

For Liberty and the Republic: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861

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Review

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Herrera, Ricardo A. *For Liberty and the Republic: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861*. New York University Press, \$55.00 ISBN 9781479819942

Citizen-Soldiers and the Limits of Republicanism

Ricardo A. Herrera has endeavored to answer an important question about war and early American society: how did citizens value their military service? Herrera is Associate Professor of Advanced Military Studies at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. His latest work, *For Liberty and the Republic: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861* examines how Americans' perceptions of service and citizenship both influenced and were informed by their understanding of republicanism from the Revolution to the Civil War.¹

For Liberty and the Republic represents Herrera's attempt to stake a claim within a vast historiography on republicanism. Between the late 1960s and the late 1980s a group of historians argued in favor of republicanism as the governing ideology of American society during the Revolutionary Era, developing the "republican synthesis." Philip Gould explains that the synthesis "transformed" historians' understanding of early American political culture by articulating how the language of republican ideology operated as a cultural force. Over a decade into the twenty-first century, historians like Herrera still invoke republicanism to define the American past.²

Herrera's argument is two fold: first, that republicanism retained a longer hold on American society than most historians have appreciated. Second, that republicanism's ideological continuity can be illustrated by a complex thread of beliefs shared amongst all American soldiers across time and space, which Herrera identifies as the "warrior ethos of republicanism." Five broad themes compose this warrior ethos and provide Herrera with the structure for his chapters: virtue, legitimacy, self-governance, God's Will and the nation, and glory, honor, and fame. These themes "informed and reinforced the connection

between military service and republican citizenship," contributing to republicanism's vitality as "an ideology for all seasons and all men."³

For Liberty and the Republic is strongest when Herrera delves into the Army's role in national mythmaking. The armies of the early republic relied upon certain myths, or "culturally acceptable fictions," to "elevate the purpose of American wars." The author illustrates this point quite well when examining the myth of the volunteer, or citizen-soldier. Drawing from eighteenth-century English military traditions that linked class and political rights with military duty, the army's institutions codified a paradoxical figure: the American volunteer. This ideal was both a rugged individualist and a disinterested patriot of the Union. Herrera asserts that officers in both volunteer companies and the regular establishment led their soldiers as political agents, imbuing them with a sense of purpose in their sacrifice as citizen-soldiers. As a result, throughout the nineteenth century, regulars and volunteers prided themselves as "the ultimate expression of republican virtue" and viewed the other as contemptible, unworthy republicans. Cultural fictions like the citizen-soldier, Herrera explains, gave military service "almost sacred overtones and reinforced a belief in the special nature of American citizenship." Such underlying beliefs further justified American wars as contests of national character.⁴

But beyond this strongpoint, *For Liberty and the Republic* falls short of expectations. In the introduction, the author attempts to satisfy the reader of his heavy reliance on primary sources, but it is a misleading assurance. To the author's due credit, there is certainly no shortage of primary source materials. Of concern is the author's dependence on secondary literature. In Chapter 3, "Free Men in Uniform," Herrera asserts that a soldier in battle, determining whether to fight or flee, "exercised his personal liberty, his freedom to govern his life as he saw fit." Whether or not soldiers actually contemplated this dilemma on the battlefield seems of little concern to Herrera, who cites a Robert Middlekauff essay as evidence for his findings. Similar passages throughout indicate that *For Liberty and the Republic* is largely imitative.⁵

When the author engages with primary manuscript materials, he often provides limited analysis. Herrera justifies that the "greater degree of spontaneity" associated with a letter or journal entry reveals candid expressions that might be missing in a memoir. Indeed, the author commands these raw sources, written in proximity to soldiers' experiences, to illustrate the colorful array of perceptions. However, the reliance on soldiers' personal documents

imposes some limitations on Herrera's larger findings. The spontaneity of these documents only provides a snapshot in time, a narrow window through which to examine a soldier or officer's experience. Incorporating other sources like memoirs, military tribunals records, enlistment contracts, and etc., might have offered stronger conclusions that addressed how generations of American soldiers valued their service over time.⁶

For *Liberty and the Republic*'s principal flaw lies in the author's unflinching assurance of the republican continuity. Herrera argues that republican ideology, "invoked in its broadest possible aspect," shaped American society continuously from 1775 to the Civil War. The pervasiveness of republicanism in the early American republic is well supported by decades of scholarship. However, the author's argumentation relies so heavily upon a broadly conceived assumption that it too often invites unproductive generalizations and meager context. Republicanism was hardly an ideology "for all seasons and all men."⁷

Herrera's emphasis on continuity limits the scope and richness of his argument. For example, the author bypasses any thorough discussion of perhaps the two most important words of the book: "American" and "citizen." In multiple passages the author asserts that "American soldiers...were citizens first and foremost." Yet, despite frequent opportunities for elaboration, Herrera addresses "citizenship" vaguely in brief segments on natural rights and political engagement. Consequently, he minimizes the importance of localism and avoids discussing the larger struggle within the Union to define the terms of citizenship and what it meant to be "American."⁸

For Liberty and the Republic stands as an example of why scholars ought to move away from the republican synthesis. Republicanism may still serve historians as an effective lens through which to examine early America. But scholars' insistence upon republican continuity, so broadly conceived, can only oversimplify the complex ideas and motives with which generations of American soldiers perceived and navigated their world. Their experiences and the contexts within which they lived transcended any single, prescriptive ideology.

Luke Hargroder is a History graduate student at Louisiana State University and an infantry officer in the United States Army National Guard. His Master's thesis focused on political discourse and club culture in late eighteenth-century New York City. Current research interests include early American republic military policy and the experience of combat.

¹Ricardo A. Herrera, *For Liberty and the Republic: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1776-1861* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2015), x-xi, 26. Republicanism was a worldview of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries based upon a theory of time and power: liberty (broadly conceived) in any republican society would eventually concede to self-interest, effeminacy, and aristocratic corruption. Only civic virtue could defend a republic from encroaching, tyrannical power.

²Philip Gould, "Virtue, Ideology, and the American Revolution: The Legacy of the Republican Synthesis," *American Literary History*, 5, No. 3 (Autumn 1993), 564, 566. See also, Herrera: *For Liberty and Republic*, xi-xvii; "A People and its Soldiers: The American Citizen as Soldier, 1776-1861," *International Bibliography of Military History*, 33, No. 1 (2013); "Toward an American Army: U.S. Soldiers, the War of 1812, and National Identity," *Army History*, No. 88 (Summer 2013); "Self-Governance and the American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861," *The Journal of Military History*, 65, No. 1 (January 2001).

³Herrera, *For Liberty and the Republic*, x-xi, 5, 26.

⁴*Ibid.*, 10-12, 18-19, 28, 87-88.

⁵*Ibid.*, 92.

⁶*Ibid.* xi-xii.

⁷*Ibid.* 5-6.

⁸*Ibid.*, 4-5, 28, 33-34, 36, 65, 68, 72, 87.