

Is the Pen Mightier than the Sword?

Op-Ed Use by Retired Military Officers in America's Major Newspapers

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Research Question

In what ways are Retired Military Officers Attempting to Influence Public Opinion in the USA?

This is an empirical and normative question

Democrats express more trust of most news sources asked about; Republicans express more distrust

Number of sources more trusted and more distrusted for political and election news, among 30 asked about

30 SOURCES:



Democrats trust
more than distrust
22 sources



Republicans distrust
more than trust 20
sources

- Source that is **trusted** by more people than distrusted
- Source that is **distrusted** by more people than trusted
- Source is **about equally trusted** as distrusted

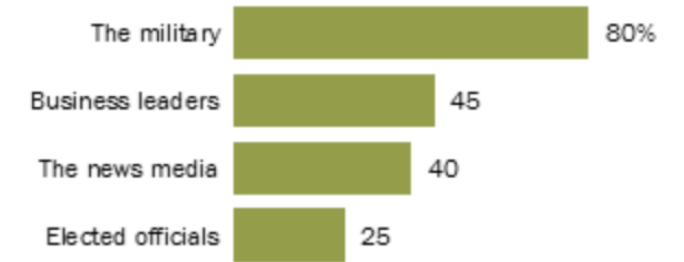
Note: Partisans include leaners.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.
"U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided"

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Majority of Americans say they have confidence in the military

Have confidence in ___ to act in the best interests of the public



Source: Survey U.S. adults conducted Jan. 29-Feb. 13, 2018.

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Why This Question Matters:

- The Military is the most-trusted Institution in America (Pew Research Survey, February 2018)
- The Public can reasonably expect that the expertise of retired military officers be used to weigh in on issues that pertain to a certain bundle of issues (national security, military matters, etc.)
- We know that the media itself is trusted along highly partisan lines (Pew Research Survey, November 2019)
- The “norm” for retired military officers is to stay apolitical unless one is running for office. We have seen this norm strained in the past, however.

The Call for a Professional Ethic

“Yours is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory, that if you lose, the Nation will be destroyed, that the very obsession of your public service must be Duty, Honor, Country.

Others will debate the controversial issues, national and international, which divide men’s minds. *But serene, calm, aloof, you stand as the Nation’s war guardians, as its lifeguards from the raging tides of international conflict, as its gladiators in the arena of battle.* For a century and a half you have defended, guarded and protected its hallowed traditions of liberty and freedom, of right and justice.

Let civilian voices argue the merits or demerits of our processes of government. Whether our strength is being sapped by deficit financing indulged in too long, by federal paternalism grown too mighty, by power groups grown too arrogant, by politics grown too corrupt, by crime grown too rampant, by morals grown too low, by taxes grown too high, by extremists grown too violent; whether our personal liberties are as firm and complete as they should be.

These great national problems are not for your professional participation or military solution. Your guidepost stands out like a tenfold beacon in the night: Duty, Honor, Country.”

- General (Retired) Douglas MacArthur to the Corps of Cadets, West Point, NY, May 12, 1962

A “Renewed” Call for a Professional Ethic

Military Leaders Should be Apolitical

31 July 2016

The Washington Post

The military is not a political prize. Politicians should take the advice of senior military leaders but keep them off the stage. ***The American people should not wonder where their military leaders draw the line between military advice and political preference.*** And our nation's soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines should not wonder about the political leanings and motivations of their leaders.

Retired Marine Gen. John Allen and retired Army Lt. Gen. Mike Flynn weren't introduced at the Democratic and Republican conventions, respectively, as "John" and "Mike." ***They were introduced as generals. As generals, they have an obligation to uphold our apolitical traditions. They have just made the task of their successors – who continue to serve in uniform and are accountable for our security - more complicated.*** It was a mistake for them to participate as they did. It was a mistake for our presidential candidates to ask them to do so.

Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, Raleigh, N.C.

The writer is former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Hypotheses

H1: The majority of retired military officers would write pieces that involved "staying in the traditional lane" of retired military officers:

- pieces that offered tactical or strategic advice about a particular course of action, recommendations an administration should take with respect to a certain issue, or support for troops

H2: There would be an increase in the number of pieces that "stray outside the lane" in recent years. Why?

- Personal thoughts are that:
 - Opinion pieces in general typically offer a thought-provoking message
 - Military elites, once retired, may not view loyalty in the same way that military elites did in previous generations. Loyalty structures may not be as black and white as they perhaps used to be. Other mitigating factors could include:
 - they are living longer, and feel that they have more to offer than just their prior military experience
 - they have been hardened by combat in the post 9/11 era and "don't care" as much about the norm of remaining utterly apolitical
 - they may genuinely feel strongly about what they are espousing, and are not afraid of the perception that their beliefs could be construed as political to some audiences

Methodology

The Data

- Editorial and Commentary Pieces written by retired military officers published in all source types (print, online, international edition) of the four largest US Newspapers by circulation (USA Today, WSJ, NYT, WaPO)
 - There are more media sources out there, but these four are largely considered to be “the plum” journalistic sources. Op-Eds are deliberately penned pieces. They are not interviews. They usually take time and thought to prepare.
- Using the Factiva and Nexus-Uni Database, I identified *215 pieces* published between *January 1, 2000 – April 16, 2020*.
- I limited my search terms to commentary/opinion and editorial pieces, and did a free text search for terms such as “retired military, former Army General, former Admiral, commander of, etc.” Total search volume was 10,000 + pieces, which I narrowed down to 215. I probably missed a few.
- I then used Nexus-Uni to then search by author to find any articles that I may have missed (which I did). Databases sometimes catalog authors differently by name and/or military affiliation.

Analysis/Coding

- After reading each piece, I attempted to find the “thesis” statement or “thrust” of the article. In addition to basic information (title, author name, published date, etc.), I tried to place the editorial into one of several bins:

Methodology (cont'd)

Coding

- **PolicySecurity** - code 1 if the written piece advocates for or denounces a particular course of action directly related to security/operational/strategic decisions of a clear military nature, or for military spending.
- **GenTroopSupport** - code 1 if the written piece is generally written to showcase the work of Troops, or to defend the memory or honor of a military figure who is not a political figure.
- **GenAdvice** - code 1 if the written piece is generally written to offer some sort of strategic advice or wisdom on a topic.
- **PolicySocial** - code 1 if the written piece advocates for or denounces a particular social policy for inclusion or exclusion into the Armed Forces. Examples: don't ask, don't tell; repeal of don't ask, don't tell; role of Transgender Troops.
- **PartyGen** - code 1 if the piece indirectly is advocating for or denouncing a documented position held by one of the major political parties, despite the fact that a political party is not named explicitly. [8 points]
- **PartyName** - code 1 if the piece explicitly advocates for or denounces the position or platform of a political party by name.
- **PolAdminName** - code 1 if the “thesis” of the piece is advocating for or denouncing a documented position held by a government official or an administration including by naming / attacking an official by name (i.e. the President, or cabinet official of an administration, or a challenger to the President)

Results

- Of the 215 pieces, breakdown by category included:

Security	Troop Support	General Advice	Social Policy	Parties (General)	Parties (Name)	Administrations or Figures (By Name)
71	19	98	7	2	1	20



- Let's examine these 30 opinion pieces (circled) in greater detail.
- The others regarding security, troop support, and general advice I consider, for the time purposes, to be “within the bounds” of retired officer expression

Note: I removed #s 7 and 16 from the list. John Murtha was an elected official and as such we expect him to write partisan pieces. # 16 is an unknown person who was writing a letter to an editor, not a deliberate op-ed.



Probably ok.



Questionable



Inappropriate

	AuthName	ArtTitle	Source	PubYr	Topic
1	Blair, Dennis and Reeder, Joe	A Multicultural Military	WaPo	2003	-U. Michigan Affirmative Action Cases
2	Clark, Wesley	Medals of Honor	NYT	2004	-Tacit Defense of SEN John Kerry
3	Franks, Tommy	War of Words	NYT	2004	-Tacit Defense of George W. Bush
4	Franks, Tommy	Right Leader, Right Time	WSJ	2004	-Endorsement of George W. Bush
5	Eaton, Paul	A Top-Down Review for the Pentagon	NYT	2006	-Attack of SECDEF Donald Rumsfeld
6	Crosby, John and McInerney, Thomas and Moore, Burt...	In Defense of Donald Rumsefeld	WSJ	2006	-Defense of SECDEF Donald Rumsfeld
7	Murtha, John	Confessions of a 'Defeatocrat'	WaPo	2006	
8	Eaton, Paul	An Army of One Less	NYT	2006	-Jab at Rumsfeld after midterm elections
9	Clark, Wesley and Raustiala, Kal	Why Terrorists Aren't Soldiers	NYT	2007	- Approach to terrorists harms democracy
10	Shalikashvili, John	Second Thoughts on Gays in the Military	NYT	2007	-Don't Ask, Don't Tell – Support/Change
11	McPeak, Merrill	Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Change	NYT	2010	-Don't Ask, Don't Tell – Support/Change
12	Scales, Robert	A War the Pentagn Doesn't Want	WaPo	2013	- Critical of Obama re: Syria
13	Hayden, Michael and Mukasey, Michael	NSA Reform that Only ISIS Could Love	WSJ	2014	- Critical of the 113 th Congress
14	Petraeus, David and O'Hanlon, Michael	Afghanistan After Obama	WaPo	2015	-Recommendations for Afghanistan
15	McChrystal, Stanley	Home Should Not Be a War Zone	NYT	2016	-2 nd Amendment Recommendations
16	UNK	Fists Raised at West Point	WaPo	2016	
17	Hayden, Michael	Donald Trump is Undermining Intelligence Gathering	NYT	2017	-Trump's Policies are Hurting Intelligence
18	Hayden, Michael	The Travel Ban Hurts American Spies – and America	WaPo	2017	-Trump's Travel Ban and Spying
19	Mullen, Mike	The Refugees We Need	NYT	2017	-Trump and Refugees
20	Mullen, Mike	Bannon Has No Place on the NSC	NYT	2017	-Trump and the NSC
21	Wilkerson, Lawrence and Wilson III, Isaiah and Adams,...	Trump's Border Stunt is a Profound Betrayal of Our Mi...	NYT	2018	-Alleges use of military at border is wrong
22	McRaven, William	Take My Security Clearance, too, Mr. President	WaPo	2018	-Sarcastic Jab at Trump
23	McChrystal, Stanley	Good Riddance	WaPo	2018	-Confederate Battle Monuments
24	McRaven, William	Our Republic is Under Attack From the President	NYT	2019	-Alleges Trump is Destroying the Country
25	Allen, John and Victor, David	Despite What Trump Says, Climate Change Threatens ...	NYT	2019	-Trump and Climate Change
26	Nagl, John	Retired Generals Warned Us About Rumsfeld. Now Th...	WaPo	2019	-Warning About Trump
27	VanLandingham, Rachel and Corn, Geoffrey	If We Want Troops to Follow Orders, We Should Trust ...	WaPo	2019	-Concern about Trump's handling of cases
28	Hertling, Mark and Natter, Robert	Cutting Refugee Admissions Will Have Severe Conseq...	WaPo	2019	-Trump's Refugee Ban
29	Mullen, Michael	Banning Transgender Troops Only Hurts Us	WaPo	2019	-Trump's Transgender Troop Ban
30	McRaven, William	If Good Men Can't Speak the Truth, We Should Be Dee...	WaPo	2020	-General Political Atmosphere

Key Takeaways

- Over the 20 year period, we have seen retired military officers write on some controversial topics that sometimes break the traditional military norm of remaining “apolitical”
 - Endorsing political candidates for office – evident in Presidential Elections, especially from 2004-onward
 - Revolt of the Generals (2006 against Rumsfeld) and perhaps a “2nd Revolt” ongoing
- What’s Different/New?
 - the publication of opinion pieces that comment on tangential political issues – topics that do not directly impact the military
 - Important topics, but should military voices be weighing in on topics such as:
 - 2nd Amendment and Gun Control, Transgender Ban, Refugee Policy/Immigration, and Climate Change
 - The fervor with which retired military are attacking sitting political figures – namely, President Donald Trump and his administration.
- Normative questions American society should consider include:
 - On what topics should Americans expect retired military officers to provide “expert advice” as a result of their professional experiences (i.e. Fighting a War versus domestic political opinions)?
 - How are various actors (the media, individual retired officers) leveraging the “institutional trust” of military elites to sway and influence public opinion?
 - To what degree do these trends make it more difficult for active military to provide their expert advice on military matters?
 - To what degree will these trends erode the public’s trust?

Next Steps

- Scrub the Data....again (June 2020)
 - What is the true “denominator”? Have I caught all of the op-eds written by retired military in these sources?
- Determine how the “macro” changes in media and particularly, opinion pieces, influence my findings
 - More online avenues to publish – what does this mean?
- Incorporate a textual analysis to measure tone and other items (July 2020)
- Finish a full-blown paper on this subject by the end of the Summer (August 2020)

Questions