



Truman National Security Project

MESSAGE GONE AWOL:

The Top Ten Mistakes Civilians Make When Talking to the Military.

All italicized quotes emerged in actual conversation—and are great examples of what NOT to say! But this conversation is about far more than “messaging”—it is about building understanding, and through understanding, respect for the culture and beliefs that lead some men and women to help others through military service.

- 1. Only say “national defense is important” followed by the word “but.”** Adding "but" robs the first part of the sentence of real meaning. Just pause, and add a period.
“Of course I think national security is important, but civil liberties are important too.”
(Better: National security is our number one priority. Fighting this long war requires strategies that stand the test of time.)
- 2. Portray foreign policy choices as easy, civilian leaders as liars or stupid, or discuss anything to do with war in dismissive or clever terms.** We have the world’s strongest military—but it is still personally difficult to win a battle, or take a city—that difficulty should not be diminished. The military tends to be filled with pragmatic, straightforward “do-ers”—they don’t appreciate the glibness that many of us learn without thinking as dinner-party conversation.
“Of course we unseated Saddam easily.” or “Surely all it would take is shock, and not any awe at all” [in describing how easy it should be to go into Darfur].
(Better: Winning a war, when there is no front line, is hard, and our civilian leaders must make hard choices. But their refusal to look the facts in the eye and make choices based on fact is unacceptable.)
- 3. Confuse politics with military service.** Do not mistake military service with being for or against war or a specific engagement — men and women of the military choose to serve their country, they do not choose their wars.
“I’m in favor of going in to Darfur, but I could never trust the president to only use the military in a way I approve.”
(Better: Our military must follow their chain of command—they deserve civilian commanders who have a strategy for victory before they commit troops to a fight.)
- 4. Declare that someone killed or injured in war was harmed for nothing, or died in vain.** Service members choose to serve our Constitution--and by doing so under civilian command, they strengthen our democracy regardless of the particular war they are fighting, or the reason for which they die. Even if civilians have made tactical or strategic mistakes, their sacrifices have meaning.
“The president has squandered the lives of our soldiers.”
(Better: Our soldiers pledge their lives to uphold the constitution. When our president violates that constitution, he undermines their sacrifice.)
- 5. Say “I support the troops” without meaning anything specific.** America is fighting two wars--but you would never know that at home. This dissonance bothers many returning service members. Show, rather than tell, how you support the troops.
“I support the troops, and I have a magnet on my car.”
(Better: visit a local military base and help a single service member.)

- 6. Treat the “military group” like an ethnic group or self-interested constituency, and focus on to their narrow self-interest.** Many join the military out of service and hold selflessness as a core value--treating the military as self-interested will quickly alienate your audience. When offering them help, phrase it in ways that makes it clear we are upholding a promise to them that they deserve, not offering them charity or giving them a "benefit". This selflessness can be a very fine line that at times is difficult for civilians to see. For example: *“We need across-the-board pay raises to support the troops.” can alienate troops!*
(Better: We make a promise to our troops when they put their lives on the line--we must uphold our promise by providing them with pay that shows we honor them.)
- 7. Believe that the military is the underclass, under-educated, or peopled by folks who are too poor to have other options, or who enjoy war.** Most people choose to enter, or to remain, in the military out of patriotism, a desire to serve others, and a wish to make the world a better place—the same reasons others enter public service or nonprofit organizations. And even those who may be enticed by college benefits, for instance, are quickly socialized into this service ethic. In fact, it makes more sense to think of those who enter the military as similar to those who serve in Teach for America and the Peace Corps.
“People go into the army when they don’t think they have other choices.”
(Better: People join the military to serve America and make the world a better place)
- 8. Be functionally illiterate about military structure.** We wouldn't imagine we could be taken seriously in government if we did not understand the bicameral structure, or the difference between the branches. It's the same in the military. Common gaffes are to refer to the military interchangeably with “the army” (only one of four services); calling everyone a soldier (only the Army has soldiers—not the Marines, Air Force, or Navy); confusing officers and enlisted (the biggest personnel distinction in the military); or displaying ignorance of the range of missions – e.g. see every servicemember as a grunt fighting the war, rather than as involved in intelligence, engineering, scientific research, keeping sea lanes open, etc.
“We honor our brave soldiers.”
(Better: "We honor our brave troops")
- 9. Describe war, the experience of being a warfighter, or a military family member as though you have direct experience when you don't.** Those who have seen war appreciate empathy--but you should be honest with yourself about where your experience ends.
“It's so hot in the California desert--I know what it must have been like in Iraq.”
(Better: Talk about an individual service member and tell his or her story)
- 10. Confuse militarism with military service.** Many in the military are there because they want to promote peace and stability. In our modern military, they are also taught to think for themselves and to experience, broadly. For instance, the services talk about the "strategic corporal," a junior rank that nonetheless has to make decisions with long-term, far-reaching implications.
“The military have hawkish views, and tend to be rigid.” or “The military is trained to blindly follow orders.”
(Better: It is the military, whose lives are at risk who want guidance on rules of engagement, and the military who understands the need for a flexible, supple strategy in the fight for hearts and minds. But rigid civilian leaders are fighting against the military's demands.)



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