Focault Analysis Essay, Research Paper

The Manufacturing of an American Soldier: An Examination of the Indoctrination Process During the Gulf War at Fort Knox, Kentucky

“As a soldier, you have accepted a solemn obligation to defend the ideals of freedom, justice, truth, and equality as found in The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. Whether you are serving a single term or making a career of the military, your actions should never be contrary to the ideals and principles upon which this nation was founded.”

- Department of the Army, Soldier’s Handbook (62)

In February of 1991, Bravo Troop of the 5/15 Cavalry stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky Training Facility performed a ritualized, ceremonial examination of its new recruits. The recruits arose at four a.m. and marched till eight to arrive at a small, secluded building surrounded by forest. The recruits stood in a single-file line facing the entrance of the building, eyes forward, feet shoulder width apart, hands folded in the small of their back. Approximately one hundred and twenty recruits stood peering through the lenses of their protective masks, watching fifteen soldiers enter the building. Once inside the building, the fifteen recruits stood at attention, fingers curled, thumb locked on second knuckle of the index finger, hands placed at their sides, heels together, feet splayed at a forty-five degree angle, stomach in, chin-up, eyes forward, in three lines, five recruits deep, facing the Drill Instructor. The room was filled with thick, white smoke. The only light came from a small fire burning on the cement floor at the drill instructor’s feet. Beside the fire was a metal, olive-green container labeled in black, block lettering the read, “Solid CS Agent.” The Drill instructed the recruits, still standing at attention, to remove their protective masks, which they did with little hesitation.

Exposure to such high concentrations of CS gas produces a violent, bodily reaction that cannot be refused. Once the face is exposed, the valve connecting the lungs to the windpipe involuntarily closes. Those who were able coughed quietly to themselves for lack of air while others vomited silently. The eyes, once exposed to the irritant, attempted to flush the gas away with profuse tearing. Likewise, the nose made an effort to remove the irritant. Thick ropes of mucus hung from the recruits’ noses, some of these ropes reaching as far down as the knees on shorter soldiers. The fifteen recruits tried to stand at attention, fingers curled, thumb placed on second knuckle of index finger, hands at their sides, heels together, feet splayed at a forty-five degree angle, stomach in, chin-up, eyes forward, in three straight lines, five recruits deep, facing the drill instructor with a mixture of mucus, tears, and vomit smeared across their bodies. The drill instructor, still wearing his protective mask, walked to the first recruit and demanded to know the maximum effective range of an M16-A2 rifle. The recruit barked back something unintelligible, his mouth making dumb O shapes. After the drill seemed satisfied, he dismissed the recruit, who then ran out the back door of the building. The drill made his way down the line, examining each recruit individually in order to make sure that the correct level of docility had been exercised, while simultaneously administering his power to set each recruit free.

Apparently, I had a lot to learn?.

\*\*\*

The point of this essay is to examine the American military’s indoctrination of the new recruit. In many ways, this essay will echo and hopefully build upon the work of Michel Foucault, particularly Discipline and Punish. As Foucault admits in Discipline and Punish, “There can be no question here of writing the history of different disciplinary institutions, with all their individual differences. I simply intend to map on a series of examples some of the essential techniques that most easily spread from one [institution] to another” (139). Since Foucault never intended a specific application in Discipline and Punish, the purpose of this essay is to examine the ways in which Foucault’s theories concerning discipline play out in actual practice at a specific place in time, namely that of the Fort Knox Training Facility during the height of the Gulf War.

This particular historical event offers a snapshot of the American indoctrination process when it is at war, a scene not witnessed in this country since Vietnam. As the lead guitarist from the spoof, rock-documentary film This is Spinal Tap explains, “Our amps go to eleven:” Likewise, the emergence of the Gulf War presented a small window in time in which the social forces that worked to transform the bodies of its new recruits were undoubtedly increased.

Furthermore, it must be mentioned that I am writing from the perspective of experience. Although readers understandably demand objectivity and may consider this perspective problematic, it should be understood that the only way this particular event in time could have been witnessed is from an insider’s perspective. Foucault speaks of ‘enclosure’ as an important element of disciplinary space, and that is certainly the case here. Access to military space is always regulated and, in many cases, simply prohibited, but this restriction, although always present, becomes absolute during wartime. Finally, it should also be mentioned that the particular role I played in the United States Army (19 Delta, cavalry scout with a specialization in armored reconnaissance) required the longest basic training period possible in the Army’s combat arms field, fifteen weeks as opposed to the usual eight mandatory of all other Army regulars. This extended training period served to increase these ‘transformative’ forces even further.

It is hardly a question that the United States military treats the new recruit as a ‘docile body,’ that which can be “manipulated, shaped, trained” into a well trained soldier that “responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces” (Foucault 136). As Foucault describes it, as early as the late eighteenth century,

the soldier had become something that [could] be made; out of a formless clay, an

inapt body, the machine required [could] be constructed; posture [was] gradually corrected; a calculated constraint [ran] slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently the automatism of habit; in short, one?’got rid of the peasant’ and ‘[gave] him the air of a soldier.’” (135)

The indoctrination of the American soldier can be seen as a process that deconstructs the individual’s sense of self while simultaneously reconstructing the individual in accordance with the values of the military: As Eisenhart suggests, the military constructs physically fit and disciplined bodies that will obey orders without question (210)-ultimately a body that will not hesitate to violate the social contract and kill. The indoctrination process also reworks the individual into a collective mentality: “The [recruit's]?body [is] trained to function part by part [and] must in turn form an element in a mechanism at another level” (Foucault 164). Basic training teaches individual skills that are then combined with the forces exercised at the level of the squad, whose forces are then combined into a platoon, a company, a squadron, a regiment and so forth. Individual forces are not relevant except in their relation to the larger whole. On one level, it is our culture’s sense of individuality that the indoctrination process targets. From the onset of the Gulf War, it was Fort Knox’s responsibility to train these new recruits in order to replace the expected losses in this complex, collective military machine, particularly the armored tank battalions/regiments that were expected to perform the majority of the actual fighting in the open terrain of the Iraqi desert. During the escalation in the Gulf, Fort Knox was an institution confronted with the problem of instilling proper ‘military bearing,’ of removing the perceived inaptitude, inefficiency, disobedience and general disarray of civilian life.

Upon arriving at Fort Knox, recruits find themselves sealed within the confines of a disciplinary space. Enclosure is complete as all outside influence is severed and the recruit is forbidden to leave this space for any reason. A recruit’s social sphere becomes essentially limited to the Drill Instructor’s disciplinary tactics and his particular platoon consisting of about thirty other recruits. The imposed isolation serves to increase the disciplinary forces at work since a recruit has nowhere to turn for support or a chance of experiencing any other ways of existing in this new world. In isolation, one loses their perspective; the sense of enclosure works to limit the recruit’s ability to formulate their own subjectivity. Even the recruit, once the indoctrination process has taken hold, becomes an accomplice to the silence and secrecy surrounding the process, which Foucault argues is necessary for abuse (get quote and cite from Amy). After fifteen weeks of constant physical and mental harassment, it becomes accepted as a matter of fact, something one deserved, a source of shame not to be discussed with others, or simply an event one dismissed entirely. The altering of a civilian’s subjectivity is potentially so complete, that oftentimes they lack the ability to discuss the indoctrination process from their previous civilian perspective and one simply becomes a functioning part of the military disciplinary system, which is the end result, or primary goal, of basic training. In essence, the process inherently works to silence its own history. As a result of its physical isolation and altered subjectivities, the indoctrination process comprises a space that has the spiraled into relative obscurity from the rest of the American mainstream, oftentimes with drastic results.

Operating within enclosure, the first week of a recruit’s life at Fort Knox is spent in a central processing area known as ‘Reception.’ The primary purpose of this space is to file more bureaucratic paperwork on the recruit and ‘prepare’ them for the permanent drill instructors that arrive to pick up their recruits once the processing is complete. Here the socialization process forces the civilian to emit the ‘proper signs’ of a new recruit. The recruit’s head is then shaved and the civilian clothes are replaced with military issue uniforms. Although the recruit has, as of yet, no real conception of military bearing, the recruit is at least forced to emit the external signs .

These signs systematically work to displace the ego as the body of a new recruit begins its transformation into the clean canvass upon which the ideal of military bearing is written. Since the shaved head is particular only to the indoctrination process, it serves no real purpose other than a humiliating method of normalization; a humiliation that even the military prisoner escapes . Pride in one’s former appearance is muted as the recruit’s once familiar self-image is transformed. Shorn and placed in fatigues, the civilian body is reborn into strict uniformity with the rest of the group. Normalized in such a way, the forces at work have begun to deconstruct the individual and situate him within the collective body. Not only does normalization affect the individual, it also affects the way the recruit’s body is perceived by others. A dehumanized body is, after all, much easier to abuse. The body of a new recruit heralds one’s new position in life.

As Foucault notes, “the body is?directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it?force it?to emit signs” (25). Everywhere the individual goes, his body is marked and forced to emit the signs of a new trainee, which set the boundaries of its own confinement. These signs also function to further the indoctrination processes’ comprehensive system of enclosure.

Although intermingling with the civilian workers and soldiers stationed at Fort Knox is minimized by the tight control that regulates a recruit’s movement within the disciplinary space (see timetable below), the embodied rhetoric of the marked recruit ensures that there is no confusion. “Discipline,” Foucault argues, “proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space,” and that it “individualizes bodies?in a network of relations” (141 & 146). The shaved head, lack of a unit patch and rank communicates a particular signal to the military observer; it is the construction of the ‘\*censored\*ing new guy,’ a ‘newbie,’ a piece of ‘fresh meat,’ which is physically written across a recruit’s body. Soldiers permanently stationed at Fort Knox who randomly encounter the recruit are bound by tradition not to afford them any respect. The signs emitted by the recruit signal his position as an object within the network of disciplinary relations, which offers virtually any soldier the opportunity to exert absolute control over the body of the dehumanized trainee.

If a noncommissioned officer (NCO) has a chance encounter with a new recruit, the recruit runs an arbitrary risk of being run through various drills, exercises and being verbally abused. NCOs understand how easy it is to humiliate and confuse the recruit who, once the indoctrination process has taken hold, becomes merely an order-obeying machine. This hazing is usually carried out on a recruit who was unfortunate enough to be caught at even a short distance from his platoon and away from the influence of his particular Drill Instructor. As Edward Drea argues, “group activity [is a] universal characteristic of basic training camps” (331). It is as if a solitary recruit is immediately suspected of claiming agency, which becomes a source of possible resistance. Passing NCOs that harass a lone recruit reinforced the idea of hiding within and conforming to ‘the herd.’

In short, Reception is an area where the recruit is forced to emit soldierly signs, and perhaps be introduced to a weak concept of discipline, although they still know nothing of its true effects. The instilling of military discipline is the sole duty of the drill instructor. Our Drill Sergeants came for us on the 9th of January in 1991, the day of my nineteenth birthday and thus began a three-month, psychological war between the Drill Sergeant and each individual recruit . I use the term psychological war since physically assaulting a recruit is no longer tolerated within the military. Since Vietnam, a drill sergeant’s disciplinary tactics within the military have shifted from the corporal to the psychological. This shift toward ‘a more gentle form of discipline’ is essentially more effective since its effects on the recruit remained hidden and relatively unobservable. Whereas the rhetoric of a bruised body once spoke volumes, one’s subjectivity remains much easier to control and effectively silence.

The relationship between a Drill Sergeant and his recruit is unique, to say the least. It is, as Foucault notes, “an uninterrupted, constant coercion?which [makes] possible the meticulous control of the operations of the [recruits'] body, which [assures] the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (137). One had to remain utterly passive and try to remain hidden while attempting to master a whole new set of foreign skills under intense methods of examination. A ’smart’ recruit continually made an effort to remain concealed from the panoptic forces at work no matter how much one was verbally or physically aggravated. To show visible signs of resistance, intentional or otherwise, meant suffering continuing degradation and/or exercise to the breaking point.

During the Gulf War, the level of stress that was brought to bear upon the recruit’s body was intense and, in many ways, escapes retelling-it is something I feel that has to be experienced to be understood. Discipline and punishment was a constant state of the recruit’s existence, which consisted primarily of verbal harassment and physical exercise to the point of muscle failure combined with the force of public humiliation . Generally speaking, recruits quickly learned that even unquestioning obedience to authority was insufficient to avoid the ritualized abuse since the cause of punishment was sometimes arbitrary or altogether indiscernible. Even if one performed the task at hand to the best of one’s ability and kept their mouth shut, one could nonetheless be both physically and psychologically terrorized for seemingly no reason at all. The recruit eventually learned to distrust his own bodily senses . Arbitrary punishment was a tactic aimed at systematically deconstructing any shred of individual confidence. Once the indoctrination process took hold, self-management became constantly deferred to an external locus of control. Distrust in one’s self, in the end, facilitated compliance with the military hierarchy.

Previously I mentioned that a ’smart’ recruit kept a low profile by remaining hidden. There were few, if any, opportunities for subversion and one, if they meant to resist, was naturally inclined to philosophical resignation and simply biding one’s time. This tactic of remaining hidden, I realize in retrospect, was, in many ways, nothing less than an illusion, a self-imposed form of surveillance, the calculated end result of the forces at work within this disciplinary space. By making a conscious attempt to remain hidden, one adopted docility and became an accomplice. At the time, there seemed no choice except docility; to deviate meant immediate punishment. If one decided to continually deviate, the potential of becoming a military prisoner or an inmate of Fort Knox’ psychiatric ward existed. Despite the protection of stoic resignation, this self-imposed/ imposed docility was extremely painful psychologically; to be acted upon and not act for three months heralded a systematic ‘quiet death’ for each and every recruit. In essence, one became the ultimate object, which was, for me anyway, the true terror of boot camp.

On the first day, our Drill Sergeants made it clear that we were to speak only when spoken to and to end each phrase with the formal address of “Drill Sergeant.” From the perspective of the recruit, communication was reduced to a seemingly meaningless, one-way event that contained no negotiation, no co-construction of the recruit or the world around him. For fifteen weeks, the majority of a recruit’s communication was leveled to a dehumanizing, impersonal exchange. Usually, a recruit’s response was reduced to an affirmative “Yes! Drill Sergeant! ” regardless of what was said. Also, the body, in strict accordance with military regulations, was locked into a fixed position of docility during all communicative events that both restricted movement and created what I would call a ‘micro-Panopticon.’ This panoptic position, the state of attention, could be imposed upon the recruit anytime the Drill Sergeant felt corrective measures were needed. To do otherwise constitutes criminal behavior punishable by military law.

The Soldier’s Handbook gives the following description for the position of attention, the cornerstone of all military movement outside of a combat zone:

Your weight should be distributed equally on the heels and the balls of your feet. When you come to attention, you should bring your heels together smartly with the toes forming a 45-degree angle, as shown in figure 8. Keep your legs straight without locking your knees. Hold your body erect with your hips level, chest lifted, and your shoulders square and even. Your arms should hang straight, but not stiffly with the backs of the hand outward. Curl your fingers so that the tips of the thumbs are alongside and touching the first joint of the forefingers. Your thumbs should be straight and along the seams of your trousers or skirt with the first joint of the forefingers touching the trousers or skirt. Your head should be erect, and your eyes should look straight to the front. (28)

This position was assumed whenever the Drill Sergeant spoke to a recruit. On one level, the position of attention functions in the military as a means to ensure a proper respect for rank. As Foucault notes, modern disciplinary tactics have perhaps become more complete than they have in the past as they focus on “supervising the processes of activity rather than its result” (137). In other words, discipline not only invests itself in the end result of an action, it now invests itself in the very means used to achieve an end thus allowing control to penetrate even deeper into the fabric of the body. It is not enough to simply have the proper respect; control during the indoctrination process becomes exerted over the very manner in which it is displayed.

As I mentioned above, the position of attention has the effect of calling into existence a ‘micro-Panopticon.’ The position of attention acts as an extremely intense individualized examination of the recruit used to measure the correct level of docility. When the recruit’s body is locked into the position of attention, the eyes remain unfocussed, unseeing and to the front. To look directly at the Drill Instructor is construed as a challenge to his authority. Foucault describes the Panopticon as “a machine for disassociating the see/being seen dyad” and that it assures “dissymmetry, disequilibrium, [and] difference” (202). Again, one is merely acted upon without acting. These power relations serve to teach a recruit the basic nature of military hierarchy. In practice, the Drills would lock a private into the position of attention for any perceived error or deviation from the norm and then proceed to verbally and/or physically harass them. Such exposure in a normative environment makes the individual highly conspicuous: “Visibility,” as Foucault notes, “is a trap” within disciplinary spaces (200).

If a drill told a recruit, for example, he was a “cock-gobbling faggot” for a perceived deviation, the position of attention would allow the drill to examine the recruit for any signs of resistance. The recruit’s face was scrutinized for any trace of emotion “until [eventually, within the fifteen week process] a certain ‘blank look’ in [the recruit's] eye’s was achieved” (Eisenhart 211). If one involuntarily displayed anything but absolute docility, the normalizing and punishing forces were then increased. The indoctrination process’ surveillance methods made certain each recruit was individualized and made visible, which ensured the right amounts of corrective force were administered.

While docility is imposed at the level of language itself, the emphasis placed on ‘drill and ceremony’ weaves docility into the very fabric of a recruit’s body.

One of the first things a recruit learns in basic training is how to perform drill and ceremony, which governs the way soldiers move in mass. The excessive length of time spent perfecting these drills seemed absurd to me at the time, since none of it would help a soldier stay alive if he was shipped off to the Gulf. As the ground forces continued to build in the Gulf and the Air Force persisted in its bombing campaign, we spent weeks simply marching.

Although it seemed absurd at the time, the attention paid to drill and ceremony served to impose docility, a coherent tactic of control targeted at the recruit’s body. Drill and ceremony becomes a method of indoctrination, an initial gateway to the world of discipline since it produces a space for surveillance, for producing infinite errors and for their subsequent corrections. It serves to produce uniformity and precision by concerning itself with the minutest details. In short, almost all of the forces at work within a disciplinary space are combined to form an intricate tactic of control.

The act of drill and ceremony primarily utilizes what Foucault calls the “the temporal elaboration of the act?a collective and obligatory rhythm, imposed from the outside.” It is, as Foucault notes, “a ‘programme’; it assures the elaboration of the act itself” (151-2). For one, marching is accomplished according to a cadence, a rhythm called by the ranking soldier in charge. All movements are accomplished in unison and the slightest deviation attracts the Drill Instructor’s gaze and produces an immediate correction. Directives for moving in mass are comprehensive. Complete control is exercised and any former power the recruit once had over their civilian body is systematically placed in the hands of another.

A recruit’s body must strictly conform to twenty-five pages worth of regulations that govern movement as part of formation (Department of the Army 25-55). Below I have included the directives for a simple maneuver as an example. I have chosen to include a simple set of actions, known as ‘present arms/order arms’, solely for the sake of brevity, as it appears in The Soldier’s Handbook. Most procedures are certainly more complex:

“Present arms / order arms” (from sling arms).

a. On the command of “Arms” of “Present, arms,” the soldier-

(1) Reaches across the body with the left hand and grasps the sling just

above the right hand.

(2) Releases the sling and performs the hand salute with the right hand.

b. On the command, “Order, arms,” the soldier-

(1) Lowers the right hand to the side, then regrasps the sling at the original

position.

(2) Releases the sling with the left hand and returns it to the left side at the

position of attention. (51)

It should be noted that the separate actions of ’sling arms,’ ‘the hand salute,’ and the ‘position of attention’ all have their own particular movements meticulously mapped out elsewhere in the Soldier’s Handbook. As Foucault correctly notes, each minute act is broken down into its smallest element. All parts of a recruit’s body are articulated and given a specific role to play in the combined exercise (151-2). Military regulations and a Drill Sergeant’s obsessive attention to detail leaves the recruit’s body no improvisational space, no chance for internal control. Drill and ceremony also subjects the recruit’s body by imposing what Foucault refers to as a precise system of command (166).

In the above example, of the first half of the verbal signal enables the recruit to anticipate the action’s execution. When the first half of the verbal signal “order” is announced, a one beat pause takes place before the order is verbally completed. At the sounding of “arms,” the body simultaneously completes the desired act. Through vigorous and repeated training, the correct response to the system of verbal commands becomes almost Pavlovian. It is an automatic and unthinking response. Repetition and aggressive persecution of mistakes produce a platoon of marching machines. After years of moving in mass formations in this manner, one begins to feel like an insignificant human cog in the greater human/military machine. The process of drill and ceremony furthers the loss of the self while training one to submit to the exterior hierarchy. The military’s attention to detail allowed almost infinite opportunities for errors and their subsequent correction. Details, within the military, are one of the primary tactics of exercising disciplinary force.

Constant surveillance of a recruit’s body and their living space were carried out routinely as well where any deviation of the smallest detail would again attract the Drill Instructors’ gaze. As Foucault suggests, “Discipline is the political anatomy of detail” (139). Discipline invests itself in the minutest ways and establishes “an ‘infra-penalty;’” it exerts itself and creates a space “that the laws [prior to the eighteenth century] had left empty; they defined and repressed a mass of behavior that the relative indifference of the great systems of punishment had allowed to escape” (178).

For example, the forces at work within this particular disciplinary space concerned itself with the correct way to lace a boot. To those who remain on the outside of such disciplinary institutions, this small detail of lacing a boot ‘correctly’ may seem trivial and almost laughable; however, forces within view boot lacing as a matter of utmost importance. Quite obviously, the way a recruit laces a boot isn’t an error to be taken seriously, one that would, for example, produce casualties in the Gulf; such attention to details is a tactic that opens up an almost infinite space for deviation and correction, which provides for the exercise of discipline and punishment. According to military tradition, the left lace is always placed over the right. For a recruit to visibly err in such a minute way would certainly incur a rash of insults and the promise of more public humiliation in the future.

Likewise, uniforms must always be starched and pressed, boots shined, headgear worn at a specific angle, rank placed at a precise distance from the bottom of the collar and so forth. Attention to detail allows for the infinite control of the entire mechanism and this control is transferred onto their living space as well. Regulations dictate the manner in which one folds their socks and underwear, length measured to the exact inch regulates the folding of a T-shirt; the sequence in which uniforms are hung; the particular way one must make their bed, the specific length the sheets were to be folded back; and, of course, everything had to be impossibly clean

327