



by Thomas Krasnican

If the military wants to retain the trust and confidence of the American people, its leaders – from the most junior to the most senior – will have to do something that might feel a little bit uncomfortable.

If we want to uphold the civil-military norms that have allowed the United States to build a powerful, professional military while maintaining a healthy democracy, our leaders must start thinking, learning, and talking about politics.

The notion of an “apolitical” military has instilled in many military leaders a deep aversion to talking about political subjects. This aversion is understandable, and in many cases, appropriate and safe. It is a conservative, easily-understood concept that often keeps service members from making improper statements or using their military status to endorse specific partisan views.

On the other hand, the last few years have shown that simply claiming that the military is “apolitical” does not protect it from being dragged into extremely sensitive political incidents.

Recent examples include:

- the [firing](#) of a Space Force lieutenant colonel who denounced DOD policies on a right-wing podcast
- [active-duty](#) and [veteran](#) involvement in the Capitol insurrection
- the use of National Guardsmen to [clear demonstrators](#) in front of the White House and subsequent photo op for which the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [apologized](#)
- the steady increase in [retired flag officers](#) using their rank to endorse or attack politicians

These kinds of episodes politicize the military, imperil our reputation as professionals, and eventually diminish the high level of faith the American people have in us. While many of these events were instigated by civilian actors, military leaders – even stellar ones – often find themselves unable to handle them effectively. It makes sense, when you think about it, that officers who have been trained to believe the military is “apolitical” may be totally unprepared when they have to deal with challenging situations of a political nature.

To say the military is apolitical is to pretend that it exists outside of the political world, when in reality, almost nothing does. The military is, and always has been, a political tool, and its leaders are inherently political actors who are forced to deal with political situations. A better understanding of that reality within the active-duty force may have mitigated some of the negative effects of the aforementioned incidents.

A more productive approach, as [many scholars have argued](#), is to [talk about the military as](#)

[“non-partisan.”](#) The distinction may seem semantic, but it encourages military leaders to actually learn how to discuss political subjects in a way that does not favor one party over another or promote certain ideological viewpoints. In a “non-partisan” military, instead of simply claiming that they operate outside of politics and refusing to discuss certain issues, leaders would evaluate their words and actions against the rigorous standard of partisan neutrality while remaining engaged with the tough issues that affect our country and our people.

Thinking and talking about politically sensitive topics in a non-partisan way is a skill that junior military leaders – not just public affairs officers, or generals and admirals testifying before Congress – must work to develop. It is possible that 20 or 30 years ago, an officer could serve for a decade or more before encountering a situation that required any semblance of political awareness or savvy. One could fulfill their oath to support and defend the Constitution by solely focusing on their “day job.” That is no longer the case.

Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen and their families are not immune from the partisan and ideological morass that envelopes more and more of daily life in America. Social division at this scale presents new challenges for military units at the tactical level – challenges that most of our predecessors did not have to reckon with.

Today, for example, *any* junior officer or senior enlisted leader must be able to lead a productive discussion in their unit on anti-democratic “extremism” without making false equivalences and without putting their hand on the scale for one political party or the other. They must be able to answer honest questions from troops about whether diversity training makes us stronger, or if it is a sign of a Marxist weakening of the force. They must be prepared for the possibility that one of their soldiers believes that a global pedophile ring controls world events, or that one of their Marines does not recognize the President as the duly elected commander-in-chief. At the very least, they should be able to help build understanding when a member of their unit is just a little bit confused or concerned about

current events.

These issues directly pertain to the overall morale, health, and readiness of all our units. Addressing them is a task that requires discipline, thoughtfulness, and preparation. And since military branches would probably be ill-advised to implement mandatory unit-level “political awareness” training in the near future, the resources for that preparation must come from one’s own personal reading and curiosity, or informal PME channels like [From the Green Notebook](#) and [SEA STATE](#) (the weekly newsletter I publish with a team of fellow junior officers).

As retired General Stanley McChrystal said on [a recent episode](#) of the FTGN podcast, “I urge military leaders not to become political, but *don’t be in denial about needing to understand [political] things*. If you can’t empathize with what other people have to deal with, it’s impossible to be effective.”

This is a message that should be widely reinforced among junior officers – at least as often as they are told about the apolitical nature of the military.

A military leader who has never been encouraged to understand politics cannot “flip a switch” and suddenly possess the skills necessary to navigate sensitive political spaces as soon as the need arises. It will require constant effort to ensure that we are ready to protect the important civil-military norms that have served our military and our nation so well in the past.

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