

Politicization of the Military: Causes, Consequences & Conclusions

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Scholars of civil-military relations have long written of the dangers associated with politicizing the U.S. military. Efforts to draw the military into partisan politics ultimately serve to degrade civilian control of the armed forces, the military's long-standing norm of nonpartisanship, the public's trust and confidence in the military, and even democracy itself. In recent years, these concerns have become more pronounced and more urgent as civilian political leaders and their surrogates have sought to drag the military deeper into partisan political fights, especially during campaigns and elections. This essay explores the drivers of the politicization of the military and the role civilian political leaders, the military, and the American public play in it. It also examines the implications for democratic governance and why efforts to push back against the politicization of the military can often backfire. The essay concludes with a look at solutions to counter the politicization of the military.

The politicization of the U.S. military is the greatest challenge in contemporary civil-military relations. Scholars and practitioners may differ on what is the most pronounced threat to national security today or the best ways military force should be used to counter such threats, but no other issue harms the relationship among civilian leaders, society, and its military the way the politicization of the armed forces does. While politicization is not a new phenomenon, it has accelerated in recent years and occurs within the larger context of democratic backsliding in American politics. The military is hardly the only public institution impacted by partisan polarization, but its implications are unique in that the military is the state's legitimate instrument of violence. When this instrument becomes politicized or is perceived to be politicized, it undermines the very foundation of democratic governance. This essay explores the steady but quiet erosion of the civil-military norm that has been occurring over the past thirty years, especially during the post-9/11 era, which has enabled many of today's efforts to politicize the armed forces. It examines the drivers and implications of politicizing the military, along with a summary of recommendations on how to reverse this trend.

The politicization of the military occurs when the military actively or passively supports partisan causes or is perceived to be aligned with one political party over

the other.¹ This definition, while accurate, implies the military is the chief actor in its own politicization. In reality, three actors bear varying degrees of responsibility for politicizing the military: civilian politicians (and their surrogates), the military, and the American public.

Civilian politicians are the biggest offenders and bear most of the responsibility for politicizing the military. Most often, they politicize the military when they try to leverage the military's prestige for their own partisan advantage, especially during campaigns and elections. The military contributes to its self-politicization when individual service members publicly express their partisan preferences and violate the military's long-standing norm of nonpartisanship. While some individual rank-and-file service members are guilty of publicly airing their personal partisan opinions, especially on social media, retired general and flag officers who engage in partisan campaign endorsements and public, partisan commentary arguably do more harm in violating the military's norm of nonpartisanship given their stature and following. Lastly, as partisan polarization has extended into the electorate, the American public contributes to the politicization of its armed forces by either failing to understand or rejecting the military's norm of nonpartisanship.

Casual observers might wonder if there was ever a time in U.S. history when the military's norm of nonpartisanship was truly secure, or if the line between partisan politics and the uniformed military has always been blurred. More than two-thirds of U.S. presidents have served in the U.S. military, and roughly one-quarter of them have been general officers. In fact, in 1852, General Winfield Scott ran for president while still in uniform.

Despite uneven practices throughout U.S. history, the principle of civilian control of the armed forces and the related norm of nonpartisanship have their roots in the nation's founding. In March 1783, George Washington diffused tensions among some officers surrounding Congress's failure to regularly pay the Continental Army in an episode known as the Newburgh Conspiracy. In what some historians identify as the closest the U.S. military ever came to a coup, Washington reminded his officers about their loyalty to the Constitution and subordination to Congress. Nine months later, Washington reaffirmed the principle of the military's subordination to civilian authority when he resigned his commission before Congress, signaling the end of his leadership over the Continental Army and his return to private life.

While there were certainly outliers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the operative norms in the U.S. military long compelled its service members to avoid partisan politics. William Tecumseh Sherman once wrote that "no Army officer should form or express an opinion" on partisan politics.² General George Marshall, who was famous for abstaining from voting while he served in uniform, often deflected questions on his political views with the quip that while his father was a Democrat and his mother was a Republican, he was an Episcopalian. Even

the norm that frowns upon retired general and flag officers publicly speaking on politics has a long tradition in the military. General Omar Bradley once remarked that “the best service a retired general can perform is to turn in his tongue along with his suit and to mothball his opinions.”³

The military’s norm of nonpartisanship, as long as it is upheld by the three main actors in the civil-military relationship – civilian political leaders, the military, and the American public – is the strongest bulwark against the politicization of the military. When the norm is healthy, the military faithfully follows civilian orders, regardless of which political party is in power, and its service members avoid public activities and commentary that could give the perception of the military’s tacit endorsement of partisan causes or candidates. When the norm is healthy, civilian political leaders respect these boundaries and do not use the military to score partisan points. When the norm is healthy, the American public does not perceive that the military is (or believe the military should be) aligned with one political party, playing a role in campaigns and elections, or involved in partisan politics.

This norm, however, has been under strain for decades now. Many scholars of civil-military relations analyze the erosion of the norm of nonpartisanship and the politicization of the military by focusing on the modern era since 1973, in line with the establishment of a professional, all-volunteer force. To be clear, civil-military relations in the United States have always been marked by some degree of friction. Civilian control of the armed forces, a bedrock principle in democracies everywhere, is characterized by friction, largely by design of the framers. In the United States, civilian control operates under a divided principal, as in the principal-agent relationship, where the principal – civilian political leaders split across the three branches of government – exercises authority and oversight of the agent, the military. Despite the fact that the military resides within the executive branch under the Department of Defense, it remains subordinate to each branch of government. This is part of the normal friction that characterizes democracy and civilian control of the armed forces.

Friction in civil-military relations, however, is not synonymous with norm erosion. Throughout the all-volunteer force era, but specifically over the past thirty-five years, U.S. civil-military relations have been characterized by a slow, steady normative degradation among civilian political leaders, within the U.S. military, and across the American public. In more recent years, many civil-military norms have been under extraordinary stress, and we have seen more flagrant efforts from military members, politicians, and the American public to draw the military into partisan politics.

The military’s norm of nonpartisanship has steadily diminished over the past half-century. First, more officers identify with a political party today than they did when the all-volunteer force began. When political scien-

tist Ole R. Holsti surveyed officers attending the war colleges from 1976 to 1996, fewer than half of respondents in 1976 self-identified as partisans, with Independents constituting the largest block at 46 percent. By 1996, however, only 22 percent of senior officers self-identified as Independents and 74 percent identified as partisans, a trend that has persisted.⁴ The 1990s also witnessed several instances of public criticism and disrespect by active-duty officers toward their commander in chief, Bill Clinton, including one notable instance in which an Air Force major general was reprimanded for referring to Clinton as a “pot-smoking,” “womanizing,” draft-dodger in a speech before a military audience.⁵

These trends have continued in recent years. Political scientist Trent J. Lythgoe has found that junior service members today are more politically active than their civilian peers.⁶ Moreover, the advent of social media has provided a means for service members to broadcast their partisan views wider than ever before. Social media is an inherently public sphere, where commentary has an exponential reach and a lasting, written record. Recent surveys of officers attending the war colleges and cadets enrolled in service academies found that one-third of respondents reported their active-duty friends used or shared rude or disparaging comments about the president and other elected leaders during both the Obama and first Trump administrations – an offense punishable under Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which prohibits officers from using contemptuous words against certain elected and appointed leaders.⁷

The military also politicizes itself when it is resistant to or skeptical of civilian control and oversight. In practice, this resistance does not manifest as outright disobedience or a refusal to follow civilian orders. It is far more subtle than that. It manifests as thinking that the default condition in civil-military relations is for the commander in chief to defer routinely to the military on decisions pertaining to the use of force or military matters in general.⁸ This is exacerbated when sentiments of exceptionalism or superiority over civilian society take root, especially within the officer corps. For example, a recent survey of service academy cadets found that 57 percent of respondents agreed with the notion that to be respected in the position, the secretary of defense should have served in uniform.⁹ The implication is that a secretary of defense who lacks military experience should not merit respect from military subordinates. Other research has found that one-quarter of military officers believe military culture is superior to the rest of society and that within the officer corps a strong correlation exists between sentiments of superiority over society and viewing civilian leaders with contempt.¹⁰ These cynical attitudes and perceptions degrade civilian control and contribute to the politicization of the military.

Arguably the most damaging erosion of the military’s nonpartisan ethic has come at the hands of retired general and flag officers – the institution’s senior leaders who are ostensibly the most sensitized to and bound by the profession’s

norms. As alluded to earlier, since the 1990s, politicians have turned to retired generals and admirals for campaign endorsements and have found a small but vocal cohort all too willing to oblige. Of the estimated seventy-five hundred retired general and flag officers, a small percentage – fewer than 10 percent – have engaged in partisan campaign endorsements and public commentary, but even a small cohort can give the impression to the American public that the military is aligned with one party.

There are three reasons why campaign endorsements by retired generals and admirals uniquely harm the military's norm of nonpartisanship.¹¹ First, they are transactional in nature: endorsers trade the status associated with their military rank and service to advance the partisan causes they care about.¹² And unlike veterans who run for elected office or serve as political appointees in the executive branch and unambiguously cross into a partisan role – and therefore face the full scrutiny of the electorate, either directly or indirectly – endorsers try to straddle both worlds, acting as if their former military status somehow places them above the political fray while engaging in the very activity the norms of their profession once proscribed. Second, they give the false impression that the endorsers speak for the entire military. Survey research has shown that few Americans can distinguish retired general and flag officers from those on active duty, and most think retired officers' views reflect the views of those on active duty.¹³ This not only reinforces the perception that endorsements reflect tacit approval by the institution but further cements a distorted understanding of civil-military norms among the public. Third, campaign endorsements by retired general and flag officers are problematic because of their rank and stature. These officers retain the title of general or admiral for life and play a unique role within the military profession, especially the four-stars, who military historian Richard Kohn called “princes of the church” because they never truly retire.¹⁴ Their obligations to represent their branch of military service in retirement – especially safeguarding its professional norms – should be more stringent than for service members of lower ranks and grades.

In more recent years, retired generals and admirals have also served as high-profile political appointees. The first Trump and Biden administrations selected recently retired four-star generals James Mattis and Lloyd Austin, respectively, to serve as secretary of defense, a move that required a congressional waiver to bypass the 1947 law that prevents someone from serving in that position who had been retired from the military for less than seven years. The last time such a waiver was used was in 1950 when Harry S. Truman nominated General George Marshall to be secretary of defense. The appointment of recently retired four-stars to oversee the military in 2016 and in 2020 is indicative of the broader civil-military normative degradation. It degrades civilian oversight of the military, sends mixed signals to the American public about the importance of civilian con-

trol, and normalizes retired generals and admirals serving in partisan political roles. It is therefore unsurprising that in a 2020 survey of service academy cadets, 50 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that “more retired generals and admirals serving as cabinet secretaries or senior political appointees is good for the country.”¹⁵

Prominent retired generals and admirals serving in political appointee positions also blurs the lines between the military and partisan politics. Unlike retired senior officers who make partisan campaign endorsements while claiming to remain above the political fray, those who serve as political appointees, such as Mattis, Austin, Colin Powell, and John Kelly, clearly don a new partisan role and subordinate their military identity in the process, similar to when veterans run for elected office. Therefore, when former White House Chief of Staff John Kelly and former Secretary of Defense James Mattis – both retired Marine four-stars – cited their past military service as the reason why they refrained from criticizing Donald Trump after he left office, it demonstrated a civil-military pitfall in having retired generals and admirals serve as political appointees.¹⁶ Certainly, such officials can choose to refrain from political commentary, but when retired senior officers who served as high-level political appointees invoke the military’s norm of non-partisanship as the reason why they refrain from commenting on politics, it weakens the norm and further confuses the American public in the process. As more retired officers serve in prominent political positions and the line between partisan politics and the military is further blurred, partisan actors will place greater pressure on all senior military officials – the vast majority of whom have never and will never serve as political appointees – to speak out on political matters.

Concerns about the military leveraging its prestige for political power endure. But over the past decade, politicians who use the military for their own partisan or electoral gain bear the most responsibility for politicizing the military. As public confidence in the military grew after the Persian Gulf War – and skyrocketed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks – so did politicians’ attempts to capitalize on this prestige. Some of these efforts were subtle, such as using troops in the backdrops of partisan speeches, while others were more blatant, such as presidential candidates soliciting campaign endorsements from retired general and flag officers. This trend began in 1988 but the most prominent example was former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral (Retired) William J. Crowe’s endorsement of Bill Clinton in 1992.¹⁷ Since then, the rate of partisan campaign endorsements has increased in almost every election year and been a strategy employed by Democrats and Republicans. In 2016, both parties featured over-the-top, partisan speeches by retired generals at their respective nominating conventions, further giving the American people the impression that the military is a partisan actor.¹⁸

Politicians have long insinuated that the U.S. military prefers them over their opponents in campaigns and elections. In his speech at the 2000 Republican National Convention, to accept the nomination for vice president, Dick Cheney spoke directly to members of the U.S. military when he said, “help is on the way,” and that soon they would “once again have a commander in chief they can respect.”¹⁹ Efforts to suggest that the military sides with one party over the other have only become more overt since the start of the first Trump administration, such as after the 2016 presidential election when Donald Trump told a military audience at MacDill Air Force Base that “you liked me and I liked you. That’s the way it worked.”²⁰ During the 2020 presidential campaign, both Trump and Biden featured photos of military officials in uniform without their consent in campaign advertisements, and during the second 2024 presidential debate, Kamala Harris told Trump, “I have talked to military leaders, some of whom worked with you, and they say you’re a disgrace.”²¹

During his first term, Donald Trump routinely referred to “my military” and “my generals,” but he crossed normative boundaries more egregiously when he began publicly attacking senior military leaders. In the lead up to the 2020 election, Trump remarked:

I’m not saying the military’s in love with me. The soldiers are. The top people in the Pentagon probably aren’t because they want to do nothing but fight wars so all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy.²²

After leaving office, he referred to senior military leaders as “some of the dumbest people I’ve ever met in my life,” and later suggested that former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, deserved to be put to death for treason.²³ These comments are noteworthy, not solely because of their shock value, but because they signaled a turning point on the right that the military – especially its senior leaders – were suddenly fair game to attack to score partisan points.

After pledging to fire the military’s top generals if reelected in 2024, because “you can’t have a woke military,” Trump made good on his promise, firing fifteen senior generals and admirals, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, chief of naval operations, commandant of the Coast Guard, and vice chief of staff of the Air Force, within his first eight months in office.²⁴ While it is a president’s prerogative to install senior military officials they think will best implement their policies, purges of such officials for no apparent cause other than they implemented the lawful orders of Trump’s predecessor are without precedent, upend the military’s meritocratic promotion process, create de facto loyalty tests for currently serving senior officers, and inject turmoil into a nonpartisan institution.

Trump’s speeches to military audiences during his second administration – such as the one at Fort Bragg in June 2025 on the eve of the U.S. Army’s two hun-

dred and fiftieth birthday and one to hundreds of generals and admirals hastily organized at Quantico, Virginia, in September 2025 – have been more partisan than any from his first term, which were already more partisan than speeches by all of his predecessors. He used both occasions to attack his political rivals, reiterate his claim that the 2020 election was stolen, and speak favorably about deploying troops to American cities.²⁵ In doing so, the president signaled to both his military audience and the American public that the armed forces should be viewed as part of his partisan constituency.

Politicizing the military is not unique to the executive branch. A recent trend among legislators has been to use general and flag officer nominations as opportunities to settle partisan scores, using the military as a prop in a more pernicious way than delivering a partisan speech with uniformed troops as part of the backdrop. Although senators have long used the technique of placing holds on the nominations of political appointees to signal their opposition or try to extract a policy concession, Senator Tommy Tuberville of Alabama set a new precedent through an eleven-month block of all general and flag officer promotions because of his opposition to a Department of Defense policy that allowed for service members to be reimbursed for out-of-state travel to have an abortion.²⁶ The blanket hold prevented more than four hundred senior officers and their families from moving to their next assignment, leaving most of these positions to be filled temporarily by their deputies, including multiple service chiefs.

Lastly, we have seen normative erosion in the civil-military attitudes of the American public. To put it bluntly, the public is a lousy judge of civil-military norms. By all accounts, the American people still have more confidence in the military than most public institutions in the United States, even though confidence has waned slightly over the past few years, a point that Rosa Brooks also cites in her essay in this issue of *Dædalus*.²⁷ Yet, at the same time, the all-volunteer force has not been well understood by the public. Defense scholar Kori Schake and Jim Mattis's 2016 book *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military* centers on a 2013 YouGov survey that found a significant percentage of Americans answered "I don't know" or "Not sure" to basic questions asking their opinions on the military.²⁸ Political scientist Peter Feaver draws on recent surveys of the American public in his 2023 book *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the U.S. Military* to conclude that public confidence in the military in the post-9/11 era was high but hollow; international relations scholar Sarah Maxey provides additional insight on this in her contribution to this issue.²⁹ In short, for many years, the public has looked at the military with both ignorance and reverence. While the reverence might be less fervent since the end of the post-9/11 wars, the continued lack of understanding of the military sets the conditions for politicization and for false narratives to gain root.

Against this backdrop, we can also point to a few troubling insights regarding how the public looks at critical civil-military norms. As political scientists Ronald Krebs and Robert Ralston have found, an uncomfortable percentage of Americans advocate deferring to the military on all sorts of policy decisions surrounding the use of force, and the degree to which they are deferential is conditioned on their partisanship.³⁰ For example, during the first Trump administration, Democrats advocated deferring policy decisions to the military as a check on Trump, whereas Republicans were less deferential to the military because their copartisan was in the White House. The public also struggles to differentiate between veterans and active-duty service members, so when veterans, including retired generals and admirals, speak out on partisan, political issues, they often assume they are speaking on behalf of the entire military. There is good evidence that the public does not demonstrate a full understanding of or commitment to the norms of vital civil-military relations; or that if they do, their commitment is overridden by their partisan preferences.³¹ Put differently, the public wants the military to be their copartisan and interprets nonpartisanship as the military siding with them and their party.

The politicization of the military carries several implications for the health of democracy in the United States. First, it degrades civilian control of the military, a foundational principle in all democracies. Continued efforts by politicians and elected leaders to drag the military into culture wars or use the military to score partisan points against their opponents reduce the military's trust in its civilian overseers and increase cynicism among those in uniform toward all politicians, not simply those most guilty of politicizing the military. These efforts also weaken civilian control by distracting from what should be close scrutiny and oversight by civilian leaders of the military on critical issues such as modernization priorities, personnel policy and recruitment challenges, war planning and execution, ineffectiveness in combating sexual assault and harassment, and the extent of extremist activity within its ranks.

Second, politicizing the military impacts public confidence in the institution and reinforces a poor understanding of civil-military principles among the American public. Public confidence in the military has long been shaped by factors beyond the military's competence and perceived professional ethics, including the public's partisan identification.³² However, much of public confidence in the military today appears to be a function of motivated reasoning, largely conditioned on who the commander in chief is at any given time.³³ The public relies on elite cues to help form their opinions about the military. As long as civilian politicians draw the institution into partisan politics, and as long as some former military elites oblige, the public will continue to have a distorted understanding of and weak attachment to the military's nonpartisan ethic. As overt, direct efforts to politicize

the force continue, confidence in the military will likely split along partisan lines. The 2025 Gallup poll on confidence in institutions already reflects this. Just seven months into Trump's second administration, Republicans' confidence in the military increased by 18 percentage points, while Democrats' confidence decreased by 21 percentage points.³⁴

Public confidence in the military is not just about the military's popularity in civil society. It carries real implications for both recruiting and retention in an all-volunteer force. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the military services struggled to meet their recruitment goals, largely a function of labor market dynamics and a decreasing proportion of American youth who meet the physical and medical standards for entry. While the Department of Defense's annual surveys of American youth's propensity to serve have not indicated politicization of the military as a reason young people have cited for why they would not join, continued efforts to politicize the armed forces could cause influencers (family members and close friends in the lexicon of military recruiting efforts) to discourage young people close to them from enlisting.³⁵

Third, politicization degrades military professionalism and effectiveness. Purges of senior officers and promotions based on partisan litmus tests rather than merit will likely divide the military and undermine unit cohesion. When advancing through the ranks is based on one's political loyalty rather than performance and potential for increased responsibility, recruitment and retention will also suffer. National security challenges may become more fraught, as some military officials might be hesitant to offer their true military advice and speak up behind closed doors, worrying it will be met with dismay or even their dismissal. Moreover, the military's technical competence will gradually diminish as political loyalty overtakes expertise and the force becomes preoccupied with partisan battles.

Efforts to push back on the politicization of the military can often backfire. Civilian politicians attempting to use the military as a weapon to stop democratic backsliding instead of using other political actors or democratic processes to do so only further politicizes the military. When President Biden gave a speech about threats to democracy in 2022, he did so in front of two Marine guards in their dress uniform. Featuring marines in the backdrop was later revealed as a conscious decision by the administration, not an oversight by staffers who failed to recognize the optics.³⁶ In the lead-up to the 2024 election, there were many calls for former military officials to speak out forcefully against Donald Trump and the particular harm a second Trump presidency would pose to democracy, national security, and increased politicization of the military.³⁷ Using retired generals instead of other politicians to carry this message, however, only serves to further enmesh the U.S. military in partisan politics, undermine the military's norm of nonpartisanship, and signal to the American public that the military can and should play an active role in campaigns and elections.

Speaking out often comes with its own peril for senior military officials. Much of the civil-military criticism directed at General Mark Milley's public comments on political matters – in congressional testimony, in speeches, and to journalists writing tell-all books during the Trump administration – was not always about the substance of his message, but that the senior-most officer in the military, not other civilian officials, was routinely and voluntarily delivering political messages.³⁸ When politicians try to draw the military into a partisan debate, uniformed officials should defer to other elected leaders and appointed officials to respond, a tactic Kori Schake approvingly calls, “hide behind the suits.”³⁹ The challenge today is that the “suits” are either contributing to democratic backsliding or failing to halt it, which has, in turn, put more pressure on those in uniform to speak out.

At the same time, when senior military officials remain silent as partisan politics encroach upon the military, it can also be construed that they are taking a side. Military officials, careful to avoid the appearance they are shirking orders in a new administration that is already predisposed to distrust them, may even cease or limit the way they communicate to their subordinates as a result. A lack of communication after the firing of over a dozen flag officers without cause; claims that military standards have been lowered to allow women to serve in direct combat roles; and efforts to weaken oversight by inspectors general, lift restrictions on rules of engagement, and denigrate the role military judge advocates play – at the very least sow confusion in the ranks.⁴⁰ Injecting partisan politics into the military ultimately serves to disorient military leaders by pressuring them to disavow core institutional principles to avoid the perception of taking a side or being seen as insubordinate.⁴¹

There have been recent calls for military officials to refuse to follow lawful orders that they deem to be harmful to democracy as a means of constraining an unprincipled president.⁴² The military is obligated to resist unlawful orders, but service members lack the moral autonomy to selectively choose which lawful orders they wish to obey and which to refuse based on their interpretation of what is good for democracy.⁴³ Encouraging the military to resist lawful but awful orders as a means of constraining an unprincipled commander in chief not only further enmeshes the military in political battles but subverts democracy by undermining civilian control.

What can be done? The solutions to stop the politicization of the military are not unlike the solutions required to stop democratic backsliding. They require norms and rules to be defended and enforced; they also require efforts to educate the public. In short, they require a painstaking, consistent commitment with few shortcuts.

First and foremost, to stop the politicization of the military, civilian political leaders on both sides of the aisle must refrain from using the military for parti-

san and electoral benefit. This recommendation is a difficult solution to achieve, because politicians naturally seek every possible electoral advantage and struggle to resist capitalizing on the military's popularity for their own benefit. Efforts to show political campaigns that endorsements by retired generals and admirals have little to no effect in swaying voters' minds have thus far proven ineffective but should nonetheless continue in the hopes of deterring politicians from seeking these endorsements in the first place.⁴⁴ Similarly, politicians aiming to halt democratic backsliding cannot look to the military to save democracy and to do the preventive work that civilian institutions and political actors must do.

The most straightforward way to halt the politicization of the military is to strengthen the norm of nonpartisanship within the military. Unlike encouraging politicians to cease and desist, strengthening the norm within the active-duty military is feasible, given the military's hierarchical nature. Work is still required, however, considering the norm's atrophy over recent decades, evident by soldiers' cheering of overt partisan talking points during the president's speech at Fort Bragg.⁴⁵ Military leaders tend to overestimate the degree to which the norm is formally taught and reinforced throughout a service member's career. In reality, formal teaching about the norm is episodic, limited often to instruction at the various service academies and upon selection for flag officer rank. More purposeful, situation-based education scenarios conducted at both the unit level and consistently throughout professional military education is needed to further bolster the norm. Likewise, the Department of Defense needs to update its rules on political activity to better account for the realities of political activity and speech today, starting with clearer, enforceable guidelines on service members' political speech on social media.⁴⁶

Similarly, more must be done to curb the partisan activity of retired generals and admirals, especially the practice of campaign endorsements. Despite numerous calls by civil-military relations scholars and practitioners for prominent retired general and flag officers to self-organize and sign an open letter that explains to the American public why they endorse no candidate for office, this has yet to materialize.⁴⁷ Peer pressure and sanctioning by fellow retired generals and admirals is required to arrest the continued decline of the norm. Retired generals and admirals who refrain from endorsing candidates or providing partisan commentary on cable news or social media greatly outnumber those who do, but the American public only hears from the vocal minority. This must change.

Lastly, while civilian and military elites carry most of the burden associated with depoliticizing the military, the American public also has a responsibility to keep the military out of partisan politics. The public is in the unique position of being able to hold both civilian political leaders and, by default, their subordinate military officials accountable during elections. The public should reject politicians' efforts to politicize the military instead of rewarding their copartisans

when they engage in such behavior. The best way to deter civilian politicians from using the military as a partisan tool is to make the practice electorally unsustainable and rebuke offenders at the ballot box. This effort will be extraordinarily difficult, because it will require the public to put commitment to a civil-military norm ahead of their partisan loyalties, and that cannot happen without intervention and education to better sensitize the public to the nature and importance of the norm in the first place.

To aid in that sensitization, civilian leaders in both parties, veterans' groups, military leaders, and even well-known actors who have starred in war movies should undertake a campaign of public service announcements to educate the public about the importance of civilian control of the military and its associated norm of nonpartisanship. These messages should be even more prominent during presidential election years. Such efforts may seem trivial in the face of flag officer purges and loyalty tests. Much like the need for improved civics education in the country, education alone will not stop democratic backsliding or rehabilitate civil-military norms overnight. But it is nonetheless required to counter disinformation and misinformation about the military that is so plentiful today.

Of the various solutions, the easiest to implement are those pertaining to service members' political behavior, because the military is a hierarchical organization bound by formal rules and regulations in addition to informal norms. Civilian politicians and elected leaders regularly violate rules pertaining to keeping the military out of partisan politics and face little sanctioning, and the public cannot be held accountable for a poor understanding of civil-military principles. Nonetheless, it does not bode well long-term for democracy in the United States if the military is the only actor committed to keeping its members out of electoral and partisan politics – while civilian leaders and the public are ambivalent, at best, and actively trying to make the military a partisan actor, at worst.

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ENDNOTES

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