



Truman National Security Project

Progressives and the Military: Bridging the Gap

By: Melissa Sturm Tryon
Veteran, Operation Iraqi Freedom

May
2006

Adapted from a chapter originally published in *With All Our Might: A Progressive Strategy for Defeating Jihadism and Defending Liberty*, edited by Will Marshall (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) www.withallourmight.com

Executive Summary

The divide between progressives and the military is rooted in cultural differences and reinforced by decades of misunderstanding. This separation is not benign: it harms the credibility of progressives in the national security sphere, and hinders progressive leaders' ability to make good policy with a full understanding of military capabilities, strengths, vulnerabilities, and needs.

Turmoil within the military, largely due to strains from the Iraq War, is causing many in uniform to question long-held political assumptions—providing a crucial opportunity for healing this unnecessary, deeply harmful division. If progressives ignore this opportunity, the general military perception that progressives do not care about military concerns will remain—or, tragically, the internal military narrative of progressive distaste for America's defenders will be strengthened. This paper is the first in a series aimed at building at healing this divide.

This paper is divided into five sections:

- Introduction
- The Progressive-Military Gap
- Understanding Military Culture
- The Values that Unite Progressives and the Military
- An Action Plan for Closing the Divide

Introduction

I was no one's idea of prime military material: a violinist inclined to neighborhood tutoring and humanitarian studies, someone who had never touched a rifle or imagined killing anything bigger than household pests.¹ But the humanitarian crises of the early 1990s seemed to prove that suffering could not be alleviated without recourse to a strong and just military. So I started officer training at West Point, mentally prepared for some culture shock.

Of course, the steely-eyed automatons my Californian teachers had despairingly warned me about were nowhere to be found. The highly confrontational environment of introductory training did require some adjustment, but was far less about *Full Metal Jacket* shenanigans than with preparing us to lead decisively and honorably through the chaos of war. In addition to standard Army troop leadership, I spent several months with Navy officers and midshipmen, and also some limited time with Marine and Air Force personnel while deployed. I've grown to value the practical wisdom, understated resolve and offbeat humor of military life.

However, the *cultural* chasm between my progressive ideals and new military surroundings was far deeper than I expected. A set of deeply ingrained assumptions about "liberals" that began in

¹ Opinions expressed are the author's own, and do not represent the official view of the U.S. military. The author is registered Independent and does not officially endorse either political party. The author would like to thank Ross Chanin, a Truman Associate, for his assistance with research for this article. The author also greatly appreciates the assistance of Kathy Roth-Douquet, Phillip Carter, Dick Klass, and the Truman National Security Project Fellows and Principals who assisted in reading and offering their advice on earlier drafts. Any mistakes that may appear in this essay, however, are the author's alone.

the Vietnam era has calcified into military folklore and been passed on from one generation to the next, with all the nuance expected of “war stories”:

- Liberals make America weak and impose dangerous ideas about limited war. Remember how Kennedy set the military up to fail in Vietnam by not letting us go in and kick butt?
- Liberals in the 1960s either shirked responsibility by running to Canada, or stayed and spit on veterans when they returned home scarred. Then Carter had the balls to pardon the shammers while veterans were abandoned to deal with their nightmares.
- Reagan showed the communists who was boss, rebuilt the military, and restored American pride.
- At least George H.W. Bush knew how to fight, win, and go home.
- Clinton was a draft dodger who slashed the military, compromised mission effectiveness by focusing on peacekeeping operations instead of the true “war” mission, and flouted moral precepts by conducting liberal social experiments.
- Iraq may or may not be going well, but there’s no excuse in voting for a presidential candidate who betrayed his own brothers-in-arms by coming home from Vietnam and telling lies about them.

The fact that I heard the “Vietnam betrayal” comment most recently from a 20-something Navy officer highlights the power of these assumptions. **Factually, of course, much of this collective memory is misinformed:** Plenty of Republicans opposed the Vietnam war, and plenty of Democrats supported it; Kennedy developed U.S. Special Operations Forces; Carter began the military build-up that Reagan continued; and Clinton bequeathed President George W. Bush the high-tech, post-Cold War force that fought so brilliantly in Afghanistan and Iraq.²

But the facts don’t always matter when soldiers banter while loading equipment or waiting for trucks to show up. The enormous demands on a service member’s time don’t allow for much outside contact and external information beyond one’s own unit or military town. And it doesn’t help that military televisions seem to be tuned exclusively to Fox News, while competitors like CNN (a.k.a., the “Clinton News Network”) are shunned.

To counter such deeply ingrained stereotypes, Democrats cannot simply trot out some retired generals at election time. In order to heal the dangerous divide between progressives and the military³—a divide that weakens our country and our democracy, not just one political party—progressives must undertake a broader, deeper embrace of the military community. Progressives must learn to understand military culture, and forge the relationships that will allow shared beliefs and values to overcome these caricatures. Many of the reasons for estrangement between

² Which wars to undertake, and the Rules of Engagement for interacting with opposing combatants and civilians are, of course, determined by America’s civilian leadership—the military’s duty is simply to carry out their missions as directed by the President (the Commander in Chief) and civilian leaders.

³ The term “military” here addresses Air Force, Army, Marine, and Navy personnel serving in an active duty capacity (including activated Reserves and National Guard). “Military community” also includes veterans and retirees, who have been socialized into many of the same norms, usually identify with current troops, and are often active in military towns—and the spouses who share many decisions and sacrifices.

progressives and the military have been examined elsewhere.⁴ What follows is a brief overview of the divide from a military insider’s perspective, a primer on military values and culture, and recommendations for how to restore progressives’ credibility with the armed forces.

The Progressive-Military Gap

The disconnect between the military and progressives has two components: a demographic divide and a cultural schism. Demographically, few serving officers have friends and relatives who are progressives. While enlistees are less likely to be conservative than officers, the increasing trend of recruiting from the rural South and Midwest is intensifying the

BASIC MILITARY RANKS

Understanding the differences between military ranks is essential for effective outreach to the military. While most studies consider the publicly visible but small set of officers, enlisted service members are more numerous and more likely to hold progressive beliefs.

COMMISSIONED OFFICERS

SENIOR OFFICERS: (Generals and Colonels in the Army, Air Force, and Marines; Admirals and Captains in the Navy) advise national policy and lead or staff large units of 3,000+. They set the military’s *official* tone—what will and will not be tolerated—but have little contact with the mass military. *Demographically, senior officers have advanced degrees, earn \$80,000-150,000 a year, and compose <5% of the military.*

JUNIOR OFFICERS: (Lieutenants; Navy Ensigns; all Captains except Naval Captains) are the decision-makers on the ground. They are responsible for leading small units of 20-250 and are responsible for enlisted service members in their unit. Their rank is respected by enlisted troops, but their influence on military values is largely a matter of personal charisma. *Hold undergraduate degrees, earn 29,000-65,000 a year, and compose 10% of the military.*

ENLISTED

NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS (NCOs): (Sergeants and Navy Petty Officers) train and supervise junior enlisted, and enforce officers’ policies. Though functionally subordinate to officers, their greater experience and proximity to junior troops gives them great influence over *internal* tone, explanations of “how things really are” and the narratives internalized by new recruits. *Generally have 5-25 years of enlisted service, often earn 2- or 4-year degrees while serving, earn 27,000-60,000 a year, and compose 40% of the military.*

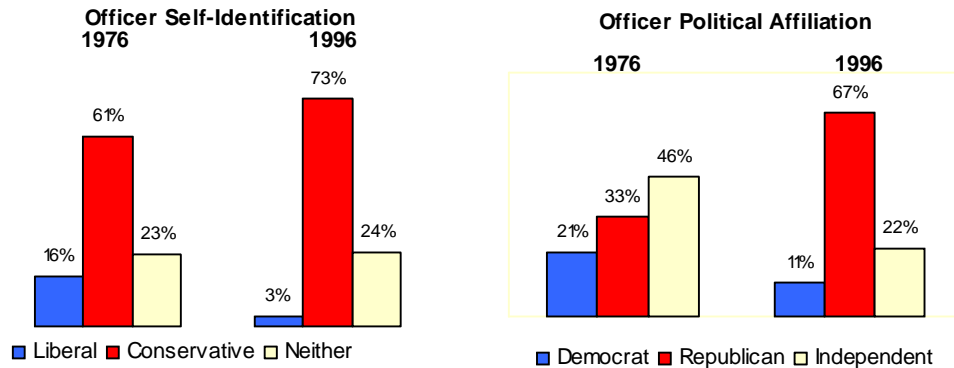
JUNIOR ENLISTED: (Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines) serve as analysts, technical operators, and self-proclaimed “grunts.” They are the mass of the military, and are the military’s future. Their opinions matter: they see the most direct effects of war and develop assumptions that will shape the next generation of recruits. *Usually hold high school diplomas, although some now attain specialized bachelor’s degrees, earn \$15,000 - 25,000 a year, and compose 44% of the military.*

⁴ See, for example, Heather Hurlbert, “War Torn,” Washington Monthly, November, 2002
<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0211.hurlbert.html>.

military’s conservative tilt. The growing social distance between progressives and the military—at both mass and elite levels—leads to misconceptions that could be changed simply with greater dialogue and interaction.⁵

Culturally, the progressive-military gap is an exaggerated version of the widely acknowledged civil-military gap. For many in uniform, the values of a hedonistic, acquisitive and rights-centered society are in tension with a mission-driven military that gives priority to concepts of duty, discipline, solidarity, and results.⁶ Liberals are seen as extreme individualists who do not like constraints, do not bend to duty, do not acknowledge the seriousness of the threats we face—and no longer join the forces that guard the freedoms they treasure.⁷ Liberal slogans such as “books not bombs” are seen by the military as facile, devaluing of military service, and frighteningly irresponsible when troops are exposed daily to real threats. For their part, liberals often view the military through the narrow prism of the culture wars, including issues such as gays in the military, and see the military as a bastion of social reactionaries. Since military elites lean heavily Republican while civilian elites lean Democratic, the cultural schism further feeds the demographic divide.⁸

These two trends have turned an institution that is supposed to be politically neutral into a strongly conservative force. In the Vietnam era, the military was culturally conservative, but politically neutral. Now, the military’s leadership is strongly partisan, and Republican. The Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS) Project on the Civil-Military Gap confirms the growth after Vietnam of Republicans among serving officers.⁹



⁵ Mark Sappenfield, “Where Recruiting Runs Strongest.” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 19, 2005.

⁶ Peter D. Feaver, Richard H. Kohn, and Lindsay P. Cohn, Eds. *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American Security*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

⁷ Military leadership does understand that these tensions undermine the respect necessary between a republic and its all-volunteer military; professionalism, political neutrality, and submission to civil authority are explicitly emphasized during officer training. Sadly, the view “on the ground” is sometimes different.

⁸ Gen. David Petraeus, as quoted in Michael C. Desch, “Explaining the Gap: Vietnam, the Republicanization of the South, and the End of the Mass Army,” in Peter D. Feaver, Richard H. Kohn, and Lindsay P. Cohn, Eds. *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American Security*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

⁹ Ole R. Holsti, “Of Chasms and Convergences: Attitudes and Beliefs of Civilians and Military Elites at the Start of a New Millennium,” in *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, p. 28.

Over the last three decades, Republican parents have been more likely than Democrats to encourage their children toward military service.¹⁰ ROTC programs were driven off Ivy League campuses during Vietnam and are now disproportionately located in the South, which is heavily Republican. Officers in particular come from politically conservative families, and high school seniors seeking officer training (future military elites) have been 5 percent to 15 percent more likely to self-identify Republican as those intending to enlist.¹¹

The mass military (new recruits and junior enlisted), however, enters the service generally reflecting the demographics of working-class America. Their politics are moderate and their party affiliations are evenly divided.¹² Recruits (by definition, enlisted ranks) are disproportionately from counties with median incomes that are low by either national or state comparison; and disproportionately from the South and Midwest, where it is the motivated youth who often join the military, seeking an alternative to poverty and factory life.¹³ (While the military is more attractive to disadvantaged households, it is important to note that service members do not enlist—and definitely do not remain in the military— simply for financial or social gain. The poor who enlist believe wholeheartedly that the country’s well-being is dependent on its fighting force, and make the choice to serve out of the same pride that motivates officers and well-off recruits.) These recruits tend to be religious and culturally conservative, but are relatively apolitical and nonpartisan.

Yet military socialization pushes enlistees toward more conservative views. The pervasive conservatism of military leaders (both officer and enlisted) creates a conformist climate that leads junior enlisted troops to become increasingly conservative and partisan with time in the military. Isolation from the moderating influences of the larger society reinforces this dynamic. Most enlisted families spend the vast majority of their service time on military bases and/or in strongly military communities. The result is an increasingly polarized and politicized military. In the 2004 election, for example, service-members preferred Bush to Kerry by 72 percent to 17 percent according to a Military Times poll.¹⁴ Enlisted troops, most from relatively apolitical backgrounds, leaned Republican 49 percent to 16 percent, while officers reported themselves 66 percent Republican and 13 percent Democrat.¹⁵ As of January 2006 and in spite of the Bush administration’s continued management failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, 56 percent of service-members identified as Republicans whereas just 13 percent identified as Democrats.¹⁶

Progressive views enjoy more private support within the mass military than one might think, however—and they are growing as a result of the Iraq War. Because those views are sometimes

¹⁰ Ole R. Holsti, “A Widening Gap Between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Evidence, 1976-1996,” *International Security*, 23 (Winter 1998/99).

¹¹ David R. Segal, Peter Freedman-Doan, Jerald G. Bachman, and Patrick M. O’Malley, “Attitudes of Entry-level Enlisted Personnel,” in *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, p 177.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Mark Brunswick, “In the Ranks of Recruits, Who Bears the Load?” *The Star Tribune*. November 3, 2005.

¹⁴ Peter D. Feaver, “Whose Military Vote?” *The Washington Post*, October 24, 2004.

¹⁵ Military Times online, <http://www.militarycity.com/polls>. However, this data is skewed by the nature of Military Times’ readership: career officers and enlisteds who lean farther right than junior officers and enlisteds.

¹⁶ Military Times 2005 year end poll, Military Times online, http://www.militarycity.com/polls/2005_chart4.php.

derided by supervisors, many service members keep their opinions to themselves. But even among libertarian-leaning officers, there is disillusionment with the Republican Party over issues like the ballooning national debt and politicians' preoccupation with social policy. More significantly, Iraq is slowly replacing Vietnam as the centerpiece of collective memory. Service members are prepared for sacrifice, but the protracted and unclear nature of Iraq deployments—and discrepancies between official, optimistic reports and their own experiences—are causing some to question the folklore that says conservatives are the strongest leaders.¹⁷

But progressive critiques have not yet solidified in the military, since disillusioned veterans lack ideological support systems, and even constructive criticism is often mistaken for disloyalty or cowardice.¹⁸ The Uniform Code of Military Justice's prohibition of contempt towards the civilian chain of command is often interpreted as a categorical prohibition against public dissent at all.¹⁹ The Army Officer's Guide explicitly warns against any political involvement—which is also interpreted as an injunction against criticizing a sitting administration.²⁰

The ugly realities of war, critical shortages of equipment and the contentious political debate over Iraq nonetheless are stirring latent unrest within the military. Such tensions could snowball into an internal challenge to the military's prevailing conservative orthodoxy—but only if progressives can find leaders with the credentials and self-confidence to address the military's all-too-real dilemmas.

Military Culture

Understanding military culture is the first essential step for progressive leaders who wish to earn the respect of the armed services. The military has a uniquely encompassing organizational culture. Extended workdays, month-long training exercises and multi-year deployments require that most of a service member's social and family life revolve around the military. The values and norms of military life reflect the imperatives of building a fighting force that can fulfill its duties with maximum efficacy. To bridge this cultural divide, progressives must learn to appreciate, not denigrate, the warrior ethos.

The "Warrior Ethos"

Each service has a version of what the Army calls the Warrior Ethos: acceptance of personal risk and discipline in order to survive and prevail in combat. Recognizing that "the more you sweat in

¹⁷ A recent Military Times survey found that 26% of active and retired military respondents did not believe America should have gone to war in Iraq, and 25% disapproved of President Bush's "handling of the situation in Iraq," although 73% of respondents felt that the war was very or somewhat likely to succeed. Op cit.

¹⁸ Contrasted with robust right-leaning organizations such as Officers' Christian Fellowship (OCF), an evangelical outreach available to American officers worldwide. I have had wonderful experiences with OCF officers, but the publicized zeal of the Air Force Academy chapter highlights the concern regarding a strong social group, on a relatively isolated military base, with no progressive counterpoint.

¹⁹ Sensitivity to this regulation is clearly uneven; criticism of W.Bush has been unwelcome amidst post-9/11 patriotism, while several military statements about Clinton bordered on contempt. Despite a strong professional ethos, officers are human; Clinton's perceived willingness to send American troops to war, when he had avoided service, seriously weakened legitimacy as Commander-in-Chief in military eyes.

²⁰ Ltc. Keith E. Bonn (R). Army Officer's Guide, 48th Edition, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1999), p 105.

peace, the less you bleed in war,”²¹ military leaders strive to develop behaviors and values that will prepare their troops to perform under stressful wartime conditions. Officially stated values change often,²² but the following fundamental cultural motifs are held across services:

- **Decisiveness.** Since military actions require innumerable split-second decisions under stressful conditions, waiting to act until one has all the facts, or until conditions are “optimal,” can cost lives. The military therefore values decisiveness—even when a slower decision might occasionally result in a better outcome. Junior officers and enlisteds constantly hear the phrase “Make it happen!” and common bumper stickers in military towns read “Lead, follow, or get out of the way.” Military people lack patience with perceived stalling and excuses—they want decisions, and they want action, not explanation. Nuanced analysis seems a luxury to forces that need to know when to start shooting at dangerous enemies—and when to stop.
- **Pride and honor.** Service members see the defense of our country as a calling, and as one of the greatest forms of service. Pride and honor are further cultivated by the military to keep service members focused on completing their missions despite personal losses and combat stress—so even service members who might have been drawn to the military for the college education are filled with a sense of deeper purpose, often religious as well as civic. Perceived slights—including the sense that they are being pitied, are “victims” of an administration or policy, or are serving out of a lack of better options—are tremendously resented by the military. This pride, when over-cultivated, leads some in the military to see their society as better than “soft” civilian society, and contributes to the civil-military divide.
- **Moral certainty.** War is a bad place for self-doubt. Service members learn to accept absolutes—one of the only ways of being comfortable with the possibility of taking or losing life for any cause. This moral certainty provides inner strength and pushes service members to value “the harder right over the easier wrong.” It also means that the military wants reassurance that its missions are morally justified. Soldiers tend to be open about religion, and are very comfortable expressing right and wrong in absolute terms—as well as suspicious of civilians who seem unclear or uncomfortable with these concepts. Since they assume that the use of force can sometimes be morally justified—and morally preferable—this certainty can also lead to disdain for liberal ambivalence about the use of force at all.
- **Community.** Combat and military training are stressful and require time away from family and local communities. Service members learn to rely on each other—even if they have never met before—and their families go out of their way to help out on short notice, expecting nothing in return. The unparalleled sense of “family” within the serving community means that service members are more comfortable with other service members—even when out of uniform. Conversely, the sense of community is born from a strong “us” and “them” paradigm, which can cause distrust for anyone who has not served in the military. The lack of serving Democrats as Hill staffers, political

²¹ Proverb often quoted in the military; attributable to many.

²² The Army’s most current official values are Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal courage, spelling L[e]a[D]e]RSHIP.

consultants, and other political jobs creates a barrier to easy conversation, even when the topic is not defense-related. Moreover, service members are apt to be fiercely protective of others in the military community, championing leaders seen as supporting the military and quick to turn against anyone perceived as denigrating the military—including former service members.

- **Commitment to winning.** In combat, there is no “can’t”—every mission given must be accomplished. The can-do attitude fostered includes a commitment to getting a job completed no matter what. It leads to anger at what is widely seen as “defeatism” among those who declare that the Iraq war is “unwinnable.” It also explains why “Bring Troops Home Now” slogans fail to resonate with service members, even when they’d personally like nothing better than to return home. No one in the military wants another Vietnam or Somalia—which are seared in collective memory as humiliating retreats without victory. That’s why most reject the idea of withdrawing from Iraq according to a politically determined timetable. What service members want most is to see America succeed in Iraq.
- **Traditionalism.** Fundamental principles of war have not changed from times of Sun-Tzu or Clausewitz; so learning from Napoleon’s operational genius, Lee’s battlefield command, or Hal Moore’s improvisational tactics at Ia Drang increases preparedness for future conflicts. The experience of combat is sufficiently unique that service members feel a kinship with those who have gone before, those who will come after, and the timelessness of rituals they share. This traditionalism also has a dark side in resistance to even positive change, and an unwillingness to try ideas that come from the “outside.” Experimentation, after all, may have lethal consequences for military personnel. The progressive impulse to test new ways to solve problems may appear to undermine time-honored routines that have worked. This value makes the military naturally conservative, and can be seen in an anti-intellectual light.

The salience of these values in military life explains why Republican rhetoric resonates strongly with soldiers. Republicans, for example, rarely use the language of victimization to describe service members, because they understand that such characterizations offend soldiers’ pride. Meanwhile, Republicans justify use-of-force decisions by reference to military-friendly values such as duty, toughness, boldness and decisiveness. Moreover, the Republican openness to religion resonates with a generally religious military.²³ For progressives, this could be cause for alarm. However, it is better seen as encouragement to be clear about the moral foundations of their own beliefs.

The Values that Unite Progressives and the Military

In fact, progressives and members of the armed forces share many core values. Though they may not agree on narrow issues like gun control, they share a commitment to service, community, individual liberty, equal opportunity for anyone willing to work hard, advancement based on merit rather than advantages of birth, and the equal right of all Americans to live with dignity. Both the military and progressives champion defense of the defenseless.

²³ Almost 75% of active duty and retired respondents to a recent, unscientific, Military Times survey declared religion to be fairly or very important in their lives.

Most progressives value West Point's iconic "Duty, Honor, Country" even if they do not publicly highlight those terms as often. With rare and regrettable exceptions, the average service member takes no pleasure in any human bloodshed. Like progressives, though, he or she believes that some causes are worth fighting for. Progressives therefore, can begin to reconnect with the military through the articulation of some common values. The most important of these values is the ideal of service.

- **Service.** It was John F. Kennedy, a great Democratic war her, who first implored Americans to, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Progressives and the military agree that all Americans have a duty to make this country a better place. The military is more than a paycheck; most join to be part of something larger than themselves, and to serve Americans and humankind—their impulse to serve is the same desire that calls progressives to work in nonprofits, public service, and other good causes.²⁴

Republicans after 9/11 have not called for a renewed national commitment to service, despite foreign and domestic catastrophes. This fact has not been lost on service members, who increasingly feel that the whole burden of the administration's "war on terror" has been placed on their shoulders. They've carried that burden valiantly, despite strained resources and decreasing active moral support from the rest of America.

This service ideal is a strong potential link between progressives and the military, which, after all, is comprised of volunteers. But we don't see many progressives in uniform, and military members generally aren't exposed to organizations like AmeriCorps and Peace Corps, which tend to attract young progressives. The military generally only sees humanitarian workers under hostile circumstances, when the military perceives itself as "bailing them out," rather than as equals in service. Thus, the military failure to appreciate progressives' commitment to public service is more a problem of institutional interaction than ideology, making it an excellent starting point for expressions of common ground.

- **Community.** Military leaders of all ranks emphasize the importance of taking care of each other, especially the lowest ranking. The idea of mutual dependence and responsibility is also a core element of progressive philosophy, which stresses that we are not born as atomized individuals, but have obligations to each other and to our society.²⁵

The linked ideas of community and service are deeply held beliefs of both progressives and the military—and are beliefs that are not expressed in conservative ideology. They are key ways in which progressives can begin building bridges to the military community. These ideas, however, need to be expressed clearly. Words like duty, brotherhood, shared sacrifice, and our shared community as Americans, resonate. Treating the military as a group whose "rights" have been victimized does not strike a positive chord.

²⁴ The importance of service is described with great humanity in Kathy Roth-Douquet and Frank Schaeffe, "AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of America's Upper Classes from Military Service—and How It Huts Our Country," (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

²⁵ Michael Tomasky of the American Prospect has written about this ideal of community and the common good in "Party in Search of a Notion," The American Prospect, May 3, 2006, <
<http://www.prospect.org/web/page.wv?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=11400>>.

- **Morality.** Clearly, progressives believe strongly in morality and justice. “Right” is central to many liberal views. Again, lack of exposure to progressives—and civilians in general—makes it difficult for the military to perceive progressives’ commitment to moral issues. However, this is another potential bridge if progressive politicians and policy makers can begin to phrase their arguments boldly in the terminology of right and wrong, rather than simply facts or pragmatic interests. Even though the areas of “right” and “wrong” may, at times clash, the military will appreciate firm moral commitments more than moral equivocation.
- **Freedom and American values.** The military prides itself on its duty to “fight for freedom.” Though the language of human rights has become a stumbling block because of perceived insults against the U.S. military by Amnesty International and similar groups, service members fundamentally believe in the civil rights and freedoms that America is founded upon.²⁶ Progressives would find resonance with the military in the idea that America needs to maintain physical security, but stands for more than that—we stand for ideals that must be defended at home and advanced abroad.²⁷ Framing human rights as integral to individual liberty and democracy will help military people to see that they, and progressives, are fighting for common cause. Progressives, for example, should continue to insist on human treatment of captives and a ban on torture—and frame these ideas as helping our military uphold the ideals they fight for. Like them, most members of the military believe that a superpower possessing the most powerful military in history must hold itself to the highest standards of conduct in order to be deserving of that power.

These shared values suggest some practical steps that progressives can take to close the cultural chasm between them and the U.S. military.

ACTION PLAN FOR CLOSING THE DIVIDE

Because many progressives do not regularly interact with individual service members, previous and recent well-meaning Democratic attempts to reach out to the military on policy issues have often been poorly received by those in uniform. For instance, when Democrats tried to fight for proper military equipment, pay, or benefits, the phrasing and Fox spin led many politically neutral service members to resent the perceived implication of themselves as victims—despite their real desire for better equipment and the benefits they deserve.

Service members do not want “fair weather friends” who pander to them for political advantage—or to be used as tools by either party. Democrats must show sustained interest to

²⁶ The military is still uncomfortable with extended military actions for ideological purposes without a direct benefit for America, because of lack of resources. They fear that a liberal, crusading ethos will use them in ways that fail to achieve missions and weaken the military in the pursuit of fruitless goals. In standing for freedom, Democrats must also stress achievability. Phillip Carter and Paul Glastris, “The Case for the Draft” Washington Monthly March 2005.

²⁷ Again, the military will be more accepting of “fostering ideals” if clearly noted that such missions will not be primarily a military burden. This is best illustrated by General Powell’s resistance to Albright’s notion of using the military for non-military action, paraphrasing, “because we can.” Colin Powell, “Why Generals Get Nervous”, New York Times, October 8, 1992.

create a foundation of trust that will help the military move toward its own ideal of a truly nonpartisan force. Solutions to the overall problem eventually require military-savvy policies—but first the cultural barriers must be addressed. Reconnecting with the military will require long-term strategy, patience, and determination. It will not be achieved in an election cycle—but it must be started now. Here’s how:

1. Forge Strategic Relationships with Credible Messengers

A long-term solution requires sustained contact between progressives and the military community in order to discover common ground and get past negative spin. For example, progressives should cultivate strong relationships with veterans’ groups and with organizations that can legitimately speak for current service members, groups that can frame progressive arguments in military ideology—providing progressives with the military-credible social network of those who have “walked the walk.”

- Groups such as Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans for America, Veterans for Common Sense, VETPAC, Vietnam Veterans of America, Veterans and Military Families for Progress, and the Gulf War Resources Council are moderate-progressive groups committed to advocacy for veterans of all generations who would be immediately open to dialogue. These groups have excellent access to recent service members’ insights and frustration with current policies and shortfalls.
- More historically conservative groups such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and Disabled American Veterans are increasingly frustrated with the lack of funding for veterans’ immediate health needs. DAV has bluntly criticized the current administration’s handling of veterans’ health. If approached with sensitivity, abstract ideological differences with veterans’ organizations take a backseat to their mission: helping veterans.
- Progressive but non-pacifistic religious leaders should build bridges to the U.S. military, to challenge conservative evangelicals’ monopoly on religious morality. God must be decoupled from the Republican Party for soldiers who dislike Republican policies but see no other voting options as moral Christians. The spiritual foundations of military service—as personal motivation and moral compass—are simply too important to disregard.²⁸

Finally, there is absolutely no substitute for actual military service.²⁹ Many in uniform are reluctant to take seriously defense-related ideas from “experts” who lack military experience, reasoning that the stresses of military action cannot be understood without a walk in those boots. Especially during wartime, military service must be a serious option for all citizens, regardless of politics or social status.

Liberals’ and elites’ disinclination to military service is often interpreted as indifference toward national security—and troops themselves. Kathy Roth-Douquet notes that less than 1 percent of

²⁸ Much more on spiritual aspects of service in Toner, James H., *True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics*, The University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, KY. 1995.

²⁹ Kathy Roth-Douquet, and Frank Schaeffer, *AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of America's Upper Classes from Military Service -- and How it Hurts Our Country*, (New York: Smithsonian Books, HarperCollins Publishers Inc.: 2006).

today's Princeton and Harvard graduates have military experience—from a high of 50 percent in 1950.³⁰ This imbalance in representation weakens our defense systems as well as our national community. For long-term, strategic reconnection with the military, progressives must:

- Encourage a generation of idealistic progressive youth to join ROTC programs, attend service academies, or enlist.
- Encourage smart young progressives to seek defense-related internship programs and entry-level jobs, especially those with regular interaction with enlisted ranks.
- Recruit recent veterans for positions of leadership and staff.
- In the absence of military experience, every progressive leader needs at least one staff member who has spent enough time in the military community to “speak military.” An informal veteran/military advisory panel might be a solution when such staff is impractical. Members of Congress should strive to take advantage of the Military Fellow program for increased dialogue.
- Recruit more military veterans to run for public office.

2. Focus on Policies that Matter to Soldiers

Much Beltway “military” debate is rightly focused on grand strategy and the use of force. But most service members are too far removed from strategic decisions to actively follow such issues. At the most abstract level, service members want to know that the armed forces will be sent to serve whenever needed, for a good mission, and never misused. However, the military majority is far too busy with daily tasks to pay attention to foreign policy debates that go deeper than assessing confidence in the judgment and basic principles of their commander in chief. Arguments about whether the United States should have invaded Iraq—or who is to blame for miscalculations—are mostly useless to service members. They must focus each day on surviving present realities and finding resolutions to existing problems.

The military community cares intensely about day-to-day challenges and shortfalls. Practical military issues concern lower ranks and injured veterans intensely, since they directly affect health and family well-being—and others in the community care about these serving members. Issues of immediate concern are not new weapons systems or even grand strategy, but:

- Severely overstretched forces resulting in unit exhaustion, deteriorating mental health, stop-loss, and ultimately more personnel shortfalls;³¹
- Poor quality of life for families, sub-standard housing especially for lower enlisted Marines and Army, family strain from repeat deployments, doubling and tripling divorce rates among different subgroups from 2001-2004;³²
- Poor resources, inadequate training time, rushed preparation, old, failing equipment;

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Thomas L. McNaugher, "Chapter 8, The Army and Operations Other Than War: Expanding Professional Jurisdiction," in *The Future of the Army Profession*. Project Directors: Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins. Edited by Lloyd J. Matthews. (Boston: McGraw Hill Companies, 2002).

³² Associated Press, "Iraq War Takes Toll on Army Marriages," *Military.Com*. June 30, 2005. Accessed November 29, 2005.

- Poor medical care from severely a overtaxed Veterans' Administration, shortfalls in VA funding resulting in catastrophic cuts in caring for legitimate, military-related physical and mental problems;³³ and
- Unclear Rules of Engagement, with no consistent guidance on treatment of local populations and detainees.

Such frustrations open a window of opportunity for progressives to reach out to the military community and show genuine empathy toward its concerns. A young Navy reservist may be too proud to complain about "Stop-Loss," but wants leaders who understand that indefinitely prolonging his service may mean losing his small business back home. "High op-tempo" means missed anniversaries, increased mental strain from returning to combat without dealing with emotional wounds from the last deployment, and insufficient equipment maintenance, and rushed training.

Most importantly, progressives need to understand how personally the military community takes public support, because of the emotional, sometimes overwhelmingly uncertain nature of military deployments. The deployed airman who disagreed with the Iraq invasion in the first place still does not want to abandon the mission and come home, because of the devastating consequences of another military defeat. To his wife, a lifelong Democrat who thinks of him constantly with intense pride and worry, anti-war protests can be difficult to perceive as anything other than a lack of respect for their sacrifice.³⁴

3. Remember that Actions Speak Louder than Words

Both the military and public are often reminded in sound-bites that, "We are a nation at war." But service members never see sacrifices other than their own. Many grow disappointed or frustrated at the notion that the military alone bears the costs of the war on terror, while nobody in power cares about the military's strain, insufficient equipment and shrinking benefits. The military feels increasingly neglected by both political parties and grows increasingly skeptical of words and promises.

Democratic leaders and progressive groups must make the effort to "show up" to support military ribbon-cuttings, hospitalized seamen, airmen stranded in institutional cafeterias on holidays.³⁵ Yellow ribbons or quick "fly-by" congressional visits, though noted, are no longer enough. Local Democratic chapters must interact with the flesh-and-blood military and listen to complaints and opinions—especially among enlisted troops and without fanfare, monitoring, or editing by military supervisors. Such outreach can run from volunteering in military hospitals, to progressive churches following Evangelicals' example of adopting deployed units or individuals, sending written and home-baked encouragement.

³³ Arthur H. Wilson, "VA Health Care Budget Crisis," in DAV: The Official Voice of the Disabled American Veterans and DAV Auxiliary, September/October 2005, p. 3.

³⁴ I must stress that anti-war attitudes are not inherently resented; many individual service members could see Cindy Sheehan in their own mothers. But massive demonstrations on the Washington Mall were eerily reminiscent of the Vietnam era, and are clearly confusing to the military's perceptions of the Democrat mainstream.

³⁵ Avoid VIP visits that are "announced" or in combat zones; they breed resentment because of the time spent cleaning and preparing for the visit, or because of the resources consumed providing security.

Eventually, Democratic leaders must be comfortable enough to be able to introduce thoughtful military initiatives: a modified national service program to distribute sacrifice and take long-term domestic burdens off the military; informed opinions of military restructuring for 21st Century demands, for instance development of a quick-strike force, constabulary force, and humanitarian and nation-building forces; or an overhaul of military medicine and VA care to provide future veterans with the support they deserve. Any great, high-level idea must start with increased visibility and tangible support, though.

4. Democrats must present a coherent vision for national security based on common beliefs.

Many individual Democratic comments, policies, and initiatives on defense have been excellent. Unfortunately, they are not yet consistent enough to overcome the louder, consistent yet clearly imprudent demands of the extreme left. Democratic leaders must find a way to coordinate messages on defense and speak with one voice, or else their thoughtful positions simply will not be heard. Aside from obvious political benefits of a unified message, Democrats must remember that service members look at all candidates as those who may someday decide their fate; voting any Democrat into office will be much more attractive if security-oriented voters know what underlying beliefs, priorities and actions they can expect from today's Democrats.

Conclusion

The estrangement between the military and progressives has deep roots and will require significant, focused effort to overcome. However, the situation is hopeful. Much of the divide is based on misperceptions and lack of interaction, and can be overcome. Moreover, the current military is in transition and turmoil, and is desperately seeking strong, responsible leadership.

Reestablishing a solid Democratic-military relationship will require focused effort to reconnect culturally, listen to military opinions of all ranks, forge institutional ties with like-minded organizations within the military community, and eventually present a consistent Democratic vision for a strong, sustainable, morally grounded defense policy. Despite increasing cynicism, military personnel are diverse, thoughtful and pragmatic enough to respond to Democratic defense initiatives if grounded in common ideals and phrased to avoid sore points.

A nation at war, facing huge challenges and potential threats, deserves a healthy and vigorous debate on security issues—between both parties. Understanding the military and tapping into progressive military thought will strengthen Democrats' ability to publicly address national security challenges and stake their own ground in defense issues. Democrats do not need to give up their own values to re-forged their relationship with the military. They must remember that America's ability to support democratic ideals in the world—as well as at home—is intrinsically intertwined with the strength and health of America's fighting force.

The Truman Paper Series

The Truman National Security Project is dedicated to creating a Democratic Party with a strong, smart, principled national security stance that sets the terms of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Truman Democrats are united by a shared set of values and a shared commitment to America's national security.

The policy views expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the policies of the Truman National Security Project. Opinions expressed also do not represent the official view of the U.S. military. The author is registered Independent and does not officially endorse either political party

About the Author

Melissa Sturm Tryon served with the 101st Airborne, providing tactical intelligence to infantry battalions during the invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. She graduated from West Point (the United States Military Academy), Airborne School, and the Special Forces SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) School. Melissa is a Rhodes Scholar who received a Masters degree in conflict management in developing countries while at Balliol College, Oxford.

