

The Chaplain as Faithful Steward of The Army Ethic in an Age of Political Friction

by Michael Demmon

Imagine a commander receiving an order that is lawful but politically explosive, one that places his soldiers in the midst of domestic strife or in the position to execute an operation viewed by half the country as illegitimate. This juggle reflects the recent burden of military leadership. The professional military ethic demands obedience,¹ yet the commander's conscience grapples with the moral friction of implementing "lawful but awful" directives.² In this crucible of command, legal advisors may strain under pressure while the judiciary, itself seen as politically compromised by many, adjudicates court challenges to the order.³ To navigate this treacherous landscape, the commander seeks a confidential space to deliberate upon his civic duty while reconciling his personal and professional integrity. This commander needs the chaplain.

As politics seeps into every aspect of life and polarization perpetually intensifies, the U.S. Army finds its professional ethic stretched from all sides of the civil-military divide: a disconnected public, partisan civilian leaders, and military elites tempted by the allure of political engagement.⁴ This storm threatens to tear the institution from its nonpartisan moorings. Leaders must not overlook a ready anchor embedded within the force itself, one that already operates from apparently conflicting intersections. The U.S. Army Chaplain Corps, often seen simply as a provider of religious services or as a morale enhancer, stands ready to act as a steward of the military's professional ethic. This historic role envisioned by George Washington offers a powerful, if underrealized, resource in this critical moment in American history.

This paper explores the historic military professional ethic established by Samuel Huntington and discusses its continued viability in the strain of today's political environment. From there, we look at the civil-military gap and how three players – politicians, the military, and the public – each contribute to, and challenge, how that historic military professional ethic functions in society. Then we'll see how members of the Chaplain Corps, as both religious and military professionals, support the nonpartisan warrior ethos from its historic role of religious advisement. The paper finishes with recommendations for how the Chaplain Corps can better live into this role, even as this era of polarization continues.

To understand the strain upon our ethic, we must first refresh the foundation laid by Huntington, now the presumed standard for generations of military leaders since World War II.⁵ Huntington articulates the ideal of the American military profession as one of specialized competence and political neutrality.⁶ This professional jurisdiction over legal violence reflects the military's particular expertise.⁷ To maintain proper civilian authority, the military's supreme virtue becomes obedience to lawful authority.⁸ To misunderstand this distinction threatens both sides of the equation. The professional officer does not question the *what* of policy but focuses on the *how*—the prompt and efficient execution of the state's decisions, democratically determined through our constitutional government. This framework establishes the military as a perfect instrument of the state,⁹ subordinate to, while independent from, the varying winds in the world of politics.

The military nonpartisan professional ethic, however, cannot mean civic ignorance or avoidance of political consequences. We must remember that the objective of nurturing a nonpartisan professional ethic is not to make soldiers ignorant of politics but to create what Trent Lythgoe calls "politically literate servicemembers."¹⁰ Political literacy reflects the ability to understand the inherently political nature of military operations as an instrument of state policy while avoiding the hazard of partisanship that would undermine democratic fair play. As Huntington would say, military leaders must stay knowledgeable and aware to bring their own competence to bear and

communicate it effectively to the statesman. In this way, the military stands ready as the constitutional tool for common defense, as the Preamble envisions, no matter what party may be helming the ship of state through the troubled waters of any given moment.

The commander's dilemma imagined at the outset presents a symptom of the deeper crisis in American civil-military relations as the long-standing norm of a nonpartisan military faces a slow, steady degradation. Civilian leaders increasingly leverage the military's prestige for partisan advantage, widening the chasm that separates the force from a society which reveres the military yet remains disengaged from it.¹¹ This disconnect creates a dangerous vacuum for partisan narratives to fill, making it difficult for the military to maintain its nonpartisan stance. Such an environment places immense pressure on military leaders, who must uphold their constitutional duty while navigating political hazards. One need only look at the *Newsom v. Trump* court case to see the peril of the nonpartisan military being drawn into partisan civic friction, stretching the very foundations of federalism.¹² Clearly, the public is watching how the military responds.

Unfortunately, modern civilian leaders increasingly breach the norm of nonpartisanship by attempting to leverage the military's high public prestige for their own political advantage. As scholar and veteran Heidi Urben notes, today's politicians sometimes refer to the military with directly possessive terms like "my generals."¹³ Candidates attach senior leaders to their campaigns as political functionaries, and incumbents host overtly partisan speeches in front of formations of uniformed service members.¹⁴ These actions blur the line between the military as an institution of the state and a tool of a specific administration or party. Such political drift by both major parties not only confuses the American public but opens the specter of *de facto* loyalty tests for senior military leaders, injecting political turmoil into a nonpartisan institution and undermining the military's meritocratic foundation.¹⁵

The widening chasm between the military and the society it serves compounds the pressure. Since 1974, the all-volunteer force has created what some scholars describe as a professional "warrior caste," a cadre largely separate from the populace it defends.¹⁶ This separation fosters a paradox where the public expresses reverence for its service members, elevating them to the status of "secular saints," yet remains profoundly ignorant of military life, culture, and purpose.¹⁷ This reverence-without-understanding allows partisan actors to plant false narratives about the military into the public mind. For the military professional, this gap can breed contempt for the civilian leaders they serve, whether elected or bureaucratic.¹⁸ If heard only through a partisan filter, this chasm makes providing wise counsel difficult, and a venerated military may then hesitate to submit readily to inferior or ignorant civilian accountability.

Given this drift, the trust the public holds for the military has been described as durable but shallow.¹⁹ Yet, problems above the strategic echelon (politics) seep down into all levels of leadership. These converging streams of politicization and the public's detachment place an unsustainable burden on commanders. Leaders must guide formations through politically divisive missions, maintain morale in the face of public misunderstanding, and preserve their own nonpartisan professionalism while feeling pressure from all sides, even above and below. This tense environment acutely heightens the commander's need for sound, confidential advisement.

To meet this need, the Chaplain Corps stands ready. Chaplain sections and Unit Ministry Teams (UMTs) provide confidential counseling and advisements to ensure leaders and soldiers alike can loyally wrestle with their conscience.²⁰ Chaplains' two professions provide a dual fluency to the formation helping navigate apparently competing interests with prudence and courage.²¹ Besides direct advisement, chaplains provide ethical instruction to the force in operational units and throughout professional military education (PME), enhancing professionalism through the military's operational tempos and career life cycles. Further, as chaplains connect "soldiers to God and God to soldiers" they also connect the military to their endorsing agency, providing a ready link to the public. When properly cultivated and employed, chaplains can help heal soldiers' hearts from battle but also shrink the civil-military gap and temper the effects of political polarization by example and through wise counsel.

The first helping tool chaplains provide is confidential religious advisement to commanders navigating moral friction. Huntington captures the classic soldier's dilemma: When faced with an ethically questionable scenario, "as a soldier he owes obedience, as a man he owes disobedience."²² Today, this conflict is rarely about patently

illegal orders;²³ more often, it concerns lawful orders that are morally or ethically fraught, or even strategically unwise. When commanders must execute a lawful but awful order,²⁴ they need a safe space to process the moral weight of their professional duty. The chaplain, by virtue of both professional function and legal protection, provides that space.²⁵ Unlike a discussion with a peer, a deputy, a sergeant major, or a judge advocate – where concerns could be interpreted as a prelude to refusal – communication with a chaplain is privileged. The chaplain's expertise allows the commander to confidently and confidentially wrestle with doubt, explore the ethical dimensions of an order, and seek moral clarity without signaling insubordination or political compromise.

Beyond individual advisement, the Chaplain Corps also stewards the profession by leading ethics education for the entire force. This role is not new but foundational to the genesis of the Chaplain Corps.²⁶ As historian John Brinsfield notes, General George Washington expected his chaplains to reinforce military discipline by reading laws of land warfare to soldiers, linking obedience to both military law and moral principles to proper conduct and, ultimately, to victory.²⁷ Washington placed chaplains in every regiment to refute the political theory claims of the crown by grounding the revolutionary cause in the moral theory of the Declaration of Independence.²⁸ We can see that from the beginning, commanders tasked chaplains with the ethical formation of the force, ensuring soldiers understood the legal and moral basis for their service and sacrifice.²⁹

Today, there is a pressing need to revitalize this educational role. Urben argues that the military tends to “overestimate the degree to which the norm [of nonpartisanship] is formally taught and reinforced.”³⁰ Many service members, including leaders, lack a sophisticated understanding of the constitutional principles that govern civil-military relations. This is why it is so important for chaplains to serve as Ethicists at Army schoolhouses. Further, The Chaplain Corps, as the Army's proponent for Moral Leadership,³¹ is perfectly positioned to fill this educational gap and nurture mental and spiritual fitness in this way.³²

If politicians attempt to borrow trust and capabilities from the military, commanders may also do so from chaplains when properly cultivated. Chaplains' reputations vary by the chaplain of course, but the air of healthy respect for the divine grants most chaplains the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise. Chaplains live out this trust as the one person in the formation with 100% confidentiality while also living what the unit is going through, up and down the chain of command. If chaplains, too, are co-opted by partisan interests beyond religious claims, then chaplains forfeit their purpose provided to commanders through George Washington's vision, Congress's direction, and Army doctrine.

The availability of this interaction hinges on the chaplain's “dual fluency.” Jason Palmer describes chaplains' competency in both the military and religious domains as part of what they bring to the formation.³³ A chaplain fluent in both his professions does not offer political or legal solutions. Instead, he provides historic, religious, and ethical frameworks to help the leader *endure* the moral burden of command. By drawing upon theological principles, ethical traditions, and the commander's own faith, the chaplain helps leaders find the moral courage to execute assigned duties while maintaining their personal integrity. This act of advisement reinforces the Army Ethic at the individual level, helping leaders minimize moral injury and reduce cynicism while preserving their ability to lead the formation effectively. This critical function is only possible, however, if the chaplain remains a trusted and apolitical agent.

Some may hesitate to utilize chaplains in this manner, so let us address potential counterarguments. First, utilizing the Chaplain Corps in this way doesn't violate any understanding of church and state separation. Rooted deeply in Army Doctrine, advisement puts forth no creedal-specific religious requirement, only the moral understanding that is common to America and the Army as an institution.

Second, some might not feel great concern for the moral uprightness of soldiers. We train them to kill, so why squabble about ethics? I would say, rather, that if we trust our military with professional jurisdiction over violence, then the military's conduct must match our professional ethic.³⁴ This matches George Washington's institution of chaplains in regiments and even General George Marshall's desire for a spiritually strong and morally upright but nonpartisan fighting force.³⁵ Chaplains help soldiers live up to The Army Ethic in order to match constitutional needs for security. To align too closely with a party undermines our basic frameworks, and we lose what is distinct about civil-military relations, threatening the norms that help our entire system function.

Thirdly, some would say that chaplains are religious leaders only, and thus limit their function to Sunday Chapel. As seen above with George Washington, and the long-practiced respect for the First Amendment, the military looks to chaplains to march along with them and help them as they strive and suffer. This mirrors most religious leaders who endeavor to engage their flock beyond Friday evening or Sunday morning.

We must acknowledge that some moral faith-claims will drift into political discussion. This happens, for instance, with current critiques from Pope Leo XIV on state violence, or how each side of the pro-life debates links to one party or the other, or the stereotypically Liberal Protestant tendencies to support DEI and LGBT policy initiatives that run against the grain of the current administration. Prudence must drive³⁶ here like in many otherwise legally debatable or morally disagreeable matters. Chaplains, and all service members for that matter, must decide as best they can what stands they are willing to make, comport that with their ordination vows and their constitutional oath, and, as recent episodes demonstrate, discern what is actually “*manifestly illegal*” or just *lawful but awful*. These challenges require the military chaplain to live the call with a healthy dependence upon the grace and mercy of God.

Chaplains should see this reminder of our historical role as an opportunity to speak into the professional military ethic.³⁷ We must be excellent at providing religious support *and* advisement. Our endorsers send us for both, and commanders need both. Along those lines, to actually assist with bridging the civil-military gap, chaplains should maintain better contact with their endorsers. This helps navigate First Amendment distinctions but also allows chaplains to communicate back to the endorsing agencies the needs of those they sent us to serve. This growth opportunity for Active Duty reflects something the Reserves and National Guard live every day as citizen soldiers. All chaplains should remember that we will eventually take off the uniform and (hopefully) return to ministry with our endorsing agents. While in the military, chaplains stand as a ready conduit for communication with the public. This is mutually beneficial, patriotic, and faithful.

Last, we must heed this call to be politically neutral, if not for our own sake then for those we serve. As the scripture says, we must be wise as serpents but innocent as doves.³⁸ Without forfeiting firm convictions or violating core statements of belief, we must stay prudent and courageous in how to live out that call so as to remain relevant and available to our commanders and not undercut what we offer to the entire formation. Like so much of what chaplains do, it comes back to supporting soldiers; meeting their needs before our own in the spirit of selfless service. We can model difficult faithfulness when the rest of the population struggles to even have political conversations civilly.

In an era of unprecedented strain upon civil-military norms, the Army should understand U.S. Army Chaplain Corps not as a passive tool but an essential steward of The Army Professional Ethic. UMTs, as dual professionals, advise commanders, educate formations, and connect to endorsers (and thereby the public). Doing all these well while resisting the allure of partisanship can alleviate immense pressure on all sides, especially when large-scale combat operations loom over the horizon or trouble heats up at home.

The health of the Army’s professional ethic is inextricably linked to the health of American democracy. Chaplains faithfully live this call every day and have done so for two and a half centuries. By helping the military remain a reliable, nonpartisan, and virtuous instrument of the state, the Chaplain Corps performs a service that transcends the force and contributes directly to national stability. In fulfilling this duty, the dual-fluent chaplain truly lives out a “hypostatic union” as both clergy and officer—serving God and Country by guiding the Army and its leaders through the moral and political complexities of our time.

Endnotes

- 1 Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 72, 74.
- 2 Urban, “Politicization of the Military,” 224.
- 3 Huntington, 78.

4 Urban, 216.

5 This paragraph draws heavily upon *Soldier and the State*'s chapter "The Military Mind," especially pages 70-79.

6 Huntington, 71.

7 Urban, 214, and Huntington 72-73.

8 Huntington, 74. The quote is "The supreme military virtue is obedience."

9 *Ibid.*, 73. "The military profession exists to serve the state."

10 Lythgoe, "Response to...", 50.

11 Bryant, Swaney, and Urban, "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint," 14.

12 The case files can be found here: https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCOURTS-cand-3_25-cv-04870/USCOURTS-cand-3_25-cv-04870-2/context. Page 7 of 52 on the 09SEP25 order shows a training slide from ARNORTH TF51, along with other DoD memoranda throughout, showcasing that the military can be easily drawn into partisan disputes when they are adjudicated in the courts.

13 Urban, 220.

14 *Ibid.*, 219-220.

15 *Ibid.*, 220.

16 Bryant, Swaney, and Urban, 11.

17 *Ibid.*, 14.

18 *Ibid.*, 15.

19 Snyder on *Decisive Point Podcast*, at 30:40.

20 For more on internal advisement, see ATP 1-05.04, especially paragraphs 1-9, 1-23, and 1-25.

21 Palmer, "Missiological Adaptation...", 19.

22 Huntington, 78.

23 Much has been made about Senator / Captain (USN, ret.) Mark Kelly's omission of "manifestly" or "patently" in the video for which he was accused of sedition. The inference that any officer's order is inherently lawful does not apply to a "*patently* illegal order" per MCM IV-24, Article 90.c.(2)(a)(ii). Any direct discussion of Kelly's case is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth acknowledging that the situation is in the air of many discussions around this topic.

24 again, Urban, 224.

25 See AR 165-1 Chapter 16, and ATP 1-05.04, paragraph 1-25.

26 Brinsfield, "Points of Light," 7.

27 *Ibid.*, 10.

28 *Ibid.*, 7.

29 *Ibid.*, 11.

- 30 Urban, 225.
- 31 AR 350-1, para. 2-17.
- 32 From units and centers throughout T2COM and nested within Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) programs.
- 33 Palmer, 19.
- 34 See ADP 6-22, esp. fig. 1-1.
- 35 Urban notes on page 215 that when pressed “on his political views, [he quipped] that while his father was a Democrat and his mother was a Republican, he was an Episcopalian.”
- 36 Prudence is often called the charioteer of the virtues. Pun Intended. See Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 1806.
- 37 The Secretary of War is inviting us to do so. <https://x.com/SecWar/status/2001113071108882526>
- 38 Matthew 10:16.