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# Building Trust Through Community, Service, and Citizenship

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**T**he mission of the U.S. Army is to “defend the nation and protect our national interests through prompt and sustained land combat” (Department of the Army, 2019a, p. v).

Throughout American history, there were times when citizens questioned the standing Army’s role and its distance from civil society (Library of Congress, n.d.). This created problems in maintaining combat power, as it did during the Vietnam War, with a collective antimilitary sentiment.

The opposite is also true. In the years following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the U.S. relied on an all-volunteer force driven by patriotism to expand and

sustain operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Enlistment data from the early 2000s show that Americans volunteered in numbers sufficient to meet wartime requirements without conscription (Kane, 2005).

The contrast in national sentiment between the Vietnam and post-9/11 eras suggests that public support directly correlates to the Army’s ability to generate and sustain combat power.

Therefore, the Army cannot accomplish its warfighting mission without sustained public trust, and NCOs have an opportunity to build and preserve that trust through deliberate, visible integration with the communities they serve.

## The Meaning of Service

Today, Americans join the Army for many reasons. Some answer a call to duty or continue a family tradition. Others pursue educational opportunities, stability, or professional development.

Researchers from RAND, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that provides leaders with information to make evidence-based decisions, describe these motivations as ranging from the “institutional” Soldier to the “pragmatic professional,” who balances commitment to service with practical goals (Helmus et al., 2018, pp. 25-26).

In an all-volunteer force, those motivations matter because the Army depends on citizens who choose to serve rather than those compelled by law. While some enter for practical reasons, military service often reshapes that initial decision. Shared hardships, disciplined training, and accountability to standards turn individual motivation into professional commitment.

That transformation strengthens more than individual Soldiers. It reinforces the Army’s credibility with the American people. Soldiers earn trust through consistent conduct and demonstrated competence, and that trust sustains the volunteer force that generates and maintains combat power.



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## Trust as the Foundation of Purpose

The Army’s ability to fight and win depends on the trust it maintains with the American people and within its own ranks. As a professional force sworn to defend the Constitution, the Army relies on public confidence to preserve its legitimacy and freedom of action (U.S. Army, 2024, pp. 1-1 to 1-2).

That confidence does not rest on authority alone. It rests on disciplined conduct, ethical leadership, and consistent adherence to standards. Externally, trust reflects the public’s belief that the Army will act lawfully and competently. Internally, trust forms the cohesion that allows Soldiers to rely on one another in combat (U.S. Army, 2024, Ch. 3).

Doctrine reinforces this connection. The warrior ethos, Army values, and professional standards guide how Soldiers train, lead, and fight (U.S. Army, 2024, p. 1-5). These principles are not abstract ideals. They shape daily behavior and operational effectiveness.

In the Army’s formations, character, competence, and commitment develop through rigorous training and accountability. Leaders strengthen this foundation by modeling ethical conduct and enforcing standards consistently (U.S. Army, 2024, p. 3-0).

When NCOs uphold these principles, they sustain cohesion inside the force and reinforce credibility outside it. That credibility, in turn, preserves the public trust necessary to generate and sustain combat power.

## Building Trust Through Community Outreach

NCOs help shape America’s trust in their Army through a variety of efforts. Some of the most visible points of contact with the American people are recruiters. Because the force relies on citizens who choose to serve, its ability to generate and sustain combat power depends on public confidence in the institution.

That choice does not occur in isolation. It develops through sustained engagement between Soldiers and the communities they represent. Recruiters routinely contribute to sustaining community engagement for the Army.

Recruiters engage schools, civic leaders, families, and local groups to answer questions about service, obligation, and opportunity. This consistent presence reduces perceived distance between the military and the public.

Parents seek reassurance about professionalism and standards. Educators expect transparency about career pathways and commitments. Students respond to authenticity. When Soldiers engage respectfully and consistently, trust develops through familiarity rather than persuasion.

In addition to recruiters, regular Soldiers often engage in community partnerships, school programs, and civic events that reinforce the connection between the military and civilians in shared spaces (Berogan, 2015).

These interactions do more than increase visibility. They strengthen public confidence in the institution and reinforce the credibility necessary to sustain voluntary enlistment.

### Leading Through Shared Purpose

Leaders strengthen public trust when they connect military service to the communities the Army represents. While many Americans associate military service primarily with combat, Soldiers also serve visibly in schools, at community centers, as youth coaches, and in other local initiatives. When NCOs and Soldiers represent the Army in a positive light, they foster a shared purpose that unites the community. These engagements demonstrate that the Army is not distant from society but part of it.



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NCOs must understand that shared purpose does not develop automatically. It requires deliberate leader involvement, sustained presence, and consistent, respectful engagement.

When leaders, or their Soldiers, participate in community programs and invest time in local partnerships, they reduce perceived distance between the force and the public. Leadership research confirms this principle: alignment grows through consistent interaction and participation rather than messaging alone (Hickman, 2009).

For an all-volunteer force, this shared purpose carries operational consequences. When communities recognize Soldiers as partners rather than outsiders, confidence

in the institution grows. That confidence supports voluntary service and reinforces trust. Therefore, leaders who cultivate shared purpose strengthen more than relationships; they reinforce the foundation that enables the Army to fight and win.

### Humanitarian Missions and Civil-Military Partnerships

Humanitarian response missions illustrate how the Army preserves public trust during moments of crisis. Joint Task Force Civil Support, the nation's only standing joint task force dedicated to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear response, supports civil authorities during domestic emergencies (Joint Task Force Civil Support, 2022). Assigned to U.S. Northern Command, the task force remains prepared to assist when state and local capabilities are overwhelmed.

Although most Americans do not routinely see this mission, its presence during domestic emergencies makes the Army's professionalism visible. Training integrates civilian role players who replicate the human consequences of catastrophe and requires disciplined communication, emotional control, and coordinated action under stress. This preparation ensures Soldiers can support civil authorities effectively while operating within legal and constitutional boundaries.

Such missions carry operational significance beyond immediate response. Visible, disciplined support during domestic crises reinforces the Army's legitimacy and demonstrates its commitment to serve the nation in accordance with the law and professional code of conduct (Department of the Army, 2019a).

Legitimacy and professional conduct increase the public trust upon which an all-volunteer force depends. In this way, readiness for humanitarian

response supports not only civil authorities but also the broader foundation that enables the Army to operate effectively.

### The National Guard's Unique Role in Community Assistance

The Army National Guard (ANG) occupies a distinctive position in the relationship between the military and the American people. As part of the Army's defense support of civil authorities' mission, the ANG operates under state authority during domestic emergencies while remaining available for federal mobilization when required (Department of the Army, 2019b).

Because guardsmen live and work in the communities they protect, Soldiers who respond to a crisis are often neighbors, teachers, police officers, business owners, or other members of the community.

The proximity of Soldiers and communities shapes how the ANG supports civil authorities. During floods, wildfires, civil disturbances, and other emergencies, ANG units integrate directly into state and local response structures rather than deploy as an external force.

Army doctrine emphasizes that military support to civil authorities requires coordination, unity of effort, and respect for established legal frameworks (Department of the Army, 2019b). The Guard's community-based posture strengthens that coordination by aligning military capability with local institutions.

For an all-volunteer force, this visible integration carries operational significance. The Army's legitimacy depends on trust between the force and the American people (Department of the Army, 2019b).

When ANG Soldiers serve alongside civil authorities in their own communities, they reinforce the connection between military service and civilian society. That connection supports the public trust necessary to sustain voluntary service.

### Transition to Veteran Citizens

The Army's commitment to the American people does not end when Soldiers leave active duty. The values instilled through military service often shape how veterans engage their communities after separation. Research indicates that veterans participated in civic engagement and community involvement more often than non-veterans, reflecting a continued sense of public responsibility (Heinz et al., 2017).

This continued engagement carries broader implications. Labor and employment data show that veterans participate actively in the workforce and frequently assume leadership roles in business, public service, and civic organizations (Pew Research Center, 2019a). Through these roles, veterans remain visible representatives of the profession of arms within civilian society.

For an all-volunteer force, that visibility matters. When former Soldiers continue to contribute constructively within their communities, they reinforce



While many Americans associate military service primarily with combat, Soldiers also serve visibly in schools, at community centers, as youth coaches, and in other local initiatives. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Josephine Pride)

public familiarity with military service and sustain confidence in the institution. That sustained confidence strengthens the trust and preserves the social foundation on which voluntary service depends.

### Veterans and Civilian Entrepreneurship

Veteran entrepreneurship represents a visible extension of military service into civilian society. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, veteran-owned businesses account for more than 1.6 million firms nationwide and employ more than three million workers (U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2023).

These enterprises range from small local companies to nationally recognized brands founded by former service members, including companies such as Black Rifle Coffee Company, Grunt Style, and Aerial Resupply Coffee.

Research also shows that veterans participate in civic activities more often than non-veterans reflecting continued engagement in community life after military service (Heinz et al., 2017). Through business ownership, employment leadership, and civic involvement, veterans remain present in the economic and social fabric of their communities.

Again, for an all-volunteer force, this continued presence carries broader significance. The Army's legitimacy depends on sustained trust between the force and the American people (Department of the Army, 2019a). When veterans contribute visibly and constructively within civilian institutions, they maintain public familiarity with military service beyond moments of crisis. That familiarity reinforces the social foundation on which voluntary service depends and supports the Army operational capabilities.

## Conclusion

It is clear the enduring trust between the U.S. Army and the American people is sustained not through a single gesture but through its Soldiers' daily conduct.

That trust is evident when recruiters speak to parents, when Soldiers mentor students, when guardsmen support a community after a storm, and when veterans lead within the local economy. These actions demonstrate that the Army does not stand apart from the nation; it serves within it.

Through this sustained presence and professional conduct Soldiers and veterans reinforce the public trust on which an all-volunteer force depends.

It is critical that NCOs understand this and not only become involved in their communities but encourage their Soldiers to do so as well.

Trust is built one leader and one Soldier at a time. And though it requires time, it is what enables the Army to generate and maintain the combat power required to defend the nation. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the American people is not simply symbolic. It is operationally essential to the Army's ability to fight and win. ■



Sgt. Aaron Amos, Texas Army National Guard, walks door to door through flooded streets, Orange, Texas, Sept. 5, 2017. Humanitarian missions carry operational significance beyond immediate response. Visible, disciplined support during domestic crises reinforces the Army's legitimacy and demonstrates its commitment to serve the nation. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Joseph Cannon)

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