

The Legacy of The American Soldier

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For the hundreds of social scientists who decamped to Washington after Pearl Harbor, the war was no mere interruption. The chance to join the fight was an opportunity to *mix* service and science. The scholars who mobilized for the Office of War Information, the Department of Agriculture, and dozens of other civilian and military agencies were, in early 1942, poised to transform their disciplines. Going in, most had no idea. War service, after all, was an exercise in applied urgency, not empyrean inquiry. Yet all those social scientists seconded to large, interdisciplinary teams, by war's end, had forged a new mode of investigation. They returned to campus with on-the-cusp ambition, aiming to reproduce the very conditions that had—or so they once thought—interrupted their studies.

A notable share of that postwar excitement was generated by a single endeavor, the studies of rank-and-file soldiers conducted by the War Department's Research Branch. The sprawling, multi-disciplinary project epitomized what became, after the war, a new and counterintuitive consensus: If you want generalized knowledge, turn to problem-oriented, sponsored research. The military studies—codified in the four postwar volumes of the *American Soldier*—showed the way.

Social Science at War

The Research Branch was established in October 1941, within the War Department's Morale Division. The idea was to ask enlisted soldiers what they thought about their conditions. Their answers, as summarized, were to be sent up the chain of command. In theory, military leadership would, then, make adjustments to bolster the troops' morale. A prominent sociologist from the

University of Chicago, Samuel Stouffer, was recruited to head the operation—and without much time to spare. He and his small staff conducted the new unit’s first survey on December 8, the day after Pearl Harbor.

Stouffer was an expert in a novel research technique, known as survey research, that commercial pollsters like George Gallup had only just invented in the run up to the 1936 presidential election. The core innovation was to ask questions of a *sample*—a small subset of the population that, crucially, the sample otherwise resembled. Stouffer was among a handful of scholars who seized on the new method, adapting its procedures to study academic problems.

Open-ended questions could be asked—and they were—but Stouffer specialized in answers that could be translated into numbers, counted, and graphed. It was important to the general that hired Stouffer that he hailed from the “hard factual side of sociology.” The preference for the quantitative was, in part, an exercise in political tact: The Research Branch was distrusted, and actively resisted, by some top brass. So the cross-tabulated sobriety of Stouffer’s approach was less threatening. It helped, too, that Stouffer was affable and diplomatic.

The Branch’s Washington-based team of social scientists, pollsters, and support staff—over 120 strong by war’s end—managed a survey operation of astonishing scale. The sheer numbers capture some of this: Over half a million soldiers filled out over two hundred different questionnaires, many with a hundred or more items each. The procedure was to recruit local enlisted men to administer the actual surveys, in central locations like a mess hall; a few dozen fellow enlistees would, in each case, fill out the paper questionnaires with the reassurance of officer-free anonymity. Stouffer’s staff of sociologists and psychologists would pour over the results, and fashion them into reports, pamphlets, and a monthly digest, *What the Soldier Thinks*.

The surveys were the Research Branch’s main tool, though a smaller team was devoted to a second technique, the controlled experiment, which also produced quantitative results. The idea was to test the effectiveness of materials designed to boost soldiers’ morale, notably Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* film series.

Psychologists, in effect, took their labs to the base. They asked troops how committed they were to the Allied cause, before and after film screenings. Did the films rouse the soldiers’ fighting spirit? Which soldiers, and which titles?

Both operations—the larger survey campaign and the experiments too—were designed for immediate, actionable results. There was no pretense, from Stouffer and his staff, that academic ends could be served. Stouffer later admitted as much. The Research Branch, he wrote after the war, was “set up to do a fast, practical job.” If some of its work proved useful to future social scientists, this would be a “happy result quite incidental to the mission of the Branch in wartime.” Indeed, he wrote, “most of our time was wasted, irretrievably wasted.”

Waste, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. To the Branch’s military sponsors, the mundane items—the questions about laundry, beer, or leave policy—were just as important for morale as the questions on, for example, group dynamics, persuasion, or racial attitudes, areas that piqued scholars’ interests. And the Branch’s reports and digests *did* inform policy. The team’s findings, for example, led to the status-conferring Infantryman’s Badge, and underwrote too a widely praised point system used to guide postwar demobilization. These were the sorts of practical payouts that Stouffer had been hired to produce.

So it is, then, a remarkable fact that Branch alumni, working after the war, were able to extract insight—transformative insight, as it turned out—from the warehoused piles of paper they had generated in such haste.

The American Soldier

The social scientists who demobilized after V-J day were, on the whole, buoyed by wartime service. They had, for one thing, the high-profile example of the natural sciences. The physicists in Los Alamos, Oak Ridge, and Chicago had so successfully marshaled basic research to the ends of war that they had indeed made the decisive difference. No one, of course, confused the social scientists for their celebrated colleagues across campus; the postwar exclusion of the social sciences from the new National Science Foundation was just one index of low Congressional esteem. But *internal* to the social science disciplines, among their own ranks, there was gathering excitement about the war-won yields. The sense of a beginning was palpable.

The proclamation that American social science could, or would soon, mimic the objectivity of natural science had already, by 1945, been issued for decades. The assertion, though, came to feel more plausible in these early postwar years. This was, partly, a generational effect: The Depression had thinned out university ranks,

and stemmed the flow of foundation dollars. Almost overnight, the war mobilized hundreds of young social scientists, some interrupting their graduate studies, to join the federal research bureaucracy. Thanks to the university system's rapid postwar expansion—fueled in part by the GI Bill—young returnees swelled the ranks of sociology and psychology departments. For many, the Washington service was a formative break with their disciplines' pasts.

The war's big, counterintuitive lesson was that applied work could yield important findings and, perhaps especially, methodological dividends. The Research Branch, and its counterparts throughout the wartime government, proved to be ideal incubators for a new mode of inquiry: team-based, cross-disciplinary, and staff-supported. The most promising methods, like survey research, required big, well-funded teams, in place of the lone-wolf, chair-bound model that had (allegedly at least) prevailed before. By the early 1950s, the belief that organized, multi-disciplinary projects could yield results of theoretical promise, and quantitative sophistication, was a commonplace among the new social science elite. They even adopted a new name, with a boost from the Ford Foundation, to designate that belief: the behavioral sciences.

The *American Soldier*—the four volumes of analyzed Research Branch work—was the quintessential expression of the new postwar rigorism. They validated, in their chart-filled, bookshelf-spanning heft alone, the nascent behavioral sciences movement. The volumes were published, in 1949 and 1950, just as the Cold War had re-opened the federal-funding sluices. One result was a re-mobilization of social scientists, many of them veterans of the Branch and the other wartime agencies. *The American Soldier* was published testimony to the yield that science—and not just the free world—could expect in return.

Stouffer oversaw the work on the books, supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. As he noted in his introduction, the project was built on a store of data “perhaps unparalleled in magnitude in the history of any single research enterprise in social psychology or sociology.” Each volume was, fittingly, produced by a team of scholars who—in almost every case—had served in the Branch. The first two centered on the surveys, then housed at American University. They were published together, in 1949, as *The American Soldier*. The third and fourth books—on the film experiments and methods, respectively—appeared soon after. *Studies in Social*

Psychology in World War II, the official name of the four-volume set, was rarely used, even then. *The American Soldier*, in practice, came to refer to the whole endeavor.

The books sold surprisingly well. They were widely and immediately recognized as totemic, as exemplars of the “new” social science that the studies, indeed, went on to legitimate. The positive reviews pointed to the substantive findings—notably the concept of “relative deprivation”—as well as innovations of method such as the scaling of survey results. “Why was a war necessary,” asked one reviewer in plaintive praise, “to give us the first systematic analysis of life as it really is experienced by a large sector of the population?” The negative reviews (and there were fewer of these) faulted the studies for their ponderous recitation of the obvious.

But everyone, boosters and detractors alike, understood the real stakes. The soundness or originality of the books’ social-psychological generalizations wasn’t the issue. *The American Soldier* was, instead, an elaborated declaration that (as one rapt reviewer put it) “social science is coming of age.” So the Research Branch work stood for the promise, and also the peril, of the new “behavioral” sciences.

Further Reading

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