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The Military and the Election: Thinking through Retired Flag Officer Endorsements

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With fall approaching, we as Americans find ourselves in the midst of another presidential election. While we are not typically in the business of debating or commenting on the country's domestic politics here at the US Army War College, the civil-military landscape today requires us to think seriously about how military service is used and leveraged during campaigns—and how that use may draw the military into partisan politics. We already see the ways political leaders and candidates portray the military (the lone remaining federal institution with an approval rating above 50 percent) as supportive of their leadership. From campaigns that publish lists of retired general officer endorsements, to advertisements that highlight political candidates' military service, to politicians who use visits to military bases in reelection literature, observers have no shortage of civil-military events to study and discuss as the election draws near.

This issue's column focuses on a prominent—and much-remarked-upon—feature of election cycles today: the prevalence of retired general and flag officer endorsements. Every election cycle, presidential campaigns release lists of former senior military leaders who endorse their candidacy and, in many cases, use them as surrogates on the campaign trail to discuss national security priorities. In some high-profile cases, retired general officers have delivered speeches at partisan national conventions, highlighting their military credentials while advocating for presidential candidates. I chose to focus on this phenomenon because it has generated significant attention from civil-military relations scholars over the last several years. There is, therefore, both existing research to evaluate and opportunity to advance our understanding of how, when, and why these endorsements may (or may not) matter for healthy civil-military relations today.

The debate, on the surface, is relatively straightforward. Should retired general officers participate in partisan politics by endorsing political candidates? Is it a celebrated exercise of free speech, or do endorsements undermine civil-military relations and unnecessarily politicize the military? The debate, however, is also complicated. After all, there are many different ways and degrees to which retired flag and general officers may advocate for political candidates. There are also various ways to discourage participation in partisan politics. To date, stewards of the profession have relied on informal social norms among the retired general officer corps to discourage political endorsements, but these norms are weakening and increasingly contested.¹

Some prominent military leaders like Joseph F. Dunford Jr. and Martin E. Dempsey have advocated for a renewed norm-based approach, while others have proposed enforcing the existing limitations on speech (up to and including Uniform Code of Military Justice action) or even introducing new language into the UCMJ that further restricts retired officers' ability to exercise partisan political speech. Yet most proposed solutions also lack a sense of the scale of the problem. Indeed, it is reasonable to expect that additional restrictions on the First Amendment rights of retired general officers should be informed by compelling evidence that such partisan political speech does, in fact, significantly harm the institution.²

So, what does the public know about general officer participation and its impact on civil-military relations? The answer, I would argue, is not as much as we should. Thanks to terrific recent research by Risa A. Brooks, Michael A. Robinson, and Heidi Urben, we know the norms against partisan endorsements are weakening and are contested among the retired general officer community. Moreover, there is evidence that retired flag officer partisan speech also correlates with other types of political behavior, like monetary donations, suggesting there is a type of "political" officer—and research from our own war college faculty reveals that those monetary contributions skew toward one political party. We also know from survey research spearheaded by Peter D. Feaver, Kyle Dropp, and James Golby that general officer endorsements of policy—whether retired or active duty—are only effective under certain conditions.³

Evidence also suggests that the risk of politicization is real. We know from recent research that military cues harm the public perception of the military as a nonpartisan entity, Americans are largely unable to distinguish between the retired and active-duty general officer corps, and the public's commitment to military norms of non-partisanship norms are weak at best. However, these findings are also not definitive. In a recently republished *Parameters* article, Zachary E. Griffiths argues the existing evidence does not

support claims that partisan speech by retired general officers significantly damages civil-military relations.⁴

It appears, therefore, that we have a gap between theory and empirics worth investigating further. While the studies Griffiths cites are a good start, a more systematic investigation of how different types of speech and endorsements by retired general officers may impact public perceptions of military partisanship is needed. Moreover, a closer look at how endorsements sway elite civil-military relations—perhaps a survey like the one fielded by Brooks, Robinson, and Urben or a more thorough set of interviews like those conducted by Todd Andrew Schmidt in his book on civilian control—would shed additional light on the ways in which retired general officer behavior may or may not undermine civil-military trust.⁵

Finally, we should evaluate the ways retired flag officer partisanship affects the profession and, in particular, the next generation of military leaders. Do retired general officers' political actions undermine non-partisanship norms among active-duty officers and cadets? We should strive to answer these empirical questions if we want to develop a policy that appropriately balances retired officers' rights with their continued responsibility to the profession of arms.

There is also a set of normative questions that deserve further attention. First and foremost, is it even appropriate to try to limit retired general officer speech? Should promotion to general officer come with a lifetime restriction on one's right to free speech? And, if so, what is the right way for retired general and flag officers to engage in the political process, if at all? When I address this topic with new one-star general officers, I ask them to consider three questions when deciding whether to participate after retirement:

- Are you being asked because of your personal experience or because of your title?
- What impact do you think your endorsement will have?
- What example do you hope to set?

There is no guarantee that this approach is the right one, however, and it is largely informed by a better-safe-than-sorry mindset. To get it right, we must do more theoretical and empirical work.

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Carrie A. Lee is the director of the US Army War College Civil-Military Relations Center and chair of the Department of National Security and Strategy. Her award-winning research and writing have appeared in publications such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Texas National Security Review*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *War on the Rocks*, and the *Washington Post*. She is a term member with the Council on Foreign Relations, a contributing editor for *War on the Rocks*, and an adjunct fellow with the Center for a New American Security. She received a PhD in political science from Stanford University and a bachelor of science degree from MIT.

Endnotes

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