Courage of a Cow:  
The Politics of Courage and Asymmetrical Warfare

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Introduction
In Tim O’Brien’s book If I Die in a Combat Zone he relates the following incident:

“One day Alpha Company was strung out in a long line, walking from one village near Pinkville to another. Some boys were herding cows in a free-fire zone. They were not supposed to be there; legal targets for our machine guns and M-16’s. We fired at them, boys and cows together, the whole company, or nearly all of it, like target practice at Fort Lewis. The boys escaped, but one cow stood its ground. Bullets struck its flanks, exploding globs of flesh, boring into its belly. The cow stood parallel to the soldiers, a wonderful profile. It looked away, in a single direction, and it did not move. I did not shoot, but I did endure, without protest, except to ask the man in front of me why he was shooting and smiling.”

Was this cow courageous? Was O’Brien’s character courageous in his endurance, but lack of protest? I want to explore this image as a metaphor for the politics of courage in the asymmetrical conflicts that have come to dominate contemporary warfare. By the politics of courage (a term borrowed from William Ian Miller’s The Mystery of Courage), I mean the way in which the virtue of courage is recognized and attributed to certain individuals by the larger society. This may come through official state recognition (medal, awards) or through more informal forms of approbation and status. Courage is a virtue that carries high social and political cache, but as the nature of warfare evolves one must ask how that affects what is attributed as courage in war and the ramifications for the politics of courage in relation to these conflicts.

William Ian Miller describes the ‘courage of dishing it out and the courage of taking it’ which also might be understood in terms of classical or offensive courage and defensive courage. While what I term classical courage, the courage of the charge (offensive courage) tends to dominate conventional warfare, the courage of endurance, perseverance (defensive courage) has become the dominant model of courage in asymmetrical conflicts like Vietnam and Iraq. My analysis will follow three lines of thought. First, I will examine how the attribute of courage is conferred in the context of asymmetrical war, focusing on the nature of the danger and risk that troops face. Connected to the changed nature of danger and risk posed by asymmetrical warfare is the
effect that a small, all volunteer force has on the politics of courage, especially when the public is far removed from the experience of war. Second, I apply Miller’s insight that the mechanization of warfare alters the traditional narrative of courage to asymmetrical warfare, showing how the narrative has changed to reflect the courage of endurance as the dominant narrative. Third, I look at the phenomenon of rescuing one’s own soldiers (especially by medical personnel) as a reflection of the change of the courage narrative in the politics of courage. No longer is courage understood primarily in terms of overcoming and facing the enemy, but rather as enduring the challenge of warfare and protecting one’s own soldiers.

I.

In the **Mystery of Courage** William Ian Miller takes up the question of how courage is defined and conferred upon individuals by society, using the term ‘politics of courage.’ This term denotes the fact that people ‘care about it desperately’, that it still ranks with people on a moral level; those who exhibit courage are objects of gratitude, awe, pride via official recognition like medals, awards (coveted as having value of various kinds) and the unofficial but powerful approbation by the community. One can look to the political and social capital given to figures like John F. Kennedy, John McCain and Audie Murphy on the basis of their wartime actions – assessed as courageous by their society. On the negative side of the ledger, one can look to the so called ‘swift boating’ of John Kerry during the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign to see that people do care about courage and recognize its cache.

Many have an interest in defining courage in their own terms and to promote their own agendas. One can note how Plato in his dialogue *Laches* seems to want to define courage in terms of wisdom, with Socrates being the paragon of courage. This stems from a desire to move the discussion of this virtue away from its traditional martial associations and definitions toward requiring deliberation and correct knowledge (wisdom). If certain kinds of vulgar, arguably rash or violent actions (beneficial in war, but not conducive to peaceful, civilian society) are deemed courageous, these actions will be encouraged and even socially condoned. However, the reality is that courage in war
does not often leave room for the kind of deliberation that philosophers think is essential. The concern about vulgarity, rashness and violence is part of the politics of courage, such that these actions will be viewed as less virtuous than an action that comes out of deliberative courage, precisely because of these concerns about the ramifications of the definition of courageous action.

Miller highlights the example of Aristodemus, the Spartan who was sent behind the lines by Leonidas at Thermopylae on account of an eye infection and failed to fight. Despite this, the Spartans viewed him as a coward even though he performed heroically at the Battle of Plataea a few years later. What accounts for this? On a philosophical analysis (courage as wisdom) he was arguably courageous in that he was wise to stay behind, given his illness, the situation and the odds faced by the Spartans at Thermopylae. However, relative to the warrior context of Sparta, and in light of the fact that another soldier in the same straits went back and fought with his comrades, Aristodemus was viewed as coward – worse than living dead in Spartan society. Once viewed in this manner, this reputation followed him for his life and was not changed by his later ‘courageous’ acts. This example raises compelling questions about how courage is defined, conferred and how it generates its social, political and moral power.

Miller argues that there must be danger, risk or something that it is reasonable to fear, not just an obstacle to overcome. In addition, society must appreciate that it is dangerous risk; in other words it must be publicly discernable. Courage is too valuable to award to simply marshalling will at any task; there must be danger and hardship which is publicly discernable and properly appreciated in that context. Given this definition, one must ask: What does courage mean in contemporary warfare? How does the politics of courage work given the nature of contemporary, largely asymmetrical warfare where the enemy is unclear, where the threat and what is to be feared are also unclear. If the enemy to be faced, the threat, is unclear, how does the public discern the danger involved and to what extent it is reasonable to fear that danger? This difficult assessment also occurs against the backdrop of what the public can discern, namely that soldiers in contemporary conflicts give up family intimacy, the benefits of a consumer lifestyle, the luxuries of the home front and risk injury and death (even if by historical standards the risks of these are comparatively low). It may be that the public discernment is that being courageous is to
be understood in terms of these sacrifices and risks rather than the dangers and risks associated with combat.

Further, the question of how the average civilian ‘knows’ or ‘discerns’ the above is a serious one. Soldiers feel that there is a limit to what outsiders (civilians in the polity) can understand since they are not sharing the risks of war.⁹ Civilians agree, and arguably (despite the media coverage) know less, since fewer have direct experience with people in the military or warfare themselves. Therefore, they both leave the discernment to be done elsewhere, or give everyone the benefit of the doubt and personify all serving as heroes and therefore worthy of the title ‘courageous’ in virtue of the fact that they have endured the experience (regardless of performance). This is reflected in the trend in media coverage of returning soldiers and sailors to all be given the courageous hero’s welcome, simply in virtue of surviving and enduring warfare. The mantra is ‘welcome home a hero’, as reflected in an official speech by Secretary of Interior Dirk Kempthorne in 2007, “Soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines who answer the call of duty and follow their orders, always {emphasis mine} deserve a hero’s welcome home.”⁹vi

This ‘welcome home a hero’ media coverage of troop homecomings, ostensibly intended not to repeat the Vietnam mistake of blaming the troops for an unpopular war, can be contrasted with the media blackout of the returning coffins in both the First Gulf War and in the current Iraq conflict. This contrast raises some interesting issues for the politics of courage. While there is great fanfare, speeches and public acclamation (social and political cache as discussed above) for all returning troops, irrespective of their performance or proximity and participation in combat, silence and official denial (represented by the lack of public recognition or honoring at the time of their return) greets those who arguably demonstrated their courage by making the ultimate sacrifice for their country. In other cultures and past conflicts, the dead would receive special kinds of honor, in recognition of their assumed courage. The returning live troops did not necessarily partake in these special honors, even though they were still honored and acclaimed, especially those that performed in ways consistent with the societal notions of courage. Based upon this, one can reasonably conclude the following: in contemporary, asymmetrical conflicts it is not the traditional courageous actions that are deemed worthy of reward and award, but simply the act of endurance and survival. It is this that becomes
to be viewed as the new standard of courage. Anything above and beyond this is supererogatory.

This connects to a concern that George Orwell raises for the politics of courage: Is it really courage if you have a support group, even if it is smaller than the majority? Is one really courageous if one has colleagues in the same boat to share the risks and dangers? Orwell thinks that this is not sufficient for moral courage, which is his primary concern, but these questions have important ramifications in the military context, especially in terms of how one awards and rewards courage. If one looks at the citations and speeches surrounded the recent Medal of Honor winners (the highest military honor bestowed in the United States), one can see how actions that might once have been viewed as simply courageous and to be expected of a soldier are now viewed as above and beyond social expectations of courage. “The Medal of Honor is awarded for an act of such courage that no one could rightly be expected to undertake it.”

The citation for Medal of Honor recipient Petty Officer Michael Anthony Monsoor describes how Monsoor fell on a grenade to save two of his colleagues, despite the fact that he could have escaped without injury (a fact stressed both in the citation and in President Bush’s speech), “…instantly and without regard for his own safety, he threw himself on the grenade…”

Given the above issues, what then happens to traditional, offensive courage? As seen above, this kind of courage then becomes supererogatory rather than (as in the Spartan context) expected. Nick Cademartori, US Army recalling an incident where he administered aid to a comrade in Iraq observes, “My command from the highest to lowest is telling me ‘good job’ and talking about an award (for me) and all I can think if that I fucked up somewhere and that he is paying. I don’t know exactly, but I am sure I did, I am not all right. But I’m not gone either, I’m still here. I’m not whole yet…but I’m not shattered. I want things simple, where I go out and fight. Fight back against this…” Note how he is being acclaimed as courageous, but he does not see himself in this way and in fact expresses frustration with the situation and a desire for a more conventional combat narrative.
II.

To look at how asymmetrical warfare shapes and has changed the traditional narrative of courage, it is important to start with the traditional narrative. In this traditional narrative, one might imagine charging the machine gun nest, leading ones soldiers going over the top of a trench, Henry V leading his men into combat after his rousing St. Crispin’s Day speech, soldiers and sailors taking the beaches at Normandy and Omaha. Miller argues that courageous action in the traditional narrative brings about a climax, resolves something (usually in a beneficial way) by turning the tide of war, raising morale, saving a life at a critical juncture etc.xi

But as war become mechanized, Miller observes, war became too big, too impersonal and the narrative of the charge was replaced with a narrative of disillusionment, exhaustion, depletion, decay as the new narrative of courage. One World War I soldier reflects his desire, “To be out of this present, ever present, eternally present misery, this stinking world of sticky, trickling earth ceilinged by a strip of threatening sky.”xii Another observer reflecting on the impersonality of The War notes, “…The War that has never ended, War as the continued experience of twentieth century man” xiii In World War II, J. Glenn Gray makes numerous observations about the machine of war and how the mechanization of warfare moved his experience of war from focused on the individual (and individual agency and responsibility) to being a member of the machine, “All humanity had eroded from those faces, so it seemed and we were confronted by deadly, efficient robots who were controlled by a powerful, inhuman will….Machines cannot respond; they can only perform…”xiv

I would build on Miller’s argument by observing that a similar insight applies to asymmetrical war in that it carries some of the impersonality and irrationality that Miller claims for larger scale, mechanized, conventional wars. At this juncture, a more precise definition of asymmetrical warfare is in order. Typically, asymmetrical war is defined as conflict between two forces of disproportionate force, but can also apply to certain kinds of strategies used by weaker opponents to maximize effectiveness against a stronger opponent, applying to guerilla warfare, insurgency, or terrorism. The US military’s current definition is as follows: “…adversaries are likely to attempt to circumvent or
undermine strengths while exploiting its weaknesses, using methods that differ significantly from the usual mode of operations."\textsuperscript{xv} A recent Joint Staff definition argues that asymmetric warfare consists of "...unanticipated or non-traditional approaches to circumvent or undermine an adversary's strengths while exploiting his vulnerabilities through unexpected technologies or innovative means."\textsuperscript{xvi}

Asymmetrical war in the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century were/are characterized by a focus on attrition, an unclear or unseen enemy with an unseen or unclear endgame where military dominance is 1) fleeting and 2) even if established does not necessarily resolve the issue, provide progress or decisively end the conflict. The longer the war goes on, and asymmetrical conflicts, like the large mechanized conflicts in World War I and World War II tend to last a comparatively long time (Vietnam over 10 years, Iraq five, going on six years), the more the offensive narrative of courage erodes into a narrative of courage as endurance.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Since courage can no longer be about the charge, enduring and preserving become central. Revisiting the Tim O’Brien story about the cow, we see an analogy being made between the cow’s endurance and O’Brien’s endurance in the face of the violence. Is the cow courageous in the sense of the courage of endurance, as the other animals and the boys run way? O’Brien argues that this is not courageous, that ‘cows are stupid’.\textsuperscript{xviii} He argues that courage requires wisdom, but he also makes the case that the conditions in Vietnam did not make much room for courage; conditions were set for just enduring it, thinking about it as little as possible and getting through one’s tour.

If this is true, I would claim we can in fact see the cow (and O’Brien) as a metaphor for courage in contemporary warfare, the courage of endurance, the courage of taking it in several ways. First, it terms of the way combat itself is altered, James Pell, a Marine in Fallujah observes, “The number one rule in the city is never expose soft flesh to the enemy when you don’t have to….Instead bring in the M1 Abrams main gun or better yet a D-9 armored bulldozer and level the house – insurgents and all.”\textsuperscript{xix} Note the difference between this and the conventional narrative of the charge, the courage of dishing it out; in fact, the soldier is not dishing it out at all, but is rather relying on the shield of technology to do the dishing out and he is simply there, like the cow, watching and enduring.
Second, one notes a theme of ‘don’t risk if you don’t have to’ which in the following can be seen in terms of a certain reluctance to killing, despite the fact that killing is conventionally viewed as normal, necessary and justified in warfare. “The son of a bitch was going to make him shoot. Price hated the man at that moment. He wanted the man to die for the sin of forcing Price to kill him…” Rather than seeing this simply in terms of an aversion to killing (which one could argue is a feature of all combat, given how humans are typically socialized not to kill), I would argue that killing reflects a certain kind of risk, of making oneself vulnerable that the previous two quotes show a definite avoidance of. If one is going to endure and survive, it makes sense to take as few risks as possible. In the story, O Brien, despite his misgivings, takes the path of least risk, the path of least resistance.

Third, in observing another soldier facing injury and death Major Paul Danielson, MD says, “I was impressed by his calm. If my severed arm was hanging by a sinew, I would have been screaming my head off and crying like a baby. Not him. No tears in his eyes, and only a grunt here and there as we adjusted his tourniquet. He was 100 percent warrior” What is important here is how ‘warriorness’ is defined, not in terms of brave, courageous actions facing the enemy, but his endurance, his taking it in the face of the new ‘enemy’ of injury, pain and possible death.

Another image from the Iraq war reflects a different aspect of the courage of endurance, of taking it. Mark Partridge Miner relates the follow incident involving an Iraqi woman, who sought out American troops and volunteered crucial information,

“What amazes me is the courage that the …woman showed. The information she gave us has since been verified by the proper authorities….The risk she is subjecting herself to us a brutal and miserable death. Without ever having experienced the pleasures of freedom without a tangible example of common decency…a gauge to base right and wrong on, she has somehow managed to overcoming her incomprehensible fears and pressures and do what is right….For the rest of my life, when I think I have it rough or am put in a situation where doing the right thing seems difficult, I’ll think back to yesterday afternoon and the humble Iraqi woman who showed me what courage was…”

While the traditional courage narratives tends to focus on physical (male) acts of courage, endurance is not just physical. Military historian John Keegan sees battle as a moral contest, so war is really a matter of undermining your enemy’s courage If war and
battle is a *moral* contest, then this opens up courage to the non-warrior (non-male) groups like women, slaves and children.

This incident does not necessarily fit the traditional narrative of courage: the Iraqi woman demonstrates humility and fear, where the traditional warrior is supposed to show confidence and overcome fear; she is a low member of society with little status and less power, unlike the traditional warrior whose uniform, weapon and traveling companions accord power and status. Like the cow and like O’Brien in the story, her course of action is unwise and lacked philosophical prudence. It would have been much wiser for her to go on about her business, not to seek out these soldiers, not to share this information and risk her life in such a ‘foolish’ manner. And yet, the ‘traditional warrior’ in the story, sees her act as one of profound courage – one even beyond what he sees himself of being capable.

**III.**

Another aspect of the change in the narrative about courage is the exaltation of the phenomenon of rescue in contemporary conflicts. The film *Blackhawk Down* valorized the impulse to ‘leave no man behind’ even if it meant (as it did in this case) terrible sacrifices, both in terms of human suffering and death as well as significant ramifications for the Somalia intervention and beyond. The story of Jessica Lynch’s rescue at the beginning of the Iraq war was a consuming media and national event and joins countless war stories of medics taking great risks to save and minister to their own colleagues and soldiers risking their lives to carry out the body of a comrade. “Soon Marines and Corpsmen came and pulled me down from the Tank and began to render first aid. During this, mortar rounds began to impact near us. The Corpsmen who were treating me took off their own body armor and piled it on top of me to protect my wounded body.”

Who traditionally gets assigned to this kind of duty? It tends to be those persons who might not seen to be the conventional warrior type: the worst shots, those seen as weak, intellectuals, conscientious objectors These may be people who desire to help, to heal rather than create harm. In the “Outsider” Ernesto is a character who reflects this type: consistently falling behind, the despair of the unit and its commanders and viewed
as a serious liability,” He quietly stated that he knew the men would be risking their lives soon in combat and that he wanted to be with the men and would do anything he could to help them – even if it meant picking up the dead and filling body bags.

However, while medics and medical personnel are highly trained and the traditional weak links are largely weeded out in an all volunteer force, the nature of asymmetrical warfare causes similar dynamics since asymmetrical war allows for less personal agency and heroism, the focus shifts more toward endurance and survival. With this shift, it makes sense that one’s fellow comrades (who can be instrumental in one’s survival/endurance) take on a greater importance while the enemy, the threat that typically is largely abstract and unseen decreases in importance. As war becomes more mechanized, more impersonal and more reliant on technology and allows less individual heroism, these rescuers become heroes, but not against the enemy (as in the conventional, offensive courage narrative where the weak link overcomes his fear to charge the enemy) but rather in support of their own soldiers. Miller observes that the rescued become re-humanized, reindividualized; they regain what has been lost – namely human relationship, emotion and personal significance.

Taking risks that they would not take in battle against the enemy, they demonstrate courage, not in the taking of life, but in the preserving of life. Is there now special nobility to the rescue as a moral category? If in asymmetrical warfare the traditional narrative of courage against the enemy erodes to be replaced by a narrative of courage as endurance, rescuers take on the actions viewed as traditionally ‘courageous’, only not against the enemy, but in the service of and for the preservation of their own side. This change in dynamic is clearly supported by the willingness of the public to demand and support the focus on the nobility of rescue as courageous, as endurance, survival and preservation – not victory – become central.

Conclusion

If asymmetrical warfare represents a departure from conventional models of warfare, one should expect to find that this departure has profound implications for the politics of courage. This paper has made the case that many of the insights from William Ian Miller’s analysis of the transition in contemporary, mechanized warfare from the
courage of ‘dishing it out’ to the courage of ‘taking it’ have important implications for thinking about the politics of courage in the context of asymmetrical warfare. Given these arguments, it seems clear the courage of endurance and survival will continue to dominate public ideas and discourse about courage, leaving us with a very real possibility that Tim O’Brien was in fact wrong, the cow is his story is in fact a paragon of courage, abeit a fundamentally altered kind of courage.

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1 Tim O’Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone (New York: Broadway, 1999), p. 139.
3 Ibid., p. 15-23.
4 Ibid. p. 209.
5 Ibid. p. 145.
6 www.doi.gov/secretary/speeches/071111-speech.html
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid. p. 61.
13 Ibid. p. 74.
16 Ibid.
18 Tim O’Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone. p. 141.


