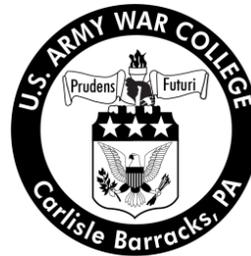


# Civilian Research Project USAWC Fellow

## Millennial Generation Spirituality and Religion in the United States Army

by

Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) John Stephen Peck  
United States Army



United States Army War College  
Class of 2013

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## **Abstract**

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Currently over two thirds of the U. S. Army is composed of Soldiers from the Millennial Generation, the generation born between 1982 and 2001. Millennials were the majority of the force that fought the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and will remain the majority of the force until the mid 2020s. The Millennial Generation is uniquely shaped by the generational cycle and postmodernity and is at a key transition point in life, the emerging adult life stage. Each of these affect Millennial spirituality and religion. These same Millennials with their personal views and spirituality join the U. S. Army and present new leadership challenges. This paper addressed the Millennials' shaping factors, trends, spirituality, unique military issues, and concluded with eight Department of the Army level recommendations intended to enhance understanding, resilience, and religious support regarding Soldiers from the Millennial Generation and the following generation.



## **Millennial Generation Spirituality and Religion in the United States Army**

On September 20, 2001, just back from the destruction at the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush addressed a Joint Session of Congress and the American people. He was casting a vision and preparing the nation for war. Among many stirring comments one of the most memorable was:

Our nation, this generation, will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter and we will not fail.<sup>1</sup>

President Bush, like other wartime presidents before him, was casting a martial vision and calling the youth of America to join and execute that vision. He was challenging young Americans in their late teens and early twenties, "this generation," to step forward into an all volunteer military entering the crucible of war. Those young men and women primarily came from the Millennial Generation, a cohort of Americans born between 1982 and 2001. They would form the vast majority of the armed forces the President was telegraphing he would send to war half way around the world.

Slightly over three years later as the war in Iraq began to have problems President Bush took the national stage and called the Millennial Generation even more clearly to support the nation, saying in his second inaugural address:

"I ask our youngest citizens to believe the evidence of your eyes. You have seen duty and allegiance in the determined faces of our soldiers. You have seen that life is fragile, and evil is real, and courage triumphs. Make the choice to serve in a cause larger than your wants, larger than yourself, and in your days you will add not just to the wealth of our country but to its character."

A few Americans have accepted the hardest duties in this cause - in the quiet work of intelligence and diplomacy ... the idealistic work of helping raise up free governments ... the dangerous and necessary work of fighting our enemies. Some have shown their devotion to our country in

deaths that honored their whole lives - and we will always honor their names and their sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

This paper strives to enhance the understanding of Army leaders, and by extension the Department of Defense and other services, about the Millennial Generation (age 12-31), particularly their human spirituality. This paper achieves this task by asking and answering in progression the standard “5Ws,” and adds a sixth W: Ways, on the spirituality of Millennials serving in the military.

1. When do generations start and end?
2. Why is understanding the Millennials important?
3. Who are the Millennials?
4. Where is Millennial Spirituality?
5. What happens when Millennials join the Military?
6. Ways the Army should address Millennial Spirituality.

Armed with the answers to those “Ws” Army leaders will better understand the human dimension of the majority of the force they lead, particularly in their spiritual domain, and thus be better equipped to shape pertinent policies.

When do generations start and end?

Although the terms are used often, it is sometimes confusing when an Army leader says “young Soldiers” or “this generation of Soldiers”. The words youth and generation are typically only defined in the mind of the speaker, if even there, and there is rarely common understanding of the causal factors that brought them to that point or their current life status. Academics categorize similar age people as an age cohort, and most pollsters and laymen refer to them as a generation. This paper will use that latter term. Before beginning to look at generational theory as it applies to Soldiers, the reader

should also be aware that generational theories provide trends and generalizations and are not necessarily true of specific individuals. Additionally there are three items related to generational study that often cause confusion - demographic start dates, demographic edges, and generation names. Imprecise use of any of these will often slant or confuse analysis regarding a particular generation.

1. Age cohorts or generations start and end dates are not fully agreed to, but are the academically and popularly accepted demographic parameters of American populations. This paper addresses only the American populace, and those dates are shown in Figure 1 below. Occasionally an author will claim dates significantly outside the normal accepted range. This can be as small as a five year variance, utilized by Donald Tapscott, who among others calls the Millennial Generation the “Echo Boomers”. He argued that their age cohort began in 1976 with an increased birth rate.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes there can be a variance exceeding ten years, such as popular author Jean Twenge, in her 2006 book, *Generation Me*, asserting the current generation of young people began in 1970.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, born in 1971, she included herself in this generation of young adults. However, this paper will not use either of these outlier demographic positions, but use the range of 1982 to 2001 as the birth range for the Millennial Generation. This is consistent, plus or minus one year, with the demographic dates used by Pew Research Forum<sup>5</sup>, and frequently cited generational theorists William Strauss and Neil Howe.<sup>6</sup>
2. Every generation will also be “fuzzy” around the demographic edges in terms of perspectives and behaviors, and thus will not align perfectly with demographic

categories. In other words, a person born in 1980-1984 may be more like a Gen Xer, more like a Millennial, or a hybrid of both.

3. Also, in reading about generations, many authors will attempt to name an age cohort, and that typically is settled by popular use over time. Such usage has settled on the names, Baby Boom/Boomer Generation and Generation X.

Although several names have been put forth for generation after X, the name that has stuck is Millennial Generation or simply Millennials, popularized by Strauss and Howe.<sup>7</sup> This paper uses those two names: Millennial Generation or Millennials synonymously.

The Army is made up of members of multiple age cohorts or generations.

Because there is a constraint on how early someone can enter military service, age 17, and a mandatory retirement age, age 62, the Army is typically made up of three age cohorts. Currently those are the Millennial Generation (age 17-31), Generation X (age 32-50), and the Baby Boomers (age 51-62), which are illustrated in the chart below, and typically identified in relation to their birth year.

| Name         | Also Called            | Birth Years* | Current Age |
|--------------|------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| GI           | Greatest, Builder      | 1901-1924    | >88         |
| Silent       | Forgotten, Builder     | 1925-1945    | 68-88       |
| Boomer       | Baby Boom              | 1946-1962    | 51-67       |
| Generation X | Slacker, Buster        | 1963-1981    | 32-50       |
| Millennial   | Y, Me, Net Gen, Mosaic | 1982-2001    | 12-31       |
| ???          | Z, Homeland            | 2001-??      | 0-12        |

\*Birth years are within +/- two years of the most commonly cited demographers

Figure 1: Source: Strauss and Howe<sup>8</sup>, Pew Research Forum<sup>9</sup>

## Why is understanding the Millennials important?

Understanding the Millennial Generation is important because national defense policy is mostly executed by service members 30 years old or younger, and most typically much younger, which at this point in history is the Millennial Generation. The chart in Figure 2 below demonstrates that the average age of every branch of service falls within the Millennial Generation demographic. The generation as a percentage of the force is even more significant, since two thirds of every branch of service is from the Millennial Generation. Most notably the U. S. Marine Corps, with larger junior enlisted squads and a less top heavy structure is over 85% from the Millennial demographic. The current war is unquestionably being fought by the Millennial Generation.

| Age Group: | 18-21 | 22-30 | 31-40 | 41-50 | 51-59 | Avg. Age |
|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|
| Service    | %     | %     | %     | %     | %     |          |
| Army       | 18.3  | 48    | 25.6  | 7.9   | 0.7   | 29       |
| Navy       | 18.6  | 46    | 26.3  | 8.3   | 0.8   | 29       |
| USMC       | 36.9  | 46    | 14    | 3.1   | 0.2   | 25       |
| Air Force  | 14.4  | 46    | 28.3  | 10    | 0.6   | 30       |

Figure 2: Source: Military One Source<sup>10</sup>

## Who are the Millennials?

The Millennials are a generation shaped by two major causal factors and currently are at highly transitory juncture in life. The Millennials are a generation that in the natural cycle of generations is significantly different than the generations that preceded them, typically their parents and grandparents from Generation X and the Baby Boomers. Those two older generations form the current Army's mid level through general officer leaders. The Millennial Generation is a generation that like their predecessor, Generation X, was raised in a postmodern culture, which makes their perspectives on life and the world particularly different than the Boomers. Those

generational elders are the current Army's Colonel and Command Sergeant Major leaders and higher. Lastly, the Millennials are at the emerging adult life stage, which typically occurs between ages 18-25.<sup>11</sup> This is an especially confusing and transitory life stage. This paper elaborates below on these three defining influences: generational cycle, postmodernism, and life stage.

### The Generational Cycle

Imagining the generations within a family of grandparents, parents, and children presents a microcosm of the generations that exist in the Army. While each generation has similarities, the family members are keenly aware of their generational differences. This plays out on a much larger and complex scale comparing American generations. The Millennial Generation is different than the generation that preceded it, Generation X and much different than their predecessors, the Baby Boom Generation in both its formative experiences and the values and habits derived from those experiences. Again it is important to remember that Generation X is no longer the youngest generation in the Army, and in fact, today's battalion and brigade commanders and Command Sergeants Major do come from Generation X. The chart below from Strauss and Howe's *Millennials Rising* depicts the key formative influences for the three generations in military service today.

| Key Phases                    | Boomers   | Generation X  | Millennials   |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Entering Childhood            | America powerful and respected internally and externally      | Consciousness Revolution against Institutions, Society Values | Culture Wars and Roaring '90s                                     |
| Entering Young Adulthood      | Consciousness Revolution against Institutions, Society Values | Culture Wars and Roaring '90s                                 | 9-11, Global War on Terror, Hurricane Katrina, Financial Meltdown |
| Society & Culture             | Boomer Childhood  | Gen X Childhood   | Millennial Childhood  |
| Child Nurture                 | Relaxing  | Underprotective   | Tightening  |
| Family Stability              | High, starting fall   | Falling   | Low, starting rise  |
| Family Priority               | Community needs   | Adult needs   | Child needs   |
| School Emphasis               | Excellence  | Liberation  | Standards   |
| Crime/Drugs                   | Low starting rise   | Rising  | High, starting fall   |
| Pop Culture                   | Homogenizing  | Confrontational   | Fragmenting   |
| Gender Role Gap               | Wide  | Narrowing   | Narrow  |
| Racial Goal                   | Integration   | Assertion   | Diversity   |
| Immigration                   | Low   | Rising  | High  |
| Income Equality               | Rising  | Peaking   | Falling   |
| Fiscal Tilt                   | To work-age adults  | To retirees   | To kids   |
| Public generosity toward poor | Rising  | Peaking   | Falling   |

Figure 3: Formative Influences Chart<sup>12</sup>

The result of these differences is a subject of debate, primarily falling into two camps: “Generation We” and “Generation Me”. The Generation We argument holds that Millennials are less cynical and more civic minded than Generation X. They are more community oriented, caring, activist, and interested in environmental causes. This is

supported by Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, Historians Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000), and also Greenberg and Weber (2008, 2011) Winograd and Hais (2011).<sup>13</sup>

The Generation Me camp includes Psychologist, Jean Twenge (2006), Gordiner (2009) and Mallan (2009). They argue Millennials are an increasingly extrinsic and materialistic culture that values money, image, and fame over concern for others.<sup>14</sup> This author favors the “Generation We” perspective, due to the strength and acceptance of its proponent’s arguments and flaws in the opposing arguments. Strauss and Howe present the Millennials in extremely positive terms and say they have seven characteristics that America can expect to see in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century:

**Special.** From precious-baby movies of the early 80’s to the effusive rhetoric of the surrounding the high school class of 2000, older generations have inculcated in the Millennials the sense that they are, collectively, vital to the nation and to their parents’ sense of purpose.

**Sheltered.** Starting with the early ‘80s child-abuse frenzy, continuing through the explosion of kid safety rules and devices, and climaxing with a post-columbine lockdown of public schools, Millennials are the focus of the most sweeping youth safety movement in American history.

**Confident.** With high levels of trust and optimism-and a newly felt connection to parents and future-Millennial teens are beginning to equate good news for themselves with good news for the country. They often boast about their generation’s power and potential.

**Team-oriented.** From Barney and soccer to school uniforms and a new classroom emphasis on group learning, Millennials are developing strong instincts and peer bonds,

**Achieving.** With accountability and higher school standards rising to the top of America’s political agenda, Millennials are on track to become the best educated and behaved adults in the nation’s history.

**Pressured.** Pushed to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take full advantage of the collective opportunities adults are offering them, Millennials feel a “trophy” kid pressure to excel.

**Conventional.** Taking pride in their improving behavior and more comfortable with their parents values than any other generation in living

memory, millennials support convention-the idea that social rules can help.<sup>15</sup>

Howe and Strauss also assert that all these traits form a “sharp break with the traits associated with Generation X.”<sup>16</sup> Whether the reader chooses the positive, “Generation We” view of the Millennials or the negative “Generation Me” view of Twenge is not essential for the purposes of this paper. Understanding that the Millennial Generation is quite different than Generation X and the Boomer Generation which preceded it is the essential idea to understand.

### Postmodernism

The generational cycle changes about every twenty years, however, the philosophical and cultural condition that generations are raised in changes every few centuries. This is pertinent to the analysis, because the current generations in the Army were raised in the transition from one philosophical period to another. The twentieth century experienced a shift from modernism to postmodernism that was most prominent in the last third of the century.<sup>17</sup> That cultural shift accelerated during the 80s due to globalization, and dramatically accelerated during the mid nineties with widespread use of the internet.<sup>18</sup> This period of rapid acceleration of postmodernity corresponds exactly with the childhood and youth of the Millennial Generation. The cultural “air” that Millennials were born into and grew up with was distinctly postmodern. It is important to know that, because their predecessors the boomers, today’s general officers and command sergeants major as indicated earlier were born into and grew up with the “old” cultural air of modernism. Generation X, today’s senior officers and non commissioned officers, were the children of the Cultural Revolution and had a sniff of the old air. The

Millennials, today's junior officers, junior non commissioned officers, and junior enlisted soldiers breathed only postmodern air in the culture they grew up in and it shows.

The postmodern culture that the Millennial Generation grew up in is known for:

1. Meaning coming from community not from specific truth sources. In other words their peer community determines meaning. The "tribe" becomes all important in meaning determination.
2. Rejection of single "truths" but reception of multiple possibilities for truth. This leads to tolerance being a cardinal virtue, and claiming truth as a cardinal "sin". Pushing that truth on others is vilified by millennials.
3. Emphasis on inclusion, and de-emphasis on anything that separates: ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, philosophy, etc.
4. Mistrust of institutions and authority structures. This has reduced in Millennials in comparison to Generation X, but still is present.<sup>19</sup>

### The Emerging Adult Life Stage

The preceding two elements explain the differences in the Millennials and preceding generations. The last observation is a point in time they have come to, a temporary, but nonetheless challenging point, called the emerging adult life stage.

Psychologists, following the classic analysis of Erik Erikson, argue that a human passes through eight psychosocial life stages, which are depicted in figure 4 below.

| Stage | Name                              | Basic Conflict                      | Important Events     | Outcome   |
|-------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| 1     | Infancy (birth to 18 months)      | <u>Trust vs. Mistrust</u>           | Feeding              | Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust.   |
| 2     | Early Childhood (2 to 3 years)    | <u>Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt</u> | Toilet Training      | Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.   |
| 3     | Preschool (3 to 5 years)          | <u>Initiative vs. Guilt</u>         | Exploration          | Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.   |
| 4     | School Age (6 to 11 years)        | <u>Industry vs. Inferiority</u>     | School               | Children need to cope with new social and academic demands. Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.   |
| 5     | Adolescence (12 to 18 years)      | <u>Identity vs. Role Confusion</u>  | Social Relationships | Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self.  |
| 6     | Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years)  | <u>Intimacy vs. Isolation</u>       | Relationships        | Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.   |
| 7     | Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years) | <u>Generativity vs. Stagnation</u>  | Work and Parenthood  | Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world. |
| 8     | Maturity (65 to death)            | <u>Ego Integrity vs. Despair</u>    | Reflection on Life   | Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfillment. Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.  |

Figure 4. Source: About.Com Psychology. *Erickson's Psychosocial Life Stages*<sup>20</sup>

Recently, Social Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett argues that modern American society has produced a new stage: “emerging adulthood” that occurs between ages 18-25.<sup>21</sup> Arnett noted that in research amongst 18-25 year olds, when asked whether they believe they have reached adulthood, most do not answer with “yes” or “no” but with “in some respects yes” and “some respects no”.<sup>22</sup>

This is the sole life stage in which nothing is consistent.<sup>23</sup> People under 18 are consistent: 95% live at home with at least one parent, 98% are not married, 95% attend school, and fewer than 10% have become parents. People in 30’s are also consistent. 75% are married, 75% are parents, and fewer than 10% attend school. However, that in-between twenties, what Arnett calls emerging adulthood, is full of inconsistency.

Arnett argues that emerging adulthood has five main features:<sup>24</sup>

1. It is the age of identity exploration, especially in love and work. Arnett asserts emerging adulthood has replaced Erickson’s adolescence as the period of greatest identity exploration.<sup>25</sup>
2. It is the age of instability. The amount of emerging adults who have moved in the previous year, spikes upward at age 18 from 15% who moved to a peak of 35% who moved at ages 20-24 before descending to the previous level in their 30s. At least half of them will move back in with their parents at least once.<sup>26</sup>
3. It is the most self-focused age of life. Arnett asserts this is not pejorative, but the goal of their self focus is gaining self sufficiency. They consider this a necessary step before committing themselves to enduring relationships in love and work.<sup>27</sup>
4. It is the age of feeling in-between, where they are neither adolescent nor adult. As noted earlier, emerging adults will frequently respond they both are and are

not adults. They consistently state the following three criteria for adulthood: accept responsibility for yourself, make independent decisions, and become financially independent.<sup>28</sup>

5. It is the age of possibilities, when hopes flourish, when people have unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives. Arnett reports that 96% of 18-24 year olds agree with the statement “I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life.” Although many will experience dreary jobs, bitter divorce or disappointing children—none envision that during their early twenties.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the generation under examination, the Millennial Generation is squarely in the middle of this intersection of life transition. Significantly, military leaders also need to grasp that they will always see in their Soldiers the emerging adult stage of life every day and every year, because the majority of their organization by design and necessity is always composed of 18-25 year olds. Thus the military will perpetually consist of emerging adults.

From this pool of late teens and twenty-somethings in generational, cultural, and life stage transition, the Department of Defense recruits America’s sons and daughters to serve in the armed forces. All the services depend on humans, but the Army and Marine Corps in particular are the more so , because they project combat power through human soldiers versus vast technological machines, often referred to as “boots on the ground”.

Because of that, the Army has put great effort into understanding and enhancing the human domains of its greatest resource: Soldiers. In 2009, the Army launched its Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program<sup>30</sup>. It focused on building resilience in soldiers

as humans within certain domains of human health common to all people: Physical, Mental, Social, Family, and Spiritual.<sup>31</sup> These domains were taken straight from the World Health Organization.<sup>32</sup> It was later expanded to include family members<sup>33</sup> and in 2013 became an important subset of the Army's Ready and Resilient Plan.<sup>34</sup> All five paths significantly influence the whole; however this paper will isolate and explore just one of those five domains of the human dimension: spiritual.

### Where is Millennial Spirituality?

This section isolates one of the five human domains of strength, Spiritual, and examines it from the perspective of the Millennial Generation. We will examine the pertinent definitions and trends attempting to portray "where" millennial generation spirituality is today.

#### Definitions

The word spiritual conjures many images; many of them centered on religious traditions, but it encompasses much more.<sup>35</sup> Scholars Patrick Sweeney, Sean Hannah, and Don Snider, defining the spiritual domain wrote:

We define the spirit as the vital animating force within living beings; the part of the human being associated with mind, will, and feelings; and the essential nature of a person...the human spirit influences how one thinks, acts, and feels about life. Thus, the development of the human spirit should form the cornerstone of any leader program.<sup>36</sup>

Secretary of the Army, John McHugh echoed similar themes six years later. In the 2013 Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness memorandum, Secretary McHugh used the following definition of spiritual fitness: "Understanding one's purpose, core values, beliefs, identity, and life vision. These elements enable a person to build inner strength, make meaning of experiences, behave ethically, persevere through challenges and be resilient when faced with adversity."<sup>37</sup> McHugh attempts to define the elusive

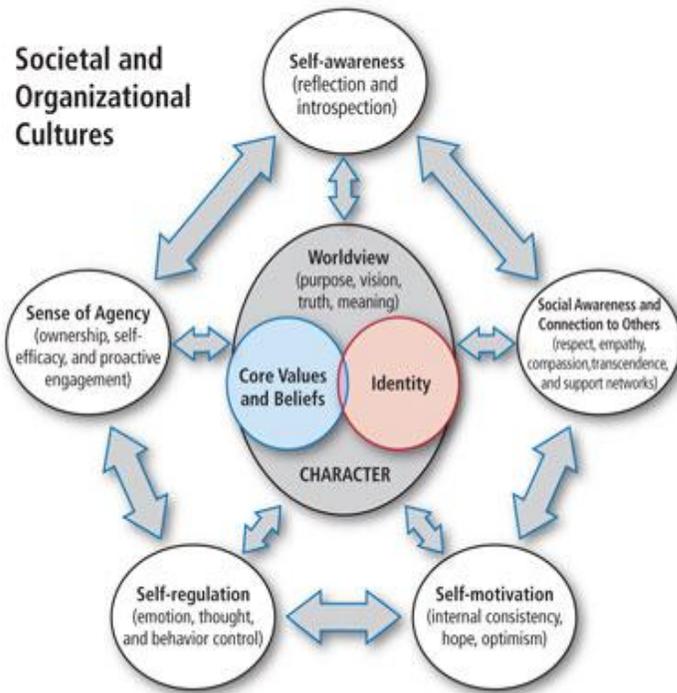
target while remaining sufficiently broad to allow for the full variety of spirituality as it relates to resilience. The key thing to understand is that while religion is a part of spirituality, and a logical item to discuss, it is not the whole—at least as defined by the Army or Department of Defense. Admiral Mike Mullen, the previous Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in his memorandum directing the Department of Defense Total Force Fitness Program defined spiritual fitness as “the ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, or values needed to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions”.<sup>38</sup> A figure in the same document representing the Total Force Fitness domains specifically used words like worldview and ethics in a diagram illustrating the domains and specifically did not use the word religion or faith.<sup>39</sup> Sweeney, Rhodes, and Boling provide a succinct separation:

While the definitions of spirituality and religion are sometimes blurred, they are two distinct concepts. *Spirituality* is both a process and path people use to discover their inner selves and develop their human spirit. *Religion* refers to institutions that propose and promote specified belief systems. It is one approach people can use in the process of developing their spirit.<sup>40</sup>

Dr. Lynn Underwood, creator of the widely used Daily Spiritual Experience Scale, provides a simple clear definition, describing the relationship between spirituality and religion as “two overlapping spheres that have much in common but also elements clearly distinct from the other”.<sup>41</sup>

Sweeney, Rhodes, and Boling using a model adapted from Sweeney’s previous work with Snider and Hannah employ a more complex model, but gain greater depth in this diagram in which five “self” traits interact with Worldview, Character, Identity, and Core Values. Religion may or may not influence each of the elements in their model.

## Conceptualization of the Domain of the Human Spirit



### Spiritual Fitness Outcomes

- Values-based Behavior
- Strength of Will
- Resilience
- Purpose and Meaning in Life
- Uplifting Relationships
- Openness and Acceptance
- Quest for Knowledge and Truth
- Enhanced Motivation to Leverage Skills to Realize Potential
- Greater Satisfaction and Commitment
- Increased Happiness

Adapted from Patrick J. Sweeney, Sean T. Hannah, and Don M. Snider, "The Domain of the Human Spirit," in *Forging the Warrior's Character: Moral Precepts from the Cadet Prayer*, ed. Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

Source: Sweeney, Rhodes, Boling, *Spiritual Fitness, Key Component of Total Force Fitness, Joint Forces Quarterly-66*

The key thing to understand about the spirituality is that while it may include religion it is broader. Certainly for some, even many individuals, religion is the primary foundation and informer of spirituality. However all Army definitions in use do not deem religion as a necessary element and when used put it in a supporting role.

### Trends

These definitions work pragmatically and legally within the Army context, however they are a transition away from earlier understandings that saw religion and spirituality as symbiotic if not synonymous. That is a transition that fits the Millennial Generation, because they are transitioning away from the religions, particularly such affiliation of their childhood and early youth. The Millennials are redefining their beliefs,

affiliations, and practices, toward a spirituality that is postmodern, post-denominational and often post-religion.

### *Postmodern*

Postmodern culture has significantly influenced Millennial Generation spirituality and practice. They have moved toward the same relativism, tolerance, and community in their spiritual lives as they do in other parts of their lives.<sup>42</sup> This occurs across all faith groups, agnostics, and atheists. However, this paper will elaborate on the numerically largest categories in society - Mainline Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, and Roman Catholics.<sup>43</sup>

Sociologist Christian Smith wrote of Mainline Protestants:

The Mainline or liberal Protestantism's Social Gospel ran out of gas. Emerging adults do not share liberal Protestantism's optimism about the growth of the Kingdom of God through cultural development and political reform. Emerging adults are highly optimistic about their future, but not society's. They do not feel compelled towards an active public life for religious or other reasons.<sup>44</sup>

However, Smith notes that while numeric growth and political attention might cause confidence, Evangelicals have much to worry about.<sup>45</sup> He indicates that contrary to the visibility of evangelicals, American culture is actually still dominated by Mainline Protestant thought. Smith asserts that while mainline churches declined dramatically during the twentieth century, the "liberals won". Their ideas are the mainstream of thought<sup>46</sup>. Even evangelicals typically known for their conservativeness have also shifted. Eric Teetsel, Director of the Manhattan Declaration, speaking at a panel hosted by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, asserted that "Millennial Evangelicals are too influenced by "Oprah-doxy" rather than orthodoxy. He characterized "Oprah-doxy" as lacking thoughtful consideration or immutable principles, instead operating from

emotion. Love, justice, inclusion and equality are good, while judgment, rigidity, and stratification are bad.<sup>47</sup> He further claimed that Millennial Evangelicals are feeling their way through life, not thinking, and want desperately to interface seamlessly in American culture.<sup>48</sup> In other words they desire to be or at least seem to be just like their non-evangelical peers in values, actions and appearance. That culture is a reflection of Evangelicalism's historic nemesis, mainline "liberal" Protestantism, which lost its battles at the micro organizational level and won its battles at the macro cultural level. Though far smaller numbers attend Mainline Protestant churches at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it does not matter because people do not need to hear liberal Protestantism's preaching.<sup>49</sup> Its worldview is simply part of the cultural air that Americans now breathe.<sup>50</sup>

American Catholicism is at an even more difficult crossroads. They too are being challenged by the current culture shift and their congregants' acceptance of it, while being rocked by clergy sex scandals. Millennial generation Catholics influenced by the culture at large question the church's teaching on sex, gender, and marriage.<sup>51</sup> Of course, that teaching comes from church authority, the clergy who in the minds of many Millennials were or symbolize the perpetrators and enablers of the sex scandals, which only increases the questioning of typically Catholic positions.<sup>52</sup>

### *Post Denominational*

The Millennial Values Project of Georgetown University documented this evolution, as shown in the chart below. In a sample of 2013 18-24 year olds comparing them between childhood and age 18-24 years old, it shows left to right: childhood starting affiliation, what percentage entered to adopt that affiliation, what percentage

exited to adopt a different affiliation, current affiliation at age 18-24, and that affiliation's net change between childhood and current affiliation.

| Religious Change Among Millennials |                    |                |               |                  |               |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|
|                                    | Childhood Religion | Entering Group | Exiting Group | Current Religion | Net Gain/Loss |
| Unaffiliated                       | 11.1               | 16.1           | 2.5           | 24.7             | 13.6          |
| Catholic                           | 27.9               | 0.5            | 8.4           | 20               | -7.9          |
| -White Catholic                    | 14.1               | 0.3            | 5.1           | 9.3              | -4.8          |
| -Latino Catholic                   | 11.4               | 0.2            | 2.6           | 9.0              | -2.4          |
| -Other Catholic                    | 2.4                | 0              | 0.6           | 1.8              | -0.6          |
| White Mainline Protestant          | 17.6               | 2.3            | 7.3           | 12.6             | -5.0          |
| White Evangelical Protestant       | 13.1               | 1.4            | 2.2           | 12.3             | -0.8          |
| Black Protestant                   | 13.1               | 0.4            | 1.5           | 9.7              | -1.1          |
| Other Christian                    | 10.8               | 1.7            | 2.9           | 9.6              | -1.2          |
| Non-Christian Religions            | 4.5                | 2.3            | 1.2           | 5.6              | 1.1           |
| DK/Other                           | 4.3                | 1.8            | 0.6           | 5.5              | 1.2           |

Source: Public Religion Research Institute, Millennial Values Survey, March 2012 (N=2013)<sup>53</sup>

The movement away from childhood religions is most pronounced in White Catholics and White Mainline Protestants. It is least in White Evangelicals and Black Protestants. The largest movement is toward self-identifying as unaffiliated, now a quarter of all Millennials: 24.7%<sup>54</sup>. Also in 2012, the Pew Research Forum, including atheists and agnostics, identified 34% of 18-22 year olds as “Unaffiliated”.<sup>55</sup>

### *Post Religion*

Millennials also change the way they approach religion and spirituality. A majority indicates religion is still important, but they redefine traditional boundaries and practice to suit their taste. One of the most prevalent redefinitions is separating spiritual from religious.<sup>56</sup> Pew Research Forum found that among the growing “unaffiliated” over a third considered themselves spiritual but not religious.<sup>57</sup> Typically they define “spiritual”

with words like personal belief, perception, or feeling and “religious” with inauthentic, institution, regulation, and expectations. Mansfield notes, “Many are eager for spirituality but suspicious of institutions.”<sup>58</sup> David Kinnaman, President of Barna Research Group, writing about unchurched Millennials notes their hostility to the church, and particularly evangelicals.<sup>59</sup> But what is more remarkable is this quote: “Many young people who grew up in church and have since dropped out do not hesitate to place the blame. They point the finger, fairly or not, at the establishment: *you lost me.*”<sup>60</sup> Often younger Christians vigorously separate their Christian identity from religious institutions, such as the Millennial survey respondent who wrote: “I wonder what percentage of...lost Catholics feel like I do, that we did not leave the Church, but rather the Church left us”<sup>61</sup> In 2012, Jefferson Bethke, age 22 posted a video “*Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus*” on YouTube. He and friends thought it might get a few thousand views. They were wrong; it had fourteen million views in eight days. It clearly struck a chord and went viral.<sup>62</sup> Christian Millennials frequently affirm Bethke’s opening text: JESUS>RELIGION.<sup>63</sup> The Pew Research Forum also found religious practice is declining among Millennials<sup>64</sup> as did the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR)<sup>65</sup>. At the same time, interest or at least willingness to identify with agnosticism and atheism are increasing. In the past five years, 2007 to 2012, as a percentage of total U.S. population, atheists went from 1.6% to 2.4% and agnostics went from 2.1% to 3.3<sup>66</sup>%

Dr. Christian Smith, Director of the University of Notre Dame’s Center for the Study of Religion and Society, led the large sociologist team that conducted the most exhaustive research to date on millennial generation spirituality: the National Study on

Youth and Religion (NSYR). Utilizing a 2532 person longitudinal panel study tracking that cohort from age 13 to 23, NSYR identified six categories that Millennials are evolving into:

Committed Traditionalists, comprising approximately 15% of Millennials. They embrace and articulate a strong religious faith, which they actively practice.

Selective Adherents, comprising approximately 30% of Millennials. They believe and perform certain aspects of their religious traditions but neglect and ignore others.

The Spiritually Open, comprising approximately 15% of Millennials. They are not personally very committed to a religious faith, but are receptive and mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters.

The Religiously Indifferent, comprising approximately 25% of Millennials. They neither care to practice religion nor oppose it.

The Religiously Disconnected, comprising approximately 5% of Millennials. They have little to no exposure or connection to religious people, ideas, or organizations.

The Irreligious, comprising approximately 10% of Millennials. They hold skeptical attitudes about and make critical arguments against religion and generally reject the idea of personal faith.<sup>67</sup>

#### What happens when Millennials join the Military?

Millennial Spirituality in the military context is challenging in two areas. The first area is identifying whether the military culture influences, indeed, changes their spirituality. The second is the leadership challenges presented to a different generation of leaders by their spirituality.

#### Does the military culture change millennial spirituality?

It is a reasonable assumption that enlisting millennial generation soldiers bring their spiritual values with them when they enlist. However once they have completed military training and joined military culture, there is scarce data on their actual religious and spiritual interests and practices, and whether they have changed. While there are

similarities and differences with civilian counterparts which are addressed below, whether military culture changed their spirituality is unknown.

*Millennials may be similar to civilian counterparts*

Millennial Generation Soldiers have some affiliation trends similar to those of their civilian peers in American society. Millennial Soldiers are also increasingly moving toward non affiliation, with the self identified “No Religious Preference” now exceeding 20% of the Army which, remember, is composed of over 66% Millennials. This percentage is much higher in under 30 year old soldiers.<sup>68</sup> Millennial Soldiers will frequently move toward pragmatic and hybrid positions. Stephen Mansfield in *The Faith of the American Soldier* wrote,

“Millennials (Soldiers) may not devote themselves to the traditions of faith, they are eager to understand life in terms of the spiritual realities of faith. Sometimes this leads to a kind of utilitarian spirituality, what some have called a “faith buffet” or a “whatever works” kind of religion. When one Millennial was asked what he believed, he said, “one part Buddha, three parts Jesus, two parts fortune cookie, and three parts Oprah.”...Most Millennials acquire their religions much like they catch colds: through casual contact with strangers. The result is a pastiche of faith that is not only without system, but often without cohesion.”<sup>69</sup>

Like society at large, agnostics and atheists in the military have found increasing voice. In December 2012, First class (senior) Cadet Blake Page resigned from the United States Military Academy in a scathing Huffington Post blog.<sup>70</sup> He asserted the Academy and its Officer Corps were criminals neglecting their oath to the Constitution for rampant religious emphasis at the Academy. He and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers are claiming the large “No Religious Preference” identification includes many agnostics and atheists,<sup>71</sup> but the neither the Army nor any other study has offered data to support that assertion.

### *Millennials may be different than civilian counterparts*

Despite the similarities just noted, it is premature to assume millennial generation soldiers are automatically the same as their civilian counterparts in terms of spirituality. They have gone through a vastly different set of life experiences from age 18 to 25. The Army broadened these soldier's perspectives in ways their civilian counterparts did not experience. The military introduces them to social and professional relationships with people from different regions of America, and often with ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. Deployment takes them typically to Afghanistan or Iraq and introduces them to cultures that are radically different than their own American culture, including religious practice. During those deployments soldiers experience the realities of life, death, taking life, violence, and hardship for themselves, their enemies, and noncombatants. It is certainly a very different context in which to develop into emerging adulthood than that experienced by their civilian peers. It is easy to imagine how the experiences of Millennial Generation Soldiers may influence their spirituality, moving them in radically different trajectories than their civilian counterparts. However, this has not been comprehensively researched to date.

### Leadership Challenges

Given their unique humanness, Army leaders have numerous challenges leading their very diverse soldiers. However, the spiritual domain provides the most perplex challenges and the ones that require the greatest sensitivity, now and in the future.

#### *Perplexity*

A growing challenge for Army leaders, and their chaplains, is the fact that the spirituality of Millennials is defined in non-religious terms. This includes Bethke's "Spiritual but not Religious" category, Mansfield's descriptions of hybrid religion, and

Smith's description of Spiritually Open. It is confusing because the Army, and particularly their Chaplain Corps, is accustomed to certain religious paradigms. The Army endorses the Constitutional free exercise of religion and uses the Chaplain Corps to provide that religious support. However the Millennials' freedom of choice has moved from following major faith groups to mixtures that cross previous boundaries. For instance, consider the soldier who described himself to Stephen Mansfield as, "one part Buddha, three parts Jesus, two parts fortune cookie, and three parts Oprah."<sup>72</sup> If that were his sincere religious belief and he desired to practice it, would that mean Army commanders, through their chaplains, would need to provide this soldier a weekly Christian worship service, a shrine room with a Buddha statue, and that the Defense Logistics Agency would need to secure an approved vendor of fortune cookies and Oprah rerun DVDs? To stay within more common religious categories, what if a different soldier desired accommodation to practice Lent, Passover, Ramadan, all multiple day religious practices or if a soldier requested three consecutive days off to celebrate Christmas, Ashura, and Kwanza, three religious and ethnic holidays that can fall back to back? This certainly challenges the spiritual and religious paradigms Army leadership is accustomed to.

### *Sensitivity*

The subject of spirituality is also an increasingly sensitive one. The reader will notice in the definition given by Secretary McHugh includes the disclaimer, "Participation in the spiritual dimension of the CSF2 program is strictly voluntary."<sup>73</sup> In a memorandum that is directive in nature, this particular caveat stood out. It is reflective of the highly sensitive nature of spirituality both personally and in the public arena. One of the frequent areas of difficulty is the fine line between a military leader expressing their

first amendment rights to freedom of speech regarding personal religious choices and what is inappropriate command influence. It is certainly a matter of controversy. In 2010 Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwarz issued a memorandum stating that his commanders should not comment on or notify airmen of religious events<sup>74</sup>. Advocates such as The Military Freedom Foundation's Founder, Mikey Weinstein, enthusiastically applauded the policy as a watershed, while General Schwarz's measure was quickly derided by sixty-six Republican Congress members.<sup>75</sup> Ironically Mr. Weinstein reversed himself in an Op-ed entitled "*Good Riddance to the Air Force's Religious Intolerance Enabler in Chief*."<sup>76</sup> and vilified General Schwarz once he was out of power for not doing more of what Weinstein was lobbying for. Weinstein equated General Schwarz's actions to the complicity of tarnished Penn State Football coach, Joe Paterno in that University's sexual assault of minors cover up scandal. Indeed, religion is a sensitive and prickly briar patch for commanders.

Ultimately these external forces influence public opinion and play out in political and legal systems. Any leader seeking to assist Millennial Soldiers regarding spirituality must be aware there are outside the military advocacy groups watching the spiritual domain much closer than the other four domains. Leader decisions and policies in the arena of religion can take on a life all their own and soon become an item of public, political or legal debate, far beyond the intent the individual commander was attempting to achieve. At the time of this paper's writing, Washington D.C. and the Department of Defense are in the midst of a budget crisis, but much attention has shifted to acrimonious posturing regarding religion within the military. This adversarial discourse occurring in the media, advocacy groups, and Congress forced the Department of

Defense to issue a statement attempting to clarify its positions on religious freedom and discourse in an attempt to reduce the tension.<sup>77</sup>

Secretary McHugh used the following definition of spiritual fitness noted earlier:

“Understanding one's purpose, core values, beliefs, identity and life vision. These elements enable a person to build inner strength, make meaning of experiences, behave ethically, persevere through challenges and be resilient when faced with adversity.”<sup>78</sup>

It is helpful to conclude this section on the spiritual domain on the irony of the first and last words of Secretary McHugh's definition of Spiritual Fitness which highlight the condition well: Understanding—unfortunately there is little; Adversity—unfortunately there is much. In summary, the key points to understand are that Millennial Soldiers are transitioning in their perspectives regarding spirituality and religion, but much more study is needed to gain a clear picture. Also, any Army leader's efforts regarding the spiritual domain should not just account for this changing landscape but be aware of the external forces that are also shaping it.

#### Ways the Army should address Millennial Spirituality?

This paper makes eight recommendations, targeted to two Army offices. They are intended to do one or more of the following:

- Enhance soldier resilience,
- Improve provision of religious support, anticipate challenges and opportunities, and
- Gain understanding in order to more effectively achieve these ends.

#### Who should address the issues?

These recommendations are aimed at the following Army offices, which have responsibility or interest in this area.

1. Department of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff G-1 (DCS-G1), the proponent of the Army's Ready and Resilient Program<sup>79</sup>, of which Comprehensive Soldier Fitness is a part.
2. Department of the Army Office of the Chief of Chaplains (DACH), which is the proponent for Army wide religious support<sup>80</sup>. Given the future nature of these recommendations, most likely they will fall within the Office of the Chief of Chaplains G5/7: Strategy, Plans and Communication.

What should they do (recommended actions)?

1. DCS G-1 commission studies to determine the impact of combat in the current wars on the spiritual dimension. Currently there are no contracted studies, peer reviewed articles, or PhD dissertations that address this. These should be part of a broader effort to ascertain impact of combat on each of the human domains of Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness.
2. DACH form a Millennial Religious Support Working Group in 2014. This group should anticipate, address, and develop recommendations for Millennial Generation religious and spiritual issues for the Chaplain Corps and Army writ large. The group should specifically identify Millennials' needs in relation to the Free Exercise of Religion. It could be either a part of or separate from the Futures Study Group described below. It should be led by a very small number of millennial attuned senior chaplains and primarily composed of chaplains, chaplain assistants and soldiers from the Millennial Generation.
3. DACH spin off a Homeland Generation Working Group from the Millennial Working Group starting in 2017 or 2018. Homeland is the current leading name

of the generation born, starting about 2002.<sup>81</sup> They are eligible to begin enlisting in 2019 and will arrive en masse the following year. They will reach fifty percent of the force by 2025 to 2027. This author identified that the Millennials had exceeded fifty percent of the Army in 2008, which was six to seven years into their generations' window of enlistment eligibility.<sup>82</sup> Applying the same pattern, the Homelanders should become the majority of the Army in 2025 to 2027.

4. DCS G-1 or DACH commission studies to gain clarity on soldiers identifying as No Religious Preference (NRP). The author was brought up in the chaplaincy, thinking NRPs had nominal Christian beliefs even though they did not choose, "Christian No Denomination" or a more specific preference. Military Religious Freedom Foundation asserts that the NRPs are primarily agnostics, atheists, and humanists who chose that because they did not want stigma with their choice of agnostic or atheist, or humanists who did not have a choice<sup>83</sup>. It is likely that NRP includes the religiously ambivalent that Smith<sup>84</sup> described earlier. What is unknown and challenging about the NRPs is the possibility that they are a hybrid of multiple preferences. Gaining this understanding will significantly enhance the Army's capacity to serve this largely unknown grouping of personnel in ways that are desirable and useful to them.
5. DCS G-1 or DACH clarify and publish definitions of Spirituality and Religion and expectations for commanders and chaplains as it pertains to Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, Religious Support, and other programs that intersect these areas.

6. DACH examine knowledge sharing and when legal practice partnerships with denominations and organizations that habitually work with the 18-25 year old age demographic in collegiate or public sector ministries. These partnerships are certainly not limited to Christian organizations. For instance, the Jewish collegiate ministry Hillel adopted new strategies of peer to peer engagement and 900 interns have built 35, 000 relationships with uninvolved Jewish peers on 70 campuses.<sup>85</sup> According to a March 2012 poll conducted for Hillel by Penn Schoen Berland, 45 percent of Jewish students participate in Hillel events, a 36 percent increase since 2005, and three in four Jewish students have a favorable opinion of Hillel, a 21 percent increase since '05. The number of Jewish students who seek a deeper, more meaningful relationship with many aspects of Jewish life and with fellow Jewish students is also rising.<sup>86</sup> Millennial Jewish Students are seeking authentic, relevant, and meaningful Jewish experiences.<sup>87</sup> Likewise there are numerous Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other collegiate and youth oriented religious interest groups and non religious groups who can provide insight into effective engagement with Millennials 18-25 years old.
7. DACH implement changes regarding garrison religious support with Millennials, so that those who desire to participate in spiritual fitness through chapel participation have an opportunity that is relevant and appealing. This author published a thesis in 2008 identifying that 85% of the Protestant chapel models employed by the Army were designed to connect with the Silent Generation or older generations, which are the current retiree community, and the remaining 15% used a model designed for Boomers, today's retirees and general officers.<sup>88</sup>

The author's subsequent inquiry indicates there has been little change since. However, at the same time civilian sector churches have implemented models that have significantly connected with the millennial generation.<sup>89</sup>

8. DACH implement a Futures Study Group. This Group should function for the chaplaincy similar to the manner in which Asymmetric Warfare Group informs Army leadership of future opportunities, threats, and blind spots. Some example challenges to consider are below, and such a group would illumine many more.
  - a. What religious support forms are emerging or will emerge the next decade that will be useful for religious support?
  - b. What potential legal actions might force DOD and DOD chaplaincies to reassess and reshape religious support?
  - c. How will Army leaders address the human dimension of Soldiers spirituality if current forms of religious support are severely constrained or eliminated due to budget or legal action?
  - d. Will consideration of either of those possibilities stimulate new paradigms and efficiencies?
  - e. Similarly, what partnering opportunities are underutilized or ignored due to budget, legal concerns, or simply institutional rigidity or fear? While some options are legally impossible, some may be legal, feasible and helpful.

### Conclusion

This paper started with a quote from President Bush in the dust of September 11, 2001 appealing for a new generation of heroes to rise up. Quickly military recruiting followed suit. One of the Army's recruitment ads after September 11th showed Army

soldiers throughout history answering the call to protect and serve at great hardship to themselves. The ad ended with "Every generation has its heroes. This one is no different."<sup>90</sup>

The first members of that generation, just old enough to enlist did in fact answer that call. They and their demographic cohort provided the majority of the all volunteer force that has fought and continues to fight America's longest war. Though Millennials may act differently and have different values and approaches, they are no different when it came to being the heroes this country needed and still needs. President George W. Bush called the Millennial Generation to rise to a worldwide crisis and to national service in the military. When his successor, President Barack Obama steps out of the Oval Office for the last time, those same Millennials will be on the eve of becoming battalion commanders, Pentagon action officers, and sergeants major. The millennial generation President Bush called forward on 9-11 is the Army of today and the Army leaders of tomorrow.

## Endnotes

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<sup>6</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising* (New York: Random House Inc., 2000), 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> The Pew Research Forum, *Religion Among the Millennials*, February 17, 2010, (accessed <http://www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx> (accessed January 12, 2013)).

<sup>10</sup> Military One Source, *2011 Demographics, Profile of the Military Community*, November 2012. [http://www.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2011\\_Demographics\\_Report.pdf](http://www.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2011_Demographics_Report.pdf) (accessed May 1, 2013), 35-37.

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<sup>20</sup> *Erikson's Psychosocial Stages Summary Chart*. [http://psychology.about.com/library/bl\\_psychosocial\\_summary.htm](http://psychology.about.com/library/bl_psychosocial_summary.htm) (accessed April 4, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood, A Theory of Development From the Late Teens through the Twenties*, *American Psychologist*, May 2000, 469.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood, The Winding Road from Late Teens Through the Twenties*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>30</sup> M. G. Mullen, *CJCSI 3405.1, Total Force Fitness, Appendix E*, September 1, 2011 [http://www.dtic.mil/cjcs\\_directives/cdata/unlimit/3405\\_01.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/cjcs_directives/cdata/unlimit/3405_01.pdf) (accessed 15 January 2013); George Casey, ALARACT 097/2010 - COMPREHENSIVE SOLDIER FITNESS EXECUTION ORDER April 6, 2010. [http://dmna.ny.gov/r3sp/resources/NGB\\_and\\_Army\\_Guidance/ALARACT-097-2010\\_GAT\\_&\\_CSF.pdf](http://dmna.ny.gov/r3sp/resources/NGB_and_Army_Guidance/ALARACT-097-2010_GAT_&_CSF.pdf) (accessed 15 January 2013).

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