

STARSHIP TROOPERS

(ROBERT HEINLEIN)

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Starship Troopers, sixty years old, is a famous work of science fiction. As with most Robert Heinlein novels, the point is more the ideas than plot or character. Heinlein therefore often swerves dangerously close to message fiction, but it never becomes intolerable. This book is Heinlein's vehicle to explain who he thinks should rule a society and what principles should inform that ruling class's actions. His main goal is to attack universal suffrage as stupid, which is true enough, although his proposed alternative is too artificial. While I'm interested in the franchise today, and its relationship to aristocracy and hierarchy, I'm equally interested in secondary aspects of the book, in particular what the role of women should be, if any, in the military.

The plot of *Starship Troopers* is simple. As in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, another classic science fiction book, the enemy is insectoid aliens. Unlike in that other book, here there is no introspection about the enemy and its motivations and emotions. Simply killing the aliens, the Bugs, is the frame of the book, as seen in flashbacks narrated by the protagonist, the soldier Juan Rico. He fights in the Mobile Infantry, whose task is to defeat enemies in much the same way as any army of the 1950s, but fighting in a tremendously powerful armored exoskeleton. The Navy ships infantrymen to other planets; the men drop from space, emerge in armor from their capsules, and kill Bugs (or, in the opening scene, terrorize a city on a planet allied to the Bugs). The story has an arc, from Rico's signing up, through training, ending in a climactic battle scene, but all of it is mere backdrop to Heinlein's political thoughts.

The book views politics through the lens of war, which often leads to the erroneous claim that Heinlein's ideal society is a militarized one. In fact, in this future history, until the recently-begun conflict with the Bugs, war was uncommon. Rico's father lectures his son, when he wants to enlist, that Federal Service (as it is called) is a waste of time, because "we've outgrown wars" and with only peace on the horizon, he'll waste his time on something that merely allows veterans, the only people allowed to vote or govern, to "give themselves airs for the rest of their lives." The system Heinlein advocates would, in his view, be

ideal for any society, but presumably he thought it would be boring to write a book about how such a society builds cities or meets other mundane civilizational challenges. Therefore, it's all about killing Bugs, even though they're, in truth, incidental.

Heinlein rejects democracy in favor of aristocracy. Not a traditional aristocracy, of blood and property, or even one of ability, but one where any person can simply choose to become an aristocrat by signing up for a term of two years Federal Service. Such service is not necessarily military, but is always at least potentially highly dangerous—if not a soldier, an enlistee may perform hazardous work or be used as a medical guinea pig. There is no conscription; signing up for Federal Service isn't even encouraged in any way—it's discouraged, if anything. Quitting is simple and carries no penalty, other than inability to ever enlist in the future. But only veterans of Federal Service are citizens (contrasted with civilians), only they can vote, and only citizens can work in government. Aside from rule, though, citizens are not an elite class. They are apparently not richer than others, for example—Rico's family is portrayed as wealthy, from business, despite his father's distaste for Federal Service, and there is no suggestion citizens profit from their service.

Heinlein gives us a lot of lectures about his system and the philosophy behind it. The book's stand-in for Heinlein is not Rico, but his high school History & Moral Philosophy teacher, Mr. Dubois. This course, which must be taught by a citizen, is meant to form all young minds. (The topic of education, in particular the introduction to, or indoctrination in, a society's core beliefs for the young, has been much on my mind lately, but I am going to delay discussion of that to another day.) Mr. Dubois clearly explains the basis of the Terran Federation's aristocracy. "Under our system every voter and officeholder is a man who has demonstrated through voluntary and difficult service that he places the welfare of the group ahead of personal advantage." Rule by the intelligent doesn't accomplish this, nor does rule by any other selection for supposed merit. "Citizenship is an attitude, a state of mind, an emotional conviction that the whole is greater than the part . . . and that the part should be humbly proud to sacrifice itself that the whole may live." This is not a search for noble death, a *kalos thanatos*. Rather, it is service to others, fundamentally utilitarian. Dubois's key claim is that "the noblest fate that a man can endure is to place his own mortal body

between his loved one and the war's desolation." This is, in a nutshell, the service implied in Federal Service.

That doesn't imply that it's all gravy for citizens (who do not include anyone currently in Federal Service, including career members). Authority and responsibility must be equal; in an "unlimited democracy" there is authority without responsibility. Democracy failed because "the people had been led to believe they could simply vote for whatever they wanted . . . and get it, without toil, without sweat, without tears." "The best things in life are beyond money; their price is agony and sweat and devotion." Citizens have an ongoing responsibility that balances the authority they exercise; their time in Federal Service is merely the most visible evidence of it. Thus, there is consent of the governed, because those who choose not to pursue Federal Service choose to be governed by those who do. Everyone is satisfied; crime is very low (in part due to corporal and capital punishment), and personal freedom (undefined as to its scope) is high.

True, this is a quasi-aristocracy, an artificial thing bearing limited actual relation to a real aristocracy. A real aristocracy is organic, arising from the superiority in some way of some group of people in a given societal situation, and counterpoised both to the masses and to what, despite the name, is different, Ortega's "mass men." Later entry by those not born into the class is possible, but difficult, much more difficult than simply choosing, for reasons portrayed as internal to each person, to serve two years in Federal Service. And in a real aristocracy, the aristocrats not only possess much or all of the direct political power, they possess most of the indirect, social power—wealth accrues to them, and they are also the tastemakers and trendsetters of society. They are those who direct its high culture, and the dreams of such a society are those of aristocrats, who mostly do not choose to be aristocrats—they become aristocrats as a consequence of their actions, and if born to it, face rigid expectations to conform their behavior accordingly. In short, such hierarchies are always natural, not chosen, and some form of them is inevitable. And, of course, all aristocracies decay over time, at which point the society must reset with a new aristocracy, a process we will see ourselves sooner or later. Heinlein, as with most ideologues, seems to see his system as pinnacle of human political systems and the end of history; that's not likely.

In Heinlein's future history, however, this system did originate organically, from military veterans imposing order on a local scale after global warfare and subsequent chaos; it exists because it works, not because it was dreamt up in the brain of some egghead. In other words, Heinlein would probably argue it's not artificial; it's simply a throwback, if somewhat differently imagined, to broadly similar historical systems of aristocracy, which often worked very well, so long as the ruling class ruled for the benefit of the entire society (the classic example being Venice). What's actually strange, and unstable, is our modern system of mass democracy. Heinlein has some choice words for John Rawls, long before John Rawls was on the scene. He, or rather Mr. Dubois, attacks the "pre-scientific pseudo-professional class" who exemplified a system of moral theory "half of it fuzzy-headed wishful thinking, half of it rationalized charlatanry."

Whether too artificial or not, this system is not an ideology and there is no attempt to create a totalitarian society, every person pulling in harness as directed by the state. Dubois is only one voice among many, though one with a bigger megaphone; his students are, in his words, "ignorant and prejudiced by their environment." That environment includes parents such as Rico's father and, presumably, other social influences. Thus, there is much room for individualism within the larger political frame and no attempt to weld society into a machine. The political system is neither Left nor Right, although it is probably more in opposition to Left governmental systems, because it has no desire at all for emancipation of the supposedly oppressed, who are not mentioned at all, and has a wholly reality-centered focus, rather than striving for a utopia. Modern preoccupations such as race are completely ignored. It sounds like a decent way to live.

Oh, I don't think Heinlein's system would work in practice, even if implemented on a national, rather than global, level. Heinlein underpins his aristocracy with dubious politico-moral theories that the twentieth century proved work poorly in practice, in particular positing that survival is the only morality and that natural rights are a complete fiction. It is not an accident that there are zero references to religion in this book, and that man's need for transcendence and meaning is ignored in favor of an arid materialism, of the sort that has proven corrosive to all societies that have tried it. Still, aristocracy is undoubtedly a key piece

of the natural pattern of government. You can operate a system that has an aristocracy without a monarchy, but not a monarchy without an aristocracy. And even the American Constitution as it existed in 1787 or in 1865 was essentially aristocratic, relative to the extreme democracy imposed on us starting a hundred years ago, the bitter fruits of which we are now eating.

While democracy is stupid and aristocracy inevitable, some form of representation for all segments of society is necessary for a stable society. That doesn't mean a direct voice in government; the Romans had the tribunes of the plebs, for example, to watch over the interests of the lower classes. It's unnecessary and foolish to try to set up a detailed structure for a future limited franchise in the abstract; such a system can only grow organically, depending on the circumstances and the society's needs. (Not just the franchise, either—note, for example, the very different attitude toward citizenship in early Rome and late Rome.) What we need will become obvious after the current system collapses and the shooting stops. My general feeling, which I have outlined elsewhere, is that political power of any sort, voting or otherwise, should be limited to those with a concrete stake in and contribution to society, and more power given to those with more stake and contribution—most of all to those with children. For now, let's turn to something tangential to Heinlein's story—the role of women in the military.

Heinlein's treatment of women in war is somewhat confused. Most pilots of starships, mainly troop transports but also artillery platforms, are women, and half the Navy's officers, though some ships lack women entirely. No women fight in the Mobile Infantry or any other part of the Army. This seems like a modern, utilitarian approach, and there is some talk along these lines, about women making the best pilots. But the main reason women are made officers is one that would be perceived as wholly retrograde by many (not by me) today: it is done so that the men who fight are kept keenly aware of women and the need to fight to protect women. Heinlein accurately portrays the allure of these women to the young infantrymen, along with the strictures imposed such that they do not unduly bother them. Rico notes that he prefers the ships with women pilots, because "It's good to know that the ultimate reason you are fighting for actually exists and that they are not just a figment of the imagination." Mr. Dubois is explicit that "do you know

of a surer way to keep a man keyed up to the point where he is willing to [fight] than by keeping him constantly reminded that the only good reason why men fight is a living, breathing reality?" Rico, again, says with heartfelt approval, "In a mixed ship, the last thing a trooper hears before a drop (maybe the last word he ever hears) is a woman's voice, wishing him luck."

So while women in this book are in the military, the focus is actually purely on masculinity. Heinlein is clear-eyed that combat is something that only appeals to men, in their nature. Rico's father, after his mother is killed by a Bug attack on Earth, joins the Mobile Infantry himself, "to prove to myself that I was a man." This points out a basic truth—women in the military, in any capacity tied to fighting, is unnatural and stupid, and you can't write a book that shows otherwise unless you are writing stilted message fiction, because if you accurately depict human nature, you will always come back to men as the focus in war, with women in a supporting role, if any. But let's parse out exactly why women should not be allowed in our military, except as nurses and as clerks or other functionaries thousands of miles from any battlefield.

I have long said women in the military is the supreme triumph of ideology over common sense. This is one of those (rare, but increasingly less so) public policy questions on which there are no good arguments at all for one side. Still, I've now spent some time parsing and classifying the collectively overwhelming, or more accurately totally unanswerable, reasons against women in the military. I will break the reasons down into three groups, any reason from any one of the groups being more than adequate to wholly justify my preferred policy. First are physical facts about men and women. The second is the mental and psychological characteristics of men and women. The third is teleological reality about men and women.

It is true, but not to the contrary, that in some circumstances women have to fight. Throughout history, women have fought to directly defend their families, for example against Indian attacks on the American frontier (my children are reading the *Little House on the Prairie* books, forbidden in schools today, which shows this reality). And when a society's survival is at stake, as in partisan warfare, rebellion, or invasion, some women have fought in organized modern fashion (although stories about Russian women in World War II, in particular, are greatly

exaggerated for modern propaganda purposes). In today's world, Israel has long required military service of women (wisely, only unmarried ones), knowing that capability may make the difference in the next go-round with the Muslims. This custom originated pre-1948, when the Jews had some women in the Haganah—though the chief lesson taken at the time was that was a bad idea, one of the reasons that until very recently, since Israel is mostly a reality-based society, because it has to be, women soldiers were confined to support positions. Only recently, under order from left-wing civilian courts, a few have been admitted to positions that are combat-trained. But even now they are never deliberately deployed to any place likely to see combat, nor can they join units designated as frontline units in case of war. The Israelis don't intend to have women fight unless it's war to the knife. And, for the record, women Viking warriors are a complete myth.

It is sometimes heard, from those not in the military, that those in charge of the military are opposed to women in the military, and would never allow ideology to triumph over common sense, so it must be true that having women in the military makes sense. Nothing could be further from the truth. Aside from that the military is subject to civilian dictates, which have long included shrill ideological demands for women in the military, decades of purging any military officer not ideologically compliant has resulted in a corrupted officer corps. The upper ranks of the military are therefore entirely conforming, and any officer with reality-based views must adopt a Gnostic attitude, keeping his hidden knowledge of the truth concealed. This is to be expected—the social justice warriors have had decades now to winnow the ranks of the military to get rid of any man who dares to point out the truth.

As to the first group of truths, simple physical ability, women have nowhere near the needed physical ability to fight, in strength, stamina, or any other physical characteristic critical to fighting. This is common sense, and even admitted by the proponents of feminizing the military—because they hold women to vastly lower physical standards than men. Given that the physical standards were originally set in order to determine the minimum necessary capability to succeed in the military, such relaxation costs lives, but that's no problem for the ideologues. Usually, this disparity in standards is treated as normal, like allowing soldiers to choose Special K rather than Cheerios, instead of

what it really is, lethal. Nobody is allowed to comment on the double standards (certainly no soldier hoping to rise in the military), except in rare instances of objective study, such as a large-scale 2015 Marine Corps test, which, no surprise, showed that women (in this case, supposedly the best women soldiers) were incapable relative to men on every physical measure.

Mostly this farce only reaches public view in the endless push for women to enter elite military groups. Knowing that the public is intrigued by the Rangers, the Green Berets, and the SEALs, and therefore is paying attention, the ideologues, afraid the average person will see right through the double-standards charade, instead relax all standards. They call this “making standards gender neutral,” and at the same time they give women concealed assistance, in a desperate attempt to get a woman, any woman, to seemingly meet physical standards probably no woman in history could match. This is coupled with endless propaganda—remember the laughable movie *G.I. Jane*? (Note that movie is nearly twenty-five years old; we have been barraged with well-financed propaganda for decades.) But so far the Navy, alone among the armed forces, has refused to relax the requirements for their elite units. And so, despite enormous political pressure to allow cheating, no woman has ever met the SEAL standards, or ever will. I guarantee you, though, soon after the next Democratic president is elected, we will hear about the triumphant entry of a woman into the SEALs. We will not be permitted to ask what made that possible, but it will not be the ability of the woman, you can be sure.

Other than lack of physical strength and stamina, women also have many outright physical frailties men do not. They become pregnant (often at very high rates upon a call-up). They are gang raped if captured, which is terrible for them and terrible for the morale of both male soldiers and society at large. (Rape is one of the main reasons the Israelis, who unlike the United States face the very real possibility of soldiers being captured, keep women out of combat.) Their rate of injury in training is terrifically high. You often hear that “some women” can meet the physical standards set for male soldiers, though details or examples of such women who want to join the military are never offered, but if there were such a woman, her ability to do push-ups would not remove her total physical unsuitability for combat.

And, of course, the nature of men and women adds yet another layer of physical problems. The idea that a mixed-sex group, in any context, is not radically different from a single-sex group, on a multitude of axes, is plainly false. Welding men into a cohesive unit is a well-understood process; adding women destroys the intangible glue and erodes the power of the group, whether in the military or elsewhere. (This is one reason the Left hates and attacks all-male groups devoted to a common end, in any context, because they tend to be very reality-based and extremely competent at achieving their stated goals, and adding women diffuses their power.) And aside from simple lack of cohesion, competition for sexual favors inevitably encourages corrosive behavior at all levels. The artificial nature of the society Heinlein outlines is made clear by his ignoring these realities, and imagining that women in the military can be decorously walled off. In real life, that doesn't work.

Sometimes you hear feeble attempts to make counter-arguments to all these facts, though mostly the facts are ignored; you usually only hear screams of "sexism!" and "emancipation!" On those rare occasions the anti-reality crowd offers a concrete response, you usually hear the argument that the modern soldier doesn't need brute strength, which is true, right up until you have to carry a wounded comrade, lug a hundred-pound pack, run with a fifty-pound machine gun, or throw a grenade a hundred feet. That is to say, it's false. You also sometimes hear claims that women make better pilots, although the specifics are always vague, but it sounds good, doesn't it? Again, though, a pilot isn't always ensconced in the cockpit. No, there are no even half-decent counter-arguments at all, as you will find if you go searching for them. All you will find is emotion and crude attempts at misdirection and obfuscation. I know, because I went looking.

Only one argument holds water, and it is not a counter-argument, but a claimed cost to excluding women. In any society facing significant external threats (e.g., Israel), political power very often follows military prowess or command. As a result, women are effectively excluded from political leadership if they have not led in battle (this appears to be true in the world of *Starship Troopers*, where women never fight in battle). True enough. So what? The claim assumes that having women in political leadership is a key component of a good society. Sometimes that may be true; a well-run society must have a balance of the masculine and

feminine. A society run only by men without feminine balance is a society of slavers and killers; a society run only by women without masculine balance is quite peaceful in their cave dwellings. But it should be clear to all that the type of society that faces challenges that make military leaders civilian leaders is the type of society that should be led by men, because men are best suited by natural temperament to meet such challenges. This is not an absolute requirement for success in meeting such challenges, as one can see from Golda Meier, or even Margaret Thatcher, but it's true as a general rule. And as we have seen from the Wuhan Plague, leadership by feminized politicians, male and female, blissfully free from manly courage, terribly harms societies faced with challenges, and that is even more true for societies faced with military threats. In any case, I have a solution to this supposed problem, already discussed above—don't allow most people to vote, in which case political leadership will accrue sensibly, not based on the masses' perception of what's needed.

Any one of these physical facts should alone put an end to the fantasy of women in the military, in any position that involves training for, or the possibility of, combat under any circumstances. (Attempting to allow women in the trained military, but limited to non-combat positions, is merely a smokescreen for attempts to force allowing women in combat, does not obviate the relevant physical limitations of women, and offers no benefit to society.) But equally, if not more, determinative is that men and women are utterly distinct in their psychology, their mental attitude toward organized, planned, anticipated violence, in a way that makes women completely unsuited for participation in the organized military. At the most basic and obvious level, normal women have no interest in fighting, while many men, especially young men, positively enjoy fighting. Not just open combat—the possibility of fighting and relative chance of success, as everyone knows, determines much of the hierarchy among men. This is true even in completely peaceful environments such as white-collar office work. (That a few women choose to participate in the safe paid activity of sport “fighting” says nothing to the contrary; there may be a few women who enjoy fighting, because of simple variability in human personalities, but they are so rare as to be completely irrelevant to society as a whole.) Men are aggressive in a way simply not found in women; they view the world entirely

differently as it relates to conflict, and that aggression is necessary to, and desirable for, combat.

That's not the end of it. Beyond simple bloodlust, men are driven by the search for personal glory and honor resulting from conflict, and women aren't. And for a man honor can be found, and earned, not just in battlefield heroics, but by him challenging himself in masculine pursuits in front of his peers. Certainly, women can be, and often are, brave, even unto death, in defense of their families, most of all their children. But this is a practical choice, or a virtue in reaction to necessity, not something sought as men seek recognition. Much of young male life naturally is men seeking approbation from other men (and admiration from women) for their deeds that distinguish them from others, and those deeds often include violence, in a way alien to a woman's thought. What is more, men instinctively recoil at taking orders from women in areas that should be exclusively male domains, because it's so obviously unnatural and demeaning to the man to take orders from someone who has not earned a spot in the hierarchy that would justify giving orders. As a result, women officers will always be ineffective. The idea of a female drill sergeant would have been a contemptible joke in a more reality-based age, because her ineffectiveness is obvious, whatever people have to pretend nowadays.

And, finally and aside from all these points, a point that needs no long explanation. A decent society simply does not allow women in the military because violence is not the *telos* of women. The core *telos* of men is provider and defender; the core *telos* of women is mother and shelterer. Pretending otherwise will always tear at the sinews of a society; the pretense of our ruling class that there is no difference is one of the numerous reasons we are such a clown society. This principle is much broader than who should be in the military. The famous children's book *Mars Needs Moms* captures this truth—a society that lacks women fulfilling their natural role, not just a biological one but one much broader, more power, and ultimately spiritual in nature, is defective. The denial of teleological truth is one of the core dooms of our society.

I'm not arguing we should change the current system. Arguing is a waste of time. We're beyond public policy arguments, since the Left controls all the relevant levers of power and will never permit any change to any policy that smacks of emancipation, no matter how obviously

flawed. Someday we will pay the price, but it's worth knowing ahead of time what a reality-based system would look like, that someday may be imposed, when we rule, and not them.