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Strategic Insights: Think Before You Post: A Message to Those in Uniform

December 9, 2016 | Colonel Heidi A. Urben

According to a Gallup poll conducted July 18-25, 2016, the 2016 presidential election campaign had set an inauspicious record: never before have so many Americans held such unfavorable views of each party's presidential nominee. Among registered voters, 58 percent held negative views of both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter offer immediate and accessible venues for the average citizen to express their support or displeasure on a host of political topics, especially during an election year. For most citizens, that commentary is a natural extension of their freedom of expression, but for members of the U.S. military, it should represent a "no-fly zone."

Recent research conducted at the National Defense University has uncovered some unsettling trends and questions about how well members of the military are adhering to the nonpartisan ethic.¹ A survey conducted in December 2015 of U.S. military students attending the five colleges of the National Defense University and cadets attending the U.S. Military Academy examined the nature and extent of political expression by members of the military on social media. Among the least objectionable findings: while respondents' nonmilitary friends were more politically active than their military friends, both active duty and retired military actively participate in multiple forms of political and partisan expression, from posting comments on political issues to "friending" political figures. Of much greater concern, is that a striking percentage of the 500+ individuals surveyed reported that their military friends, both active duty and retired, have used or shared insulting, rude, or disdainful comments directed against political leaders on social media networking sites.

The role that retired military officers should play in political discourse remains up for debate, as evident by Lieutenant General (Ret.) Michael T. Flynn and General (Ret.) John R. Allen's political endorsements at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and their subsequent rebuke by General (Ret.) Martin E. Dempsey. The constraints for active duty members of the military are less debatable. The Department of Defense affords service members considerable latitude in expressing their political views, as long as it is clear their views do not imply an official endorsement by the military. Nonetheless, Department of Defense Directive 1344.10 addresses political activity in the military, providing a list of do's and don'ts, and Article 88 of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice prohibits officers from using contemptuous words against elected officials.

Despite those guidelines, 35 percent of those surveyed indicated their active duty friends have made or shared inappropriate social media posts about specific elected leaders; 50 percent indicated their active duty friends have disparaged politicians running for office; and 34 percent reported observing the same behavior by their active duty friends directed against the President. These findings not only represent a departure from the long-standing norm of nonpartisanship in the military, but also reveal a lack of decorum and deference to civilian authority by those in uniform. Sure, respondents indicated their civilian friends were twice as likely to post or share

rude commentary against elected leaders than their active duty military friends, but civilians have the unambiguous right to do so. Those in uniform do not.

The suggestion that the social media activities of military members are personal in nature misses the mark. The majority of service members' social media pages are adorned with photos of themselves in uniform and other unmistakable connections to their military service, and as many businesses and nonmilitary organizations increasingly warn their employees, social media is fundamentally a public sphere. Moreover, unlike a private discussion with friends and family, political commentary on social media—the modern day town square—becomes a written, lasting record with an exponentially vast public reach, as friends of friends continue to share or pass on an original post or comment.

These findings also show a substantial disconnect between the appeals of the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph F. Dunford Jr. (and his two immediate predecessors) and the political behavior of those in uniform today. Former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael G. Mullen and General Dempsey used their podium on multiple occasions to strongly encourage those on active duty to keep their politics private, with General Dempsey advocating the extension of the nonpartisan ethic into service members' behavior on social media.² In July 2016, General Dunford Jr. continued the tradition of reminding those in the military about the importance of political neutrality—and the perception of political neutrality—in advance of the presidential election.³ These continued appeals by the current and former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs are notable for two reasons. First, the sheer fact they repeatedly felt compelled to address this issue indicates there is a problem across the joint force. Second, for nearly a decade now, as evident by this study's findings, these warnings by our nation's top uniformed leaders seem to have fallen on deaf ears. If adherence to the nonpartisan ethic is indeed eroding, what are the implications for strategic leadership today, and what must leaders do to exercise better stewardship of the profession? A first step, rather than parsing what is allowable and what is not, is to center discussions on whether or not such political activity is appropriate—even, and perhaps especially, those activities that are currently allowable. As Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1 *The Army Profession* states:

The Uniformed Code of Military Justice, Army regulations, and policies set the minimum standards for ethical conduct. . . . Simple or strict compliance with laws and regulations rarely generates a deeper understanding of why a standard of conduct is prescribed and is considered right and good.⁴

In this debate, the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs have been doing all the heavy lifting—while other senior military leaders have largely remained silent as the topic of civil-military relations fades from professional military education curriculum. Norms are not imbued throughout the military without continued emphasis, teaching, and self-policing. Leaders of all ranks across the services, but especially our senior leaders, must be more vocal in stressing the need for those on active duty to remain apolitical and should not wait until the eve of a presidential election to do so. Moreover, the role that nonpartisan ethics plays in the broader part of the military profession, not to mention the full implications of the military's subordination to civilian authority, should be revisited at every stage of professional military education. The normative violations discovered in this study suggest more attention, not less, is required.

For the 19th year in a row, the American public rated the military as the top-ranked institution in Gallup's annual confidence poll. The trust of the American people is rooted, in part, in the ethic of nonpartisanship and adherence to professional standards. Despite whatever acrimony may

characterize election seasons, active duty military members would be well served to steer clear from publicizing their personal, political views on social media and refrain altogether from criticizing political leaders. Such behavior threatens to erode the trust in which the public holds the military, leading to it being viewed as just another interest group. Perhaps even more importantly, leaders across the services, as stewards of the profession, must do a better job of communicating why this matters. By more effectively linking the nonpartisan ethic and political neutrality to the concept of trust, leaders will not only encourage active duty military members to “think before they post,” but to increasingly reflect upon what it means to be part of the profession.

ENDNOTES

1. Heidi A. Urban, “Like, Comment, Retweet: The State of the Military’s Nonpartisan Ethic in the World of Social Media,” Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, forthcoming.

2. Martin E. Dempsey, “From the Chairman: Putting Our Nation First,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Iss. 65, 2nd Qtr. 2012, p. 4. See also Michael G. Mullen, “From the Chairman: Military Must Stay Apolitical,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Iss. 50, 3rd Qtr. 2008, pp. 2-3; Michael G. Mullen, “Speech Delivered at National Defense University Commencement,” Presented at the National Defense University, Fort Leslie J. McNair, Washington, DC, June 11, 2009; Martin E. Dempsey, “Civil-Military Relations and the Profession of Arms,” Chairman’s Corner, June 25, 2012, available from <http://www.dodlive.mil/index.php/2012/06/civil-military-relations-and-the-profession-of-arms/>.

3. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., “From the Chairman: Upholding Our Oath,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Iss. 82, 3rd Qtr. 2016, pp. 2-3.

4. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, June 2015, pp. 1-3.

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