

The Nature of “Federal Service” in Robert A. Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*

James Gifford

Robert A. Heinlein’s 1959 novel *Starship Troopers* has been called one of the most controversial science fiction works ever written. Few who are familiar with science fiction as a whole would disagree. Although it contains no sex and no bad language, this relatively short novel contains the detailed exposition of several ideas that have proven almost explosively controversial, within the realm of science fiction and without.

Central to the controversy is the book’s notion that a voting franchise must be earned by a would-be citizen. A franchise is not given to anyone, for any reason, until they have served a term (defined in the book as two years) in Federal Service. The book makes clear that the great majority of citizens do not bother with a term or a franchise; indeed, the protagonist’s father is a wealthy and successful businessman who is proud of his family’s hundred-year record of non-service. The government makes no attempt to recruit or entice volunteers; in fact, they work at dissuading would-be inductees by emphasizing the hard and brutal nature of service and the fact that those who enlist have no choice of service—they put themselves entirely at the government’s mercy for the duration of their term.

The minimum age of enlistment is eighteen, male or female, and there appears to be no upper limit. The protagonist’s father, past forty, enlists later in the book. No one may interfere with a decision to enlist. In the words of the protagonist, Juan Rico, early in the book, after his best friend Carl has announced his intention to enlist:

So I told [Carl] I was joining up, too.

He gave me an odd look. “Your old man won’t let you.”

“Huh? How can he stop me? And of course he couldn’t, not legally. It’s the first completely free choice anybody gets (and maybe his last); when a boy, or a girl, reaches his or her eighteenth birthday, her or she can volunteer and nobody else has any say in the matter. [Ch. II, p.21]

Furthermore, it is made clear that no citizen who wants to enlist can be turned down for any reason, except for lacking the mental competence to understand the decision. The doctor giving Juan his induction physical examination makes this plain:

I asked one of the doctors what percentage of the victims flunked the physical. He looked startled. “Why, we *never* fail anyone. The law doesn’t permit us to.”

“Huh? I mean, excuse me, Doctor? Then what’s the point of this goose-flesh parade?”

“Why, the purpose is [...] to find out what duties you are physically able to perform. [...] The only way you can fail is by having the psychiatrists decide that you are not able to understand the oath.” [Ch. II, p.29]

©1996 by James D. Gifford. All rights reserved. No portion of this work may be duplicated in any form, paper or electronic, without express written permission of the author, except as otherwise provided in this notice. This work may be reproduced in its entirety for personal or academic use without explicit permission or payment of royalty as long as the work is not duplicated in any modified form. Permission for quotation of portions of this work exceeding ‘fair use’ limits is also granted provided each such quotation or group of quotations is accompanied by a full citation of the work’s title and author information. Quoted material in this work taken from *Starship Troopers* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959) and *Expanded Universe* (New York: Ace Books, 1980), both by Robert A. Heinlein. Use of this material is believed to be within the copyright ‘fair use’ doctrine.

I am deeply indebted to David Dyer-Bennett (ddb@ddb.com) for his inspiration and basic research into this work’s topic. I am also grateful to the many correspondents who, in a variety of electronic forums, helped create and shape the opinions expressed in this work.

The simple notion that a vote must be earned, or paid for, instead of being freely granted to every person who reaches a certain age—or owns a certain amount of land or property, or is of a certain gender or race—is in and of itself capable of causing violent controversy. In a later essay published in the 1980 collection *Expanded Universe*, Heinlein explores a range of options for limiting the vote to citizens willing to accept the responsibility for their actions along with the simple right.

However, it is not my intent to explore the ramifications of whether it would be good to limit the franchise in any of the ways Heinlein suggests. We have here a novel whose central notion is that the franchise *is* limited, and that franchisees must be discharged veterans of Federal Service. The term "veteran" is used throughout the book to designate a citizen who has completed his or her term of service and earned a franchise. As for "discharged," it is made clear that serving members of Federal Service do not have the vote:

Why, I had gone through all this to get my franchise, hadn't I?—and if I went career, I was just as far away from the privilege of voting as if I had never enrolled...because as long as you were still in uniform, you weren't entitled to vote. [Ch. XI, p.129]

So, in the *Starship Troopers* universe, any citizen may request a term in Federal Service and be granted that request without anyone's let or hindrance. Completion of the term is the only way to gain the right to vote.

So, just what is "Federal Service"? There are two commonly given answers, only one of which can be correct:

1. *Federal Service is roughly equivalent to present-day military service (Army, Navy, Marine), including military support services such as research and development, logistics, labor battalions and intelligence.*
2. *Federal Service is equivalent to general government service, including military service and what we would call "civil service," the latter being responsible for ninety-five percent of all Federal Service positions.*

There has been an extraordinary amount of argument over which answer is correct. There is evidence to support both views, although it is unequally distributed. The evidence for answer one is strong and plentiful. The evidence for answer two is sparse, weak and subjective, although points can be made in its favor. Given the imbalance, it would seem that the argument would have been settled long ago. This would be true were it not for a very strong comment by Robert Heinlein himself, insisting that the latter answer is correct.

Heinlein's Commentary

The 1980 collection *Expanded Universe* contains several dozen shorter works by Heinlein, many never before published or never reprinted after their initial magazine appearances. In between this valuable material is even more valuable commentary by Heinlein on the works, his writing career and his own life.

One of the previously unreprinted pieces is a newspaper ad for the "Patrick Henry League," created by Heinlein and his wife to drum up support for the U.S. nuclear testing program. In 1958, President Eisenhower was considering a unilateral cessation of nuclear weapon testing, based on a Soviet promise to make it joint. The Heinleins were adamantly opposed, given the Soviet Union's poor record of promise-keeping, and the Patrick Henry League was the result.

Eisenhower suspended nuclear testing. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union ignored its promise and resumed testing with some of the largest and "dirtiest" weapons ever detonated.

Heinlein was infuriated. He stopped work on the novel that would become *Stranger in a Strange Land* and wrote *Starship Troopers* in a white-hot fury. Like most of his novels, it was completed in a few weeks. Although written as a juvenile novel for Scribner's, following his other immensely successful novels in that series, it was rejected and was eventually published as an adult novel by G.P. Putnam's Sons.

In the interstitial material following the Patrick Henry ad in *Expanded Universe*, Heinlein complains in detail about the critics' response to *Starship Troopers* over the years. One by one, he demolishes their arguments in crisp, angry prose. At first, however, he makes the following curious statement:

"Veteran" does not mean in English dictionaries or in this novel solely a person who has served in military forces. I concede that in commonest usage today it means a war veteran...but no one hesitates to speak of a veteran fireman or a veteran school teacher. In *STARSHIP TROOPERS* it is stated flatly and more than once that nineteen out of twenty veterans are *not* military veterans. Instead, 95% of voters are what we call today "former members of federal civil service." [ellipses and emphasis in the original]

There is certainly nothing ambiguous about that, and an author is certainly the last word on his or her work. (At least, so I believe; those with deconstructionist leanings are free to visit the egress at this point.)

And yet... Heinlein is wrong on this point. Flatly so.

This commentary is often cited by those who believe in answer number two; it is often the source of their belief in the correctness of that answer.

But Heinlein is still wrong on this point.

The Nature of Federal Service: A Summary

Rather than laboriously build the chain of evidence and present conclusions on the way, I prefer to summarize my interpretation of the nature of Federal Service here, then present all of the evidence pro and con afterward.

My interpretation is based on the text of *Starship Troopers*, and reasonable inferences therefrom:

- Federal Service is closely akin to military service in our era, with no significant aspects of what we would consider "civil service." It does have significant military-support divisions and positions, such as logistics, intelligence and military R and D.
- All explicit and unambiguous references to Federal Service in the novel make it clear that it is military/military support in nature.
- The assumption of the characters is that Federal Service is military in nature.
- Nowhere in the novel does it state or significantly imply that any discernible fraction of the volunteers are placed in "civil service" positions—certainly not nineteen out of twenty of them.
- The few references that support the "civil service" notion of Federal Service are vague, ambiguous and require non-objective reading of the text.
- Many of the arguments for the "civil service" version of Federal Service pile supposition on guess on analogy, and ignore explicit passages to the contrary.

Heinlein's statement is incorrect. The book does not "flatly state" that any significant fraction of Federal Service positions are civil service-like even once, much less "more than once."

The Nature of Federal Service: The Evidence

The text of *Starship Troopers* has many passages explicitly describing Federal Service, and many more in which a character implies something significant about its nature. I intend to make at least brief reference to each of these passages.

References are indicated by chapter (Ch. II, Ch. XI, etc.) and by page number (p.22, pp.45-47, etc.) These page numbers refer to the 1980 Berkley Book paperback edition of *Starship Troopers* and should be identical with or close to those of most paperback editions.

The first reference to Federal Service is in Chapter II, when Juan describes his decision to join up and the events that followed. When he announces his intention, his father does his best to talk Juan out of it. Most of this passage is neutral with respect to the nature of Federal Service. However, there are two significant comments by Juan's father:

He sighed again. "All normal stages. And the last one, right at the end of adolescence, when a boy decides to join up and wear a pretty uniform." [Ch. II, p.21]

It is possible that all or many branches of a "civil service" Federal Service would require or issue uniforms—after all, serving in any capacity is a proud privilege. But this smacks more of military service, since uniforms are not commonly worn by general government workers. A later comment by Juan's father is even more explicit:

"Son, don't think I don't sympathize with you; I do. But look at the real facts. If there were a war, I'd be the first to cheer you on—and to put the business on a war footing. But there isn't, and praise God there never will be again. We've outgrown wars. This planet is now peaceful and happy and we enjoy good enough relations with other planets. So what is this 'Federal Service'? Parasitism, pure and simple. A functionless organism, utterly obsolete, living on the taxpayers." [Ch. II, p.23]

Juan's father clearly sees Federal Service as military service, a defense agency, a war mechanism. If large parts—not to say ninety-five percent of it—were more general governmental functions, why does Emilio Rico assume exclusively that Juan's interest is in military-style service? Why does he not mention, say, the utter boredom and wasted time of a job 'flying a desk' in some faceless bureaucracy, or the hazards of civil duties such as heavy public works construction? In a more general Federal Service, any of these would be more likely than a slot in the five-percent military.

In a following passage, Juan is remembering comments made by his History & Moral Philosophy instructor, Mr. Dubois:

Suddenly he pointed his stump at me. "You. What is the moral difference between the soldier and the civilian?" [Ch. II, p.24]

First of all, a clear definition has been made here: a *civilian* is a *non-soldier*, not necessarily a *non-veteran* in Heinlein's definition. Admittedly, Dubois is an ex-Mobile Infantry officer and the discussion we are overseeing is about the politics of force—but the instructor is still making a clear distinction without reference to "civil service" veterans. Juan answers:

"The difference," I answered carefully, "lies in the field of civic virtue. A soldier accepts personal responsibility for the safety of the body politic of which he is a member, defending it, if need be, with his life. The civilian does not." [Ibid.]

Again, it is just barely possible to assume that the discussion is limited to military service. Yet there is no mention of any civil service aspect to Federal Service—"civilians" are still "non-soldiers." While an ex-file clerk might be called a "veteran," it is unlikely that he or she would have been called a "soldier" while serving the Federal Service term.

When Juan and his friend Carl go to sign up, they are joined by a third friend, Carmencita Ibañez. As they are discussing their enlistment, she announces that she is going to try for spaceship pilot. (Later, the book makes it clear that she is an ideal candidate for the job.) Juan, apparently to impress the "ornamental" Carmen, also states his intent to become a pilot. Then Carmen turns to Carl:

"Are you going to be a pilot, too?"

"Me?" Carl answered. "I'm no truck driver. You know me—Starside R&D, if they'll have me. Electronics."

"Truck driver' indeed! I hope they stick you out on Pluto and let you freeze. No, I don't—good luck!" [Ch. II, p.26]

None of these positions are exclusively military, although their context has already given them a military cast. Carmen and Carl are clearly qualified for the positions they are seeking, so their decisions don't require any justification; Juan is clearly aiming for pilot based on its glamour, and to impress Carmen. It's doubtful that anyone signing up would choose a dull "civil service" position, so perhaps there is little to be gleaned from this passage.

Then they go inside the Federal Service building, to the recruiting station in the rotunda.

A fleet sergeant sat at a desk there, in dress uniform, gaudy as a circus. His chest was loaded with ribbons I couldn't read. [Ch. II, p.26]

If Federal Service is largely "civil service," why is the recruiting officer a gaudily-decorated soldier (just as military recruiters are in our own day)? If only one in twenty recruits ends up in a military branch of Federal Service, why is an active-duty sergeant used as a front for the recruiting station?

The three announce their interest in joining up, and sergeant sends Carmen up to the enlistment office with an approving comment. He then turns a cold eye to the boys:

"So?" he said. "For what? Labor battalions?"

"Oh, no!" [Juan] said. "I'm going to be a pilot."

He stared at me and simply turned his eyes away. "You?"

"I'm interested in the Research and Development Corps," Carl said soberly, "especially electronics. I understand the chances are pretty good."

"They are if you can cut it," the Fleet Sergeant said grimly[.] [Ch. II, pp.26-27]

Labor battalions; pilot; R&D Corps. All very military-sounding. No mention of anything like civil service, which a decorated combat officer attempting to scare off uncertain volunteers might mention. The Fleet Sergeant then explains why the government doesn't care "one bucket of swill" whether Juan and Carl enlist or not:

"Because it has become stylish, with some people—too many people—to serve a term and earn a franchise and be able to wear a ribbon in your lapel which says you're a vet'ran...whether you've ever seen combat or not. But if you *want* to serve and I can't talk you out of it, then we have to take you, because that's your constitutional right. It says that everybody, male or female, shall have his born right to pay his service and assume full citizenship—but the facts are that we are getting hard pushed to find things for all the volunteers to do that aren't just glorified K.P. You can't all be real military men; we don't need that many and most of the volunteers aren't number-one soldier material anyway.

[...] So for those who insist on serving their term—but haven't got what we want and must have—we've had to think up a whole list of dirty, nasty, dangerous jobs that will either run 'em home with their tails between their legs and their terms uncompleted...or at the very least make them remember for the rest of their lives that citizenship is valuable to them because they've paid a high price for it." [Ch. II, p.27]

Here we have it, in the words of a Federal Service recruiter: Federal Service is either real military duty, or some dirty, dangerous facsimile thought up to test the mettle of those not good enough for real military duty. Where are the nineteen-times-more-plentiful "civil service" jobs in this scenario? The Fleet Sergeant makes it even plainer a little later on:

"So why don't you boys go home, go to college, and then go be chemists or insurance brokers or whatever? A term of service isn't a kiddie camp; it's either real military service, rough and dangerous even in peacetime, or a most unreasonable facsimile thereof. Not a vacation. Not a romantic adventure." [Ch. II, p.28]

In the words of the one person in the book in the best position to know, there is no "civil service" aspect to Federal Service.

Throughout the book, it is made abundantly clear that government workers in all non-military positions are "civilians," hired "by the barrel" to do the "ant work." Indeed, the second person Juan encounters during his enlistment process is the doctor giving him his induction physical:

"Doctor, were you already a doctor when you joined up? Or did they decide you ought to be a doctor and send you to school?"

"Me?" He seemed shocked. "Youngster, do I look that silly? I'm a civilian employee."

"Oh. Sorry, sir."

"No offense. But military service is for ants. Believe me. I see 'em go, I see 'em come back—when they do come back. I see what's done for them? And for what? A purely nominal political privilege[.]" [Ch. II, p.29]

Once again, it is assumed that Juan's enlistment is in the military, with no mention of the possibility of a "civil service" assignment. And the doctor, who logically should be a Federal Service member, turns out to be a "civilian employee." When Juan is given the service oath for Federal Service, his first thought is this:

At least it made me realize that I was no longer a civilian, with my shirttail out and nothing on my mind. [Ch. II, p.31]

Unless Federal Service includes boot camp for file clerks—or is entirely military in nature—this comment makes no sense.

Juan's request to be a pilot is taken seriously, and he is tested for aptitude. He fails miserably, and so:

The placement officer let me list my lesser preferences, in order [...] Naturally I listed all the Space Navy jobs (other than pilot) at the top; whether I went as power-room technician or as cook, I knew that I preferred any Navy job to any Army job—I wanted to travel.

Next I listed Intelligence [...] After that came a long list; psychological warfare, chemical warfare, biological warfare, combat ecology, [...] logistics corps, [...] and a dozen others. Clear at the bottom, with some hesitation, I put K-9 Corps, and Infantry. [Ch. II, p.32]

After a week of aptitude testing, Juan finds he has "flunked every choice" above K-9 Corps. An interview with the placement officer disqualifies him for that branch, and so:

"How would you like to be an infantryman?" [the placement officer asked.]

I came out of the Federal Building feeling subdued and not really unhappy. At least I was a soldier; I had papers in my pocket to prove it. I hadn't been classed as too dumb and useless for anything but make-work. [Ibid.]

On his way out, Juan runs into the recruiting sergeant and tells him he was accepted in the Mobile Infantry. The sergeant responds:

His face broke in a big grin of delight and he shoved out his hand. "My outfit! Shake, son! We'll make a man of you—or kill you trying. Maybe both."

"It's a good choice?" I asked doubtfully.

"A good choice? Son, it's the *only* choice. The Mobile Infantry *is* the Army. All the others are button pushers or professors, along merely to hand us the saw; *we* do the work." [Ch. II, p.35]

It is just barely possible to read some support for the "civil service" Federal Service from these paragraphs, in that Juan lists only military positions and gets one. Perhaps he knows full well of the "civil service" options, but military service seems more glamorous and exciting. However, one comment of his seems to give lie to this notion: He is pleased that he managed to hang onto what he sees as the bottom rung of the ladder and avoid "make-work"—which was defined by the recruiting sergeant as "a hard, dirty facsimile of real military service." Why was Juan not afraid, instead, of being

stuck as a file clerk or power plant maintenance worker or some other dreary, pointlessly hazardous job?

Once Juan is in boot camp (recognizable to any present-day Army or Marine veteran), he watches as his bunkmates wash out, one by one, for various reasons. One Carruthers is simply too old for the rigors of boot camp (at 35!) and is taken away on a stretcher. Juan mentions that he later ran into Carruthers:

He had refused discharge (you don't have to accept a medical) and wound up as a third cook in a [Space Navy] troop transport. [Ch. III, p.46]

It seems unlikely that a man medically discharged from one branch of the military would be given a slot in another branch; it seems much more likely that such an individual would end up in a non-physical "civil service" position. Unless, of course, there are no such positions within Federal Service and a workable slot had to be found for him.

Later, Juan is on light duty due to a training injury and is serving as orderly in the company commander's office. After an ugly confrontation he is directed out of the commander's office:

There was nobody in the outer office, just a couple of civilian clerks. [...] I doubt if the civilians could hear [the argument in the inner office] as they were each wearing transcriber phones and were bent over typers—besides, they didn't matter. [Ch. 6. pp.64-65]

A remote and unpleasant military training base has civilian clerks? Not Federal Service "civil service" clerks?

It is just barely possible to draw support for the "civil service" Federal Service from these and other paragraphs by arguing about the meaning of the term "civilian." The novel is about a military serviceman in a (proud and haughty) military branch of the service during wartime. Perhaps everyone who is not a soldier is a "civilian" to the M.I., whether or not they are Federal Service members.

Except that a distinction is drawn in the book, more than once, not only between "soldiers" and "civilians," but between "Federal Service members" and "civilians." (Supporting quotes follow.)

While still in boot camp and ready to resign through discouragement and hardship, Juan receives a letter from his high-school History & Moral Philosophy teacher (who turns out to be a retired M.I. officer):

You are now going through the hardest part of your service— [...] the deep, soul-turning readjustments and re-evaluations necessary to metamorphize a potential citizen into one in being. [Ch. VI, p.73]

This may be ambiguous—after all, it is from one military serviceman to another—but it does not seem to leave any room for a non-military veteran/citizen. It is difficult to imagine that the training for, say, a park ranger or sanitation engineer would involve "soul-turning readjustments."

The signature is a surprise to Juan:

Old Sour Mouth was a short colonel? [...] Mr. Dubois had never used any sort of rank around school. We had supposed (if we thought about it at all) that he must have been a corporal or some such who had been let out when he lost his hand and had been fixed up with a soft job [...] Of course, we had known he was a veteran since History and Moral Philosophy must be taught by a citizen. But an M.I.? He didn't look it. [Ch. VI, p.74]

Mr. Dubois does not resemble a "real" soldier like the other M.I. Juan knows; Juan follows by describing him as a "prissy dancing-master type." Yet it does not occur to Juan and his schoolmates the Dubois was anything but a soldier—not a clerk, not a manager, not a technical worker.

On his first leave back in "civilian life," Juan encounters some merchant marine sailors and makes the following observations:

[Juan and his M.I. companions] were the only uniforms in the place; most of the other customers were merchant marine sailors—Seattle handles an awful lot of surface tonnage. I hadn't known it at the time but merchant sailors don't like us. Part of it has to do with the fact that their guilds have tried and tried to get their trade classed as equivalent to Federal Service, without success—but I understand some of it goes way back in history, centuries. [Ch. IX, p.101]

Once again, there is ambiguity and room for interpretation in this paragraph, but the world of *Starship Troopers* is one that has been completely reorganized and rebuilt after a devastating war. It seems unlikely that merchant marine service would not become part of a unified Federal Service—unless Federal Service is exclusively military and the traditional rivalry between the Navy and the Merchant Marine has been continued.

Well into his active term of service, Juan gets an R&R break on the planet Sanctuary. He makes the following comments about why it is a better place for R&R than Earth itself:

[W]hile it has an awful lot of civilians, more than a million, as civilians go they aren't bad. They know there is a war on. Fully half of them are employed either at the Base or in war industry[.]

[...] Besides the civilian wonderful 50 per cent [females], about 40 per cent of the Federal Service people on Sanctuary are female. [Ch. XI, p.125]

This is one of the few passages in the novel that provides any support for a non-military aspect of Federal Service—but again there is ambiguity. The female Federal Service members could be clerks and technicians... or Logistics, Intelligence and Quartermaster files.

Juan ends up dating a "slender, redheaded" chemist

from the Research Station. She had known Carl on Pluto and Carl had written to me to look her up if I ever got to Sanctuary. [Ch. XI, p.127]

It is implied later that the Pluto Research Station had military significance; it is difficult to imagine how a chemist would be transferred from there to a remote planet except under (military) orders.

On the suggestion of a shipmate, Juan decides to "go career"—sign up for a twenty-year officer's career (during which he will not technically be a citizen and cannot vote). In evaluating the suggestion, he makes the following comment:

I could hear Colonel Dubois in my mind: "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."

Admirable sentiment for a soldier; puzzling if applied to most stripes of "civil servant."

As he is being detached for OCS, Juan encounters his own father—in M.I. uniform as a corporal. He expresses surprise:

"Uh...but Father, you're— Well, I mean, aren't you sort of old to be soldiering? I mean, the Navy, or Logistics, or—"

"I wanted the M.I. and I got it!" he said emphatically. [Ch. XII, p.133]

It does not occur to Juan that his (fortyish) father would be better off serving in a "civil service" capacity—after all, Emilio Rico is a wealthy and successful businessman with a variety of skills that would be useful in a more bureaucratic setting. Clearly, no such "civil service" opportunities exist in Federal Service.

Juan has a brief date with Carmencita (now a pilot-trainee) which results in a wonderful evening except that

It was somewhat dimmed by the fact that we had each heard about Carl—killed when the Bugs smashed our research station on Pluto.[.] [Ch. XII, p.138]

While it is possible that Carl was working for a "civil service" branch of Federal Service, it appears that the Pluto Research Station was of sufficient military importance to warrant destruction by the enemy. If he was not a military serviceman, he was working in a military-support capacity.

In OCS, Juan must repeat the History and Moral Philosophy course of his high-school days—only this time, instead of merely being audited, it must be passed. There is a considerable amount of commentary and discussion of the present political system in the course of this class:

[T]he Federation [...] just grew. With national governments in collapse [...] something had to fill the vacuum, and in many cases it was returned [war] veterans. [T]he system [had] collapsed; somebody else moved in.

The first known case [...] was typical. Some veterans got together as vigilantes [...] and decided not to let anyone but veterans on their committee. Just arbitrary at first [...] but what started as an emergency measure became constitutional practice...in a generation or two.

[T]hose [...] veterans [...] decided that [...] they weren't going to let any [...] civilians have any say about it. [Ch. XII, p.142]

In other words, the Federation was founded by military veterans who permitted only other military citizens to run things—and eventually, to vote. There is no mention whatsoever of citizenship being expanded to include non-military veterans.

The discussion continues into why the system is successful:

"Mr. Salomon, can you give me a reason—not historical nor theoretical but practical—why the franchise is today limited to discharged veterans?" [the instructor asked.]

"Uh, because they are picked men, sir. Smarter."

"Preposterous! [...] Service men are not brighter than civilians. In many cases civilians are much more intelligent." [...]

Sally answered, "Uh, service men are disciplined, sir."

Major Reid was gentle with him. "Sorry. An appealing theory not backed up by facts. [... It is not] verifiable that military discipline makes a man self-disciplined once he is out [and can vote.] And you have forgotten that in peacetime most veterans come from non-combatant auxiliary services and have not been subjected to the full rigors of military discipline; they have merely been harried, overworked and endangered—yet their votes count." [Ch XII, p.143]

Here again it is clearly stated: in Federal Service, there are soldiers (combatants) and members of "non-combatant auxiliary services." It takes a mighty stretch of the language and imagination to apply this phrasing to most conceivable "civil service" jobs—yet it quite accurately describes non-combatant branches of a military organization: logistics, R&D, etc.

Major Reid makes two more telling comments about the nature of the system:

"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." [Ch. XII, p.144]

"We ensure that all who wield [sovereign franchise] accept the ultimate in social responsibility—we require each person who wishes to exert control over the state to wager his own life—and lose it, if need be—to save the life of the state." [Ch. XII, p.146]

It is near-impossible to apply these statements to the general run of "civil servant," but they apply magnificently and whole-heartedly to soldiers and military support personnel.

After Juan graduates from OCS and returns to battle as a junior officer, he makes these comments:

While a few M.I. are on desk jobs you will always find that they are shy an arm or leg, or some such. [T]hey really ought to count twice since they release able-bodied M.I. by filling jobs which require fighting spirit but not physical perfection. They do work that civilians can't do—or we would hire civilians. Civilians are like beans; you buy 'em as needed for any job that requires merely skill and savvy. [...]

But *all* "soft, safe" jobs are filled by civilians[.] [Ch. XIII, p.164]

Here again it is barely possible that "civilian" to Lieutenant Juan Rico means "non-military Federal Service member." But here again, that is a stretch of the language and seems contradicted by the other passages of the book.

With that, I believe that I have quoted or referenced every single passage of *Starship Troopers* that makes a significant statement about the nature of Federal Service.

Summary

I have already summarized my interpretation of the nature of Federal Service. To reiterate: I believe that the evidence in the text of *Starship Troopers* is overwhelmingly in favor of the "exclusively military and military support" Federal Service. The only contrary evidence is sparse, vague and subject to varying interpretation.

Except, of course, for Heinlein's own flat and uncompromising statement.

Why Was Heinlein in Error?

It is difficult to baldly state that an author I admire very much is wrong in his statement regarding one of his works I also admire very much. I would hesitate to declare Robert Heinlein wrong on anything, much less a statement regarding one of his own works.

But the facts—the words of the book itself—do indeed prove him wrong.

I believe I know why. But what follows is my opinion, based on a handful of facts and much supposition, based in turn on a double decade of studying Heinlein's works. I may be utterly wrong.

The interstitial material in *Expanded Universe* is unusual in that it has a rambling, conversational tone and is nowhere near as polished and tight as most of Heinlein's nonfiction writing. It does not seem to be a tightly planned, researched and written essay. It is more like an evening's conversation with Robert Heinlein—a conversation over dinner and a few drinks, in the living room of his beloved house at Bonny Doon. As such, it is unique, valuable and utterly charming.

But like a casual conversation, it contains a number of factual errors and rather loosely specified opinions that probably would not have been included in a more formally written and edited essay. These errors and loose opinions include:

- Heinlein's statements about the "Bridey Murphy" past-life case. The case was quite thoroughly and competently debunked in the 1950's, with followups in later decades. Investigation of past-life regression has shown that all known cases are the result of leading by the interviewer and fantasizing by the patient. Heinlein's defense of the case is an embarrassment; I find it hard to believe he would have formally written such a statement.
- Heinlein excoriates *Time* magazine for its exposé of Bridey Murphy and hammers home the point by mentioning other reporting errors by *Time*. However, it was not *Time* magazine that ran the Bridey exposé; it was *Life* magazine.
- Heinlein points readers to Twain's "The Curious Republic of Gondor"; the title is actually "The Curious Republic of Gondour." (A trivial slip, I admit, but I'll explain why it is significant in a moment.)

- Heinlein's statements about the overreported size of Moscow in 1960 are, to put it bluntly, bizarre. I have queried Sovietologists, former Army Intelligence officials, reference books of every sort, and even peeked into publications of nutball anti-Soviet groups. Nowhere was I able to glean the smallest supporting comment for the Heinleins' supposition. (Perhaps it's just that well-kept a secret.)
- Heinlein mentions that he wrote nine "save the world" articles shortly after the war, and none were ever published. (Three appear in *Expanded Universe*.) There are actually five such articles in the UC Santa Cruz archives.

Again, that last is a trivial slip, but I believe it and the "Gondour" error point up the source of all these mistakes: the interstitial material in *Expanded Universe* is a transcript of one or more telephone interviews with Heinlein, conducted by Jim Baen (the editor of the collection) or one of his editorial assistants. Although Heinlein undoubtedly reviewed and edited the typed transcript, for whatever reasons, it was done incompletely.

"Gondour" was heard and transcribed as "Gondor." "Five such stories" was heard as "nine such stories." The other errors are attributable to the casual nature of the interview/conversation. Had Heinlein written and edited the material himself, it is likely that some of the wilder statements would not have been made, or would have been phrased more precisely, or would have carried more supporting evidence.

The statement "*In STARSHIP TROOPERS it is stated flatly and more than once that nineteen out of twenty veterans are not military veterans. Instead, 95% of voters are what we call today "former members of federal civil service"*" is one such. It seems likely that if Heinlein had been writing the essay, he would have taken the book from the shelf and skimmed it for supporting statements. Not finding any, it is likely that he would have modified his statement.

On the other hand...

Heinlein would not have made such a statement did he not believe it. I believe that Heinlein's intention was for Federal Service to be only five percent military, and that in the haste and fury of writing it and due to the nature of the protagonist's service, the supporting statements were left out or inadvertently edited out.

By the text of the novel, Federal Service is entirely military in nature. But if any reader chooses to take Heinlein's separate comment as evidence of his *intent* to make Federal Service ninety-five percent "civil service," they will get no argument from me.

I wish I had had the chance to discuss this directly with Heinlein before his death; I have no doubt that he would have graciously admitted his error or set me straight in a few crisp sentences. But it's too late, too late—and I can only hope that his shade can forgive me for saying he was wrong.

I invite any and all comment on this essay, especially any comments that point up factual or quoting errors on my part. Comments may be addressed to gifford@nitrosyncretic.com, or left via my web page at <http://www.nitrosyncretic.com/rah>, or sent via mail to PO Box 1164, Citrus Heights, CA 95611 USA.

(If I may deal briefly with two other common points of argument regarding *Starship Troopers*: Juan Rico is of Filipino heritage (he is not black). He also does not die at the end of the novel. The book is clear on both these points. — JDG)