



Virginia Army National Guard soldiers assigned to Bravo Troop, 2nd Squadron, 183rd Cavalry Regiment, 116th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, stand guard 11 January 2021 in Washington, D.C. Following the 6 January 2021 rioting at the U.S. Capitol, National Guard soldiers and airmen from several states traveled to Washington to provide support to federal and district authorities leading up to the fifty-ninth presidential inauguration. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Bryan Myhr, U.S. Army)

Brittle and Brutal

An Avoidable 2024 Civil-Military Relations Forecast

Col. Todd Schmidt, PhD, U.S. Army

The historically high public confidence of the American public in the U.S. military has steadily dropped over the past few decades, trending toward the all-time lows of the 1970s and

early 1980s.¹ To help explain the dynamics of this trend, in his 2023 book, *Thanks for Your Service*, Dr. Peter Feaver provides a central finding that the military's historically high approval numbers are brittle.

High public opinion of the military is propped up, influenced by feckless political partisanship and a flimsy social desirability bias, meaning approval for the military is currently the socially acceptable attitude to hold. Feaver's warning to the military is twofold. First, senior leaders must understand that confidence in the military is tenuous and superficial. Second, if the military wants to retain the confidence of the American public, it must earn it the "old-fashioned" way by demonstrating competence and unwaveringly high professional ethics.²

In parallel, political campaigns, particularly at the national level, have seemingly become more brutal. Events surrounding the 2020 presidential election, the 6 January 2021 rioting at the U.S. Capitol, and the national turmoil experienced during the COVID pandemic created in the minds of an increasing number of Americans the justifiability of violence against the government. As reported by National Public Radio, one in four Americans believe that violence against the government is justifiable sometimes, while one in ten Americans believe violence is justifiable "right now."³

The 2024 presidential election season is here. Although the military aspires to be apolitical and non-partisan as an institution, oftentimes individuals act in contravention of this aspiration. Possibly in correlation with these contraventions, in recent years, public opinion of the military has fallen significantly below historic highs while the military's ability to recruit has become increasingly challenged.⁴ The 2024 presidential election campaign season could, at best, see a flatline of no significant change in public approval of the military. However, at worst, active military service members and, particularly, retirees could succumb to political emotion, actively involving themselves in polarizing, partisan behaviors.

It is important for all military service members, active and retired, to understand the dynamics in play as it relates to civil-military relations. At a minimum, the military should adopt a "do no harm" approach. In other words, the military institution and individual military service members should realize the aspirations of being apolitical and nonpartisan. This is no easy task. At a maximum, prudent leaders may want to treat politicization of the military in the upcoming campaign season as a viral threat and take a proactive approach, implementing updated policy, regulations, and measures early to help prevent or lessen the impacts of the upcoming political season.

This opinion essay provides a potential, yet avoidable, forecast of what 2024 political season might bring in the context of civil-military relations and the U.S. presidential election. If past is prologue (hint: it is), the U.S. military may be heading toward a political hurricane season as the United States enters the intense prime campaigning period of the 2024 presidential election. However, there are considerations and actions that might be taken by leaders at all levels to avoid political storm damage.

Considerations

First, I encourage senior leaders interested or concerned with civil-military relations to read the book *Dangerous Instrument* by Dr. Michael Robinson.⁵ In this book, the author explains how politicization of the military occurs, many times involuntarily. Using a "parallax model," Robinson describes how partisan political actors, observers, and the military interact in ways that can affect the lens or perspective by which the military is viewed, making the institution appear to be partisan or politically captured when it is not.

For example, political parties may be pulled to the left or right by the extremes of either party. Likewise, civilians may be pulled to the left or right on the political spectrum. A result of this sort of shift changes political perspective. From one perspective, the military may be viewed as more right leaning and conservative. From an opposing perspective, the military may be viewed as more left leaning and "woke."⁶

Perspective of military politicization, partisanship, or political capture will be dependent on how left or right of center each voter finds themselves. Or, in a worst-case scenario, the military may be the shifting variable. This occurs when retired and active-duty military service members actively and purposefully exhibit partisan behavior that conflicts with U.S. military values and norms.⁷

Second, retired military service members will, sadly, continue to willingly endorse partisan political candidates

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Sgt. Hubert D. Delany (*right*), a public affairs mass communication specialist assigned to the 3rd Psychological Operations Battalion (Airborne) (Dissemination), helps a fellow soldier register to vote 13 October 2020 through the Federal Voting Assistance Program as part of a voting registration drive at Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty), North Carolina. While service members are encouraged to vote, there are strict rules related to military service member involvement in political activities. (Photo by Sgt. Liem Huynh, U.S. Army)

as they have for the past six presidential campaigns. In rare cases, they may agree to take the stage at political conventions, or worse, engage in raucous partisan behavior. And, although retired military political endorsements “do not provide a statistically significant boost in overall support for candidates,” the more significant impact is continued decay in trust of the military and increased perceptions of the military as a politically partisan institution.⁸ Despite the damage these actions taken by a growing number of military retirees may have on public opinion and trust in the military, both major political parties will continue to relentlessly seek, solicit, and superscribe the names of all the retired military senior officers they can muster to endorse their presidential candidate. Going further, political candidates will look for every opportunity to be seen with military service members in uniform, endeavoring

to signal their favor within the military and basking in the regard the public has for the military, even while their actions undermine it.

Third, national security missteps, mistakes, and decisions made by some major candidates will be called out and relitigated. Fingers pointing blame at civilian leaders will be inevitable. Currently serving military leaders will stay prudently and pragmatically silent during these political salvos. The military may allow blame and responsibility for military stumbles that should be shared with civilian counterparts to be parried and absorbed by elected leaders. No one will remember this after the election is over, but it will be (and has been) noted by observant journalists and our best and brightest civil-military relations scholars.⁹

For example, Dr. Risa Brooks suggests that the U.S. military’s ineffectiveness in Afghanistan was related

to serious, unresolved, and continuing institutional shortcomings and flaws. Brooks details contradicting priorities and application of military resources toward training efforts versus fighting an insurgency—decisions that reside with senior military commanders—as one potential cause of strategic failure. Brooks also identifies the U.S. military’s neglect of consideration for the nuanced interplay between politics and military activities, whether in Afghanistan or in the United States, as an ironic flaw, considering the military’s historic emphasis on Carl von Clausewitz’s teachings. Finally, Brooks suggests that the military failed to integrate its focus on tactical and operational actions with strategic objectives. “These faults in military effectiveness cannot simply be blamed ... on the failings of politicians,” Brooks warns.¹⁰ Leaving these issues unacknowledged, unstudied, and unresolved may only ensure that they resurface in future conflicts.

Fourth, a growing proportion of military service members, increasingly identified as a “warrior caste,” will continue to take to social media to politically self-identify with their party of choice, although it is not clear whether they know and understand what political conservatism or liberalism really mean.¹¹ This relatively new warrior caste will be caught up in their emotions and political beliefs, thinking that because they are placed on a superficial societal pedestal as “secular saints,” they are entitled to voice their political opinions, regardless of clear constraints outlined in a uniformed code of military justice.¹² Although America’s military is often found to be increasingly isolated from the society it serves, it may be beginning to—for better or worse—reflect the values of the society it serves.

Mitigating Actions

So, what must be done? Curriculum addressing civil-military relations in professional military education

(PME) should be required—not elective—throughout a leader’s career. It should not be summarily addressed at the highest levels of PME. In her “Guide to Instilling the Non-Partisan Ethic,” Georgetown University’s Dr. Heidi Urben suggests that improving PME to better instill the fundamental principles of civil-military relations is exceptionally important and necessary, but insufficient. Trying to solve current challenges through mere changes in PME “reinforces the fallacy that PME can and should solve ... professional deficiencies.”¹³

According to Urben’s expert opinion, the Department of Defense needs to urgently review rules and regulations regarding political activities. Department of Defense Directive 1344.10 needs to be reviewed and updated with greater frequency to provide greater clarity and context related to the “why” of the rules related to military service member involvement in political activity.¹⁴ Secondly, Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice must also be reviewed and updated. It should address all ranks of military service (not just commissioned officers), as well as clearly defining its application to all categories of retired service members “subject to its provisions.”¹⁵

American politics are brutal, and American support for the military is brittle. If the military wants to maintain the high regard, confidence, and honor in which the American public continues to hold it, U.S. service members must earn it—every day. Senior leaders, particularly influential military retirees, must reinforce the apolitical, nonpartisan role of the military institution and those that serve in uniform. Being complicit in the continued erosion of America’s confidence and trust in the military by actively participating in politically partisan behavior must be addressed by the military institution, services, and leadership. There must be real consequences for offenders. Failure to do so will have dramatic impact on our ability to fight, prosecute, and win future wars. ■

Notes

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Military Review Recommends

The Staff Ride Handbook for the Red River Campaign, 7 March-19 May 1864

Steven E. Clay

The Red River Campaign of 1864 is an effective vehicle for a staff ride. It raises a variety of teaching points at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war, that are relevant to today's officer. In this long-anticipated staff ride handbook, author Steven E. Clay reveals how a study of the Red River Campaign offers insights on a wide variety of combat support and combat service support activities, most notably military engineering and logistics. The campaign also featured prominent participation by the U.S. Navy, offering staff ride participants to examine joint operations on the landscape that shaped how decisions were made. To read this handbook online, visit https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Research%20and%20Books/2023/SRHB_Red_River_WEB_READY.pdf

