

PERCEPTION AND REALITY: THE URGENCY OF FINDING AND FIXING EXTREMISM AND RACIAL BIAS IN THE ARMED FORCES

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Many Americans were undoubtedly dismayed by the news that [as many as 20% of participants](#) in the January 6th insurrection – a percentage about ten times greater than the percentage of Americans who volunteer to serve in the military – were current or former members of the armed forces. And for good reason. The active or even passive participation of those who have sworn an oath to defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, is especially damning. As disappointing as the deeply-flawed judgment of these men and women may have been, even more troubling would be a failure of the military institution to seize upon this moment as an opportunity to take a hard look at how and why the corrupted message that inspired this insurrection produced such appeal.

The first step in this reckoning is to recognize that military personnel are not better-than-average Americans; they *are* the American average, a mix of its best and worst tendencies. It is an organization where courageous warriors serve with honor alongside individuals whose beliefs, and occasionally affiliations, contradict the basic values of the nation and the military institution. This military is a society where dangerous adherence to white supremacy and other radical views bubbles just below the surface. Indeed, those of us who have served in the ranks are probably the least surprised by these insurrection statistics because we know that no leader ever truly knows ground truth in a unit, and that it is immensely difficult to counter the appeal of views that are hidden in the shadows.

Contending with this reality in order to develop a military culture that genuinely disdains extremist and racist beliefs is essential to preserve not only the perception of loyalty to the nation, but the reality of it as well. A culture of equality and respect amongst service members is critical to ensure unit effectiveness amongst a force that prides itself on being diverse, as well as necessary for our nation's health. The first step in this process must be to peel back the idealized image of American military society as a fair meritocracy of heroes – an image that has never fully matched reality plus subtly diminishes the sacrifices of those not in uniform.

The modern myth of an American serviceman or woman – an American who necessarily embraces a greater devotion to the highest ideals of our nation than his civilian counterpart as well as possesses morally-superior ethics – has always been partially fictional. Those in [our all-volunteer force](#) are not necessarily “better” than any other American; they just choose to accept a special burden on behalf of our nation. There are many others in America who shoulder different, yet equally important burdens; there are millions of non-military Americans whose bravery, selfless sacrifice, and at times personally-dangerous efforts make this country a safer and more just and equitable nation, including nurses, teachers, community activists, first responders, etc.

What *does* make the military different is what “we the people” it defends may justifiably expect from those currently and formerly in its ranks: an unequivocal loyalty to our Constitution

and the rule of law that comprise the foundation of our national narrative. Indeed, many might be surprised to learn that military officers swear no oath to obey the President, but instead swear their fidelity exclusively to the Constitution. Perhaps this is why Americans today seem to desperately want to believe that those in uniform, or who once wore it, reflect the better angels of our national ethos, when instead they are as susceptible to the pernicious messages of extremist groups as any other member of society. What's worse, once corrupted by such messages, the very notion of "duty" that is so central to military culture may be what compels those with military backgrounds to seek out leading roles in these groups. This is where the myth of the modern service-member collides with reality, and what makes that 20% of insurrection arrestees so alarming: *the fact that we as a nation absolutely must be able to trust that our fellow Americans in uniform will not use their access to superior weaponry, sheer numbers, and understanding of military tactics to subvert our democracy.*

The nature of the ultimate military mission – to fight and win the nation's wars – is unique, which is why its members must be as well. Quite simply, we rely on military members to be different than other Americans. This is why it is so important for the military institution and its civilian leaders to prioritize identification and rejection of those within the ranks who market or buy extremist agendas. Our nation relies on the men and women in uniform to put aside their own personal prejudices, desires, and politics to work efficiently and respectfully with fellow service-members who don't always look like them or think like them, all toward the singular goal of mission effectiveness. To this end, the nation demands that service-members relinquish certain First Amendment speech and assembly rights; we demand they follow lawful orders no matter how dangerous, and even when they disagree with the objective (for example, the wisdom of invading [another nation](#) or of donning the [blue beret of the United Nations](#)). Nor may they simply choose to leave the military when they don't like a supervisor, or a mission at hand, or the danger they face. Military members' core commitment is to subordinate personal safety, beliefs, and interests to those embraced by the nation and the military institution.

Hence when a group of insurrectionists, apparently 20% of whom have military experience, mount an attack on our Capitol Building to block the execution of federal law, and when a retired 3 star general and former national security advisor publicly calls on the President to declare martial law and order a new election, we feel betrayed – and justifiably concerned about what is going on today within the military ranks. Such concern is not far-fetched or new; it was well-articulated and widely-shared at the founding of our nation.

In a 1776 letter, Samuel Adams, who, besides signing the Declaration of Independence and helping write the Articles of Confederation, was a General in the Massachusetts militia, [wrote this](#):

A standing Army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the Liberties of the People. Soldiers are apt to consider themselves as a Body distinct from the rest of the Citizens. They have their Arms always in their hands. Their Rules and their Discipline is severe. They soon become attachd to their officers and disposd to yield implicit Obedience to their Commands. Such a Power should be watchd with a jealous Eye ... Men who have been long subject to military Laws and inured to military Customs and Habits, may lose the Spirit and Feeling of Citizens. And even Citizens, having been used to admire the Heroism which the

Commanders of their own Army have displayed, and to look up to them as their Saviors may be prevailed upon to surrender to them those Rights for the protection of which against Invaders they had employed and paid them [sic].

Samuel Adams didn't have a crystal ball, but seemingly predicted the power of retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, who not only made un-American and legally absurd calls for martial law but also [appeared at a Washington D.C. rally](#) the day before the January 6 assault and riled up the crowd by falsely claiming that Trump had won the presidential election. We know now that many in that crowd, far more than their average representation in the civilian population, had military service. So when [Flynn theatrically spoke to members of the legislative branch](#) in front of this crowd, seemingly threatening violence, those with a military background were particularly primed to heed his message and do their duty as he called upon their special skills: "Those of you who are feeling weak tonight, those of you that don't have the moral fiber in your body, get some tonight, because tomorrow we the people are going to be here, and we want you to know that we will not stand for a lie!" Whether Flynn will face repercussions for such reckless rhetoric that contributed to five deaths is unknown; what is known is that he is a retired officer who [by federal law](#) is still subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, a criminal code that prohibits a wide swath of misconduct, [including speech that is "service-discrediting."](#)

Congress and our new Secretary of Defense must demand answers. For example, what is the military doing to ensure it is not recruiting those with extremist ties? What is it doing regarding diversity, equity and inclusion, given that [a 2019 poll revealed](#) a shocking 1/3 of all current service members witnessed signs of white supremacist and racist ideologies amongst their colleagues, a substantial increase from the year before? What is the military doing regarding accountability for those who engage in extremist, racist, or misogynistic conduct, including speech? Do existing efforts fall into the category of *pro forma* periodic Power-Point 'borientations' (boring presentations) or is the institution genuinely committed to cultural integrity?

Furthermore, what legally *can* the military do to police its potential recruits and its own for extremism, racism, homophobia, transphobia and misogyny, given constitutional protections of such vile thoughts? How much of the First Amendment's protection of free speech and assembly should be erased for those who volunteer for military service? Yes, the Supreme Court has long allowed, based on the nature of the military as a ["special society"](#) with a unique mission, the restrictions of constitutional protections for those in the military. How should such restrictions be balanced with critical thinking skills, and the freedom of individual military members to be personally political, while militarily apolitical?

Reports that the Department of Defense is [scouring social media of would-be recruits](#) to determine their fitness for service is both welcome and concerning – do we trust those doing the vetting that they aren't also weeding out those [whose politics or religion they don't agree with](#)? What procedural safeguards have been integrated into this process to ensure respect for the delicate balance between culling those unfit for service from the ranks, and respecting the right to individual thought and belief that does not impact good order and discipline? Will this process be transparent? Will service-members trust it to achieve legitimate results? Just trying to understand the [current policies related to extremist groups](#) would challenge the most diligent military attorney – so what is being done to simplify, clarify, and implement these directives? These are perhaps

the most important questions the military and its civilian leaders and overseers must begin to answer if they want the perception of the great American service-member to match reality.

Eighty-three percent of U.S. respondents in a [recent poll said](#) they have confidence in the military “to act in the best interests of the public;” the military was at the top of the list (tied with scientists) for the most trusted group or organization in America. The events of January 6th may likely – and should – lower that confidence, and give impetus to the civilian and uniformed leaders of the military to comprehensively and closely examine the health of our armed forces. Those who serve, and those who are protected by those who serve, deserve a healthy military – and our democracy depends on it.

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