

Retired Flag Officers and Public Political Criticism

by Robert L. Caslen

Lock her up! Lock her up!” So screams a retired Army lieutenant general at a presidential nominees’ party convention. This chant certainly received a lot of attention from the American people, and not necessarily from what the opposing candidate did, but simply because America was not used to seeing senior military leaders, whether active or retired, so publicly supporting—or condemning—a political person or a political issue. But this public appearance, I would argue, met the presidential nominee’s intent to secure military votes and to show the public that he was a pro-military nominee. Not to mention that it also certainly gained the chanting retired general officer a key position in the president’s inner circle as the president’s National Security Advisor.

Not to be outdone, the opposing party’s presidential nominee gathered about 20 or so retired generals and admirals to stand alongside her during her nominating convention. And sure enough, there were plenty of flag officers I personally served with who were publicly choosing sides in the upcoming presidential political election. One of them, a retired 4-star general who had previously commanded all forces in Afghanistan, was on the convention’s final night’s agenda, addressing the convention attendees, as well as a national audience on TV. And again, the American people were wondering what this new norm of public political support from retired flag officers was all about.

America was comfortable with a nonpartisan, apolitical military leadership that was constitutionally bound to provide military advice that was not laced with political influence. But now that many retired flag officers are coming public in support or criticism of a serving politician, what does something like this mean to the American people, and what message is America really hearing?

When we officers take the military oath of service upon entering the Army or any of the other services, we swear an oath of allegiance to the Constitution, and through this oath we are

Lieutenant General (Ret.) Robert L. Caslen served in the U.S. Army for 43 years. His military career culminated in 2018 as the 59th superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point. Caslen served as the chief of the Office of Security Cooperation in Iraq and was the Commandant of the Army’s Command and General Staff College and commanded the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Caslen holds an MBA from Long Island University and a master’s in industrial engineering from Kansas State University.

joining the profession of arms. What is key about a profession—any profession for that matter—is that those in the profession provide a unique service their clients need, and this service is unique in that only those in this profession can provide it. Think of the profession of administering physical and mental health by a doctor, psychologist, or dentist. They provide the unique act of providing health services, and by doing so, they earn the trust of their patients.

So, in the profession of arms, who is our client? And what is the “unique service” we provide to our clients? Quite simply, our client is the American people, and the unique service we provide is the use of lethal force in an ethical way to protect them. And what is particularly unique is that we are willing to give our lives for their protection. First responders have a similar unique service, but their client is limited to the community they serve. The United States military’s client includes all of America, to include all ethnicities, races, faiths or no faith, genders, and all political affiliations.

One of the Army’s published field manuals specifically talks about the Profession of Arms, and how the professional ethic and its values are defined. The field manual is *Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (ADP 6-22), Army Leadership and the Profession*, and I commend the Army for putting this together and publishing it.

Concerning the ethical application of lethal force, ADP 6-22 states, “Soldiers in combat operations are responsible for the ethical application of lethal force in honorable service to the Nation. The law is explicit. Soldiers are bound to obey the legal and moral orders of their superiors; but they must disobey an unlawful or immoral order. Soldiers are also legally bound to report violations of the law of war to their chain of command.”¹

The client for the Profession of Arms is the American people, and the basis for this relationship is found in our Constitution. When we take the oath of allegiance to the Constitution,

we believe and adhere to what the Constitutions says. The U.S. Constitution puts the military in a subordinate relationship to our elected officials, where these elected officials are elected by the American people. So, if you connect the dots, those we serve are the American people who elect our government officials, of whom we are subordinate to.

...those we serve are the American people who elect our government officials, of whom we are subordinate to.

ADP 6-22 goes on to say that the “Army profession is a trusted vocation of Soldiers and Army civilians whose collective expertise is the ethical design, generation, support, and application of landpower (sic); serving under civilian authority; and entrusted to defend the Constitution and the rights and interests of the American people.”²

Addressing this issue of a “trusted vocation,” APD 6-22 states,

The Army’s essential characteristics of trust, honorable service, military expertise, stewardship, and *esprit de corps* enable the Army to serve America faithfully as an established military profession. These characteristics of the Army Profession reflect our national ideals, the Army Values, the Army Ethic, and the Army’s approach to accomplishing its mission to defend the Constitution and the American people. Soldiers and Department of the Army (DA) Civilians are professionals, guided in everything they do by the Army Ethic. They are certified and bonded with other Army professionals through a shared identity and service within a culture of trust.³

As I said before, a profession requires a relationship with its client, and that is a relationship built on trust. Stephen Covey wrote a great book called *The Speed of Trust*. The

premise is quite simple. Those companies or organizations that have deep trust among their employees are able to operate at accelerated speeds. Bureaucracy is reduced or removed, and informed decisions are quickly made, thus setting the conditions for increased accomplishments. Covey illustrated that trust always has two outcomes—speed and cost. When trust goes up, costs will go down, and the speed of doing business will go up. Covey also wrote that “Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people.”⁴

Character becomes the most important element in effective leadership.

Covey defines trust as a function between competence and character. If you are given the world’s best arsenal and military equipment, and you do not know how to fly it, sail it, or use it, then you are not going to have the trust and confidence of either your superiors, or your client—the American people—to use it properly when you have to. If you are conducting operations of mass destruction without concern for collateral damages, you are not going to be trusted to use your equipment in accordance with the *ethical* application of combat arms. Another way to make this point is to simply say that if you are not competent, then your client—the American people—will not trust you.

Because character is necessary for trust to exist, if you cannot deliver on your word, no one will trust you. Or if you violate culture norms and values, again no one will trust you. A leader’s character embraces, teaches, and inculcates the values of its institution. The Army’s values, for example, are loyalty, duty, respect, selfless-service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Those who violate these values are seen by the profession as one who possesses a character defect. Not only will the client no longer trust

him or her, but trust is also lost by the leader’s subordinates, peers, and superiors within the leader’s organization. Character becomes the most important element in effective leadership. You can be the top of your class, but if you fail in character, you fail in leadership.

When I was a division commander in northern Iraq towards the end of the surge, commanding an Army division of over 23,000 military members, I found myself, halfway through the rotation, signing letters of reprimand, or Article 15s at least once or twice a week, mostly for character violations. My policy was that I would adjudicate senior leader misconduct, which was defined by all officers—from second lieutenant to general officer, all warrant officers, and senior enlisted grades of E-7 and above. My rotation in theater was only 12 months, but in those 12 months, I adjudicated 78 cases of officer and senior NCO misconduct. Given there are 52 weeks in a year, this equates to one and a half letters of reprimand or article 15s each week! The rank breakout was one colonel, eight lieutenant colonels, 10 majors, 18 captains, 15 lieutenants, nine warrant officers, and 17 NCOs (E8-E9). Studying the 78 offenses was revealing as well, as 76 of them were offenses inside the operating bases, and only two were offenses that occurred while conducting combat operations, which were detainee abuse and negligent discharge. The other 76 were inappropriate relationships, hostile environments, false official statements, sexual harassment, fraternization, violation of General Order #1 (alcohol, pornography, visitation violation), adultery, dereliction of duty, disobeying a lawful order, loss of sensitive item, assault, aggravated sexual contact, abuse of subordinates, drug use, AWOL, DUI, and wearing unauthorized tabs.

Writing the article 15s and the letters of reprimand was difficult—I knew they would all end up disqualifying the senior leader of another promotion and resulting in forced leave from the Army. But what was more concerning was

the impact it had on the unit. I had a battalion lose its battalion commander to a vehicle born improvised explosive device (VBID). The battalion commander was respected and loved. He was a great leader, no-nonsense, highly competent, and everyone looked up to him. It was a tragic loss. But working with his home station unit, we were able to quickly find a replacement. I initially thought this replacement officer was a great fit. But within a month of installing him as the new commander, he was under investigation for an act of misconduct, which was substantiated, and resulted in relieving him of command and required him to move elsewhere. That officer would never see another promotion and would be forced to leave the Army within the next two to three years.

But, the impact it had on the unit's morale was devastating. The unit that was once one of the best in the Division was soon one of the worst. I went on patrol with them one day, and there was argument on the open radio net, disrespect by subordinates of senior leader's decisions, unmaintained vehicles that were breaking down, and a nose-dive in morale. Said another way, a senior leader's misconduct not only has an adverse impact on the leader that normally results in his or her removal, but also has a remarkable negative impact on unit performance.

Why is this so important? Simply because, if you fail in character, you fail in leadership. And not only do you fail, but you end up bringing your unit down with you.

So how does all this apply to retired general officers who publicly criticize serving politicians? There is no shortage of retired flag officers appearing on news networks today giving perspectives of the war in Ukraine, the defection of an Army Soldier rushing across the South Korean border into North Korea, or the latest Chinese naval and air training with incursions into Taiwan's water and airspace. I had a conversation with a former Chairman of

the Joint Staff, and he was in support of retired officer's military assessments, as this is what we are obligated to do—to provide apolitical military advice. And quite frankly, their assessments add much to the American public's understanding of what is occurring as well as bring forward military issues and perspectives that the public would otherwise not understand. In other words, the appearance of retired flag officers providing military assessments and advice about on-going military issues is welcomed and, in most cases, helpful.

Strategic leaders have a stewardship responsibility for the relationship between the military and civilian leaders of the Army.

ADP 6-22 recognizes the issue of a senior military leader providing military advice to their elected officials and encourages senior military leaders to provide professional military advice.

Strategic leaders have a stewardship responsibility for the relationship between the military and civilian leaders of the Army. Leaders take an oath of office that subordinates the military leader to the laws of the Nation and its elected and appointed leaders, creating a distinct civil-military relationship. Army professionals understand this and appreciate the critical role this concept has played throughout America's history. Equally important, this concept requires military professionals to understand the role of civilian leaders and their responsibilities to the civilian leadership. A critical element of this relationship is the trust that civilian leaders have in their military leaders to represent the military and provide professional military advice. Military professionals have unique expertise, and their input is vital to formulating and executing defense policy.

Based on mutual trust, this relationship requires candor and authority to execute the decisions of the civilian leaders. These decisions provide the strategic direction and framework in which strategic military leaders operate.⁵

But “professional military advice” is not the same as “public criticism.” So, what happens when one of these retired flag officers crosses the line, and instead of providing military advice, they use their forum to publicly criticize a currently serving political leader by being critical of the policies they profess and the actions they may have taken?

...“professional military advice” is not the same as “public criticism.”

Quite simply, the American public will see that senior military leaders are providing politically laced advice, rather than the apolitical nonpartisan advice they are required to provide, and thus begins an erosion of trust between the American people and their military.

ADP 6-22 states that

Army professionals have a duty to provide their unique and vital expertise to the decision-making process. It is our responsibility to ensure that professional military advice is candidly and respectfully presented to civilian leaders. The key condition for effective American civil-military relations is mutual respect and trust. ... Army professionals properly confine their advisory role to the policy-making process and do not engage public policy advocacy or dissent. Army professionals adhere to a strict ethic of political nonpartisanship in the execution of their duty.⁶

One can ask that since active-duty flag officers must adhere to an ethic of political nonpartisanship, then why is it that retired officers cannot publicly speak their mind,

particularly if they are critical of currently serving political policy?

Most of my research deals with active-duty officers and I have not found much written about the ethical duties and responsibilities of *retired* officers. However, I have seen the impact of retired officer’s public criticism of currently serving political administrators, and the equivalent degradation of public trust and confidence of our military.

According to a Statista Research Department research summary published July 31, 2023, U.S. public confidence in the armed forces from 1975-2023 has shifted considerably in the last five years, dropping from 72% in support in 2018 to 60% in 2023.⁷ There are a lot of circumstances related to this drop in confidence, but I am certain the significant amount of recent retired flag officer criticism of existing public officials, particularly the U.S. President, has contributed to this drop in trust and confidence. The public does not separate an active-duty flag officer with a retired flag officer. When they see a retired officer critical of a serving public official, they feel that *all* flag officers are politically motivated, and this idea of “military advice” is laced with political considerations, and not what is best for the security of our nation. And a consequence is the drop in their trust that the American military is no longer able to provide the security our nation requires.

Another question is whether retired flag officers can be held accountable for their public criticism or public support of a currently serving political administrator? The simple answer is that I have yet to see any retired officer being held accountable. But *should* they be held accountable? There is no easy answer to this question. Some would say they should be held accountable simply because they are still commissioned officers in a retired status. When officers take their commissioning oath, they swear allegiance to the Constitution, and as explained earlier, the Constitution places the

military subordinate to its civil authority. So, the logic would argue that whether you are active or retired, you remain a commissioned officer, and as a retired commissioned officer, you aspire to the same ethic that is expected of our active-duty officers. Frankly, I have floated this idea a few times during my time as Superintendent of West Point and did not find many takers. Perhaps this can be a topic of debate for another time. But in the end, the issue that has to be addressed is trust—the trust of the American people with their military to prosecute war in a lethal and moral way, and win. And as I write this, that trust is waning.

I am often asked if a retired military officer should be able to serve in political office? After all, President Dwight Eisenhower was once a five-star general, only to become the President of the United States shortly after his Army retirement. President Ulysses Grant did the same almost a century before. The answer is complicated and my recommendation is taken from the American people's perspective.

First, we have numerous former military who currently serve in public political office—82 veterans in the 118th Congress House of Representatives and 17 in the Senate. These members are not all *retired* military, nor are they retired flag officers. My observation is that the public does not see them as retired *flag* officers who provide politicized military advice, but rather honorable Americans who elected to serve their country. And since most are not retired, and are not retired flag officers, they do not have the mandate to provide military advice that flag officers have. The bottom line is that America values and respects their military service to our country and trusts their continued service in their new political position.

But what about a retired *flag* officer seeking a political position? Again, I would argue America sees them as honorable service members, whose service is respected, and who have already earned the trust from their colleagues who

elected them for political service.

I would argue, however, a slightly different position with respect to retired *flag* officers. In order to build the confidence of the American public and to avoid any conflict of interest, if I were a retired flag officer seeking a political position, I would resign my military commission in order to seek my political position. When you resign your commission, you are no longer in a conflict of interest and you can argue any political position you want. The disadvantage of resigning your commission is that you would personally no longer receive your retired commissioned officer pension. That may place you and your family in a challenging fiscal situation, but it will certainly clear you of anyone who would fault you for representing the military as providing politicized military advice.

...if I were a retired flag officer seeking a political position, I would resign my military commission in order to seek my political position.

In summary, I applaud our retired officer corps for participating in news reports that help explain military operations and their complications. They provide significant insights into the challenges of prosecuting conflict, and I feel that is an important service to the people of our nation. However, when these retired officers cross the line from explanation to criticism of serving political officials, it forces America to question whether the constitutionally directed impartial military advice is indeed impartial or not.

If you want to see what is not only right, but also symbolic, of the military's political non-partiality, watch the Service Chiefs of Staff at our nation's annual State of the Union address made by the President of the United States. If you ever watch this speech, it is a hugely

political speech during which the President praises his successes and provides policy advocating issues that need to be addressed. At some suggestions, the President's party will all stand and cheer. At other suggestions, where there is bi-partisan support, both parties will stand up and cheer. And when he cheers America, you will again see bi-partisan support and cheering. But what is revealing is to watch the Service Chiefs of Staff during each of these policy suggestions and accomplishments advocating the pride in America. When there is a partisan comment and the President's party are all standing and cheering, the Chiefs just sit there stone-faced. And when our Country is highlighted for accomplishment without partisan bias, they, too, will stand and cheer.

But I love to see them sitting there stone-faced at a partisan comment. That is the picture our country wants to see. A military that is apolitical, and one that will provide pure military advice to our Nation's president. This is the picture that is not only what our country wants, but it is also the one that builds the trust relationship with the American people.

That is not the case when one of our military flag officers — whether active or retired — stands up in criticism or in political public support. Although a retired flag officer may feel empowered to criticize a public political person, they should take into consideration that their actions are like a bullet shot into our nation's 'bank of public trust' that exists with our military and the American people. It takes significant goodwill to fill that bank of public trust and it takes just a bit to empty it out.

Trust is the glue that holds our relationship with the American people together. I encourage all my retired flag officer colleagues to be sensitive when they are on TV, or on their social media, or elsewhere, slamming a political administration. It will quickly drain the bank of public trust and that is something our Nation cannot afford right now. **IAJ**

Notes

1 Headquarters, Department of Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) No. 1 (July 31, 2019): 18.

2 Ibid., 16.

3 Ibid., 1-2.

4 From my blog <https://www.robertcaslen.com/blog/trust-the-most-important-element-in-effective-leadership>

5 Headquarters, Department of Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) No. 6-22 (October 9, 2019): 113.

6 ADP 6-22, 19.

7 Statista Research Department. Public confidence levels in the United States armed forces from 1975 to 2023 (July 31, 2023), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/239149/confidence-in-the-us-armed-forces/>