied the categories of thought for innumerable soldiers during this time period. When soldiers wrote, for instance, that they were putting aside self-interest for the sake of the common good, they were speaking a national language. The individuals under review here, the American citizens most willing to take up arms, were very ready to fight for an abstraction. That was what being a patriot meant in America during this time to countless American soldiers. In fact, by 1861, the one thing that all American soldiers could agree on, Herrera tells us, is that there was nothing more American than “killing for the sake of ideals” (p. 166). For all its other ambiguities, republicanism offers little leeway on this point. Republicanism gets people to fight, it turns out, more than it determines what exactly they are fighting for. Much of Herrera’s book confronts the difficulty that a republican ethos could pose for military partici-

pation and discipline, which is certainly worth noting and would potentially apply more in some ways to the individuals who were not featured in this study and who did not serve. But for those who Herrera does focus on, the people who did fight and the fervent republicanism that spurred them on, the book actually leaves the reader with a different question. As republicans, they were more than ready to fight; it was getting them to know when to stop that may well have been the trickier proposition.

Note

[1]. Steve Pincus, "Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth," *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 705-736.

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