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An Alternative Perspective of Veteran Disapproval of Recent Wars: Civil-Military Relations is Strong

George Fust - 13 July 2019

A Pew Research Center [report](#) published on July 10 suggests that most veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan believe these wars are “not worth fighting.” What are the implications of these findings? What can they reveal about the health of U.S. civil-military relations? Is it dangerous for the guardians to be opposed to the mission they are directed to accomplish? At first glance, the data is troubling. Those who oppose America’s longest wars will tout this report as the crown jewel. If the veterans are against the war, then it must truly be a poor decision. What these critics fail to see is how this report reveals the health of America’s civil-military relations in a positive way.

It is commonly understood that wartime stresses the relationship between those who prosecute the war, the military, and those who prescribe the policy outcomes for it, the civilians. Elliot Cohen writes in *Supreme Command*, “because political objectives are just that – political – they are often ambiguous, contradictory, and uncertain. It is one of the greatest sources of frustration for soldiers.” Healthy civil-military relations require the military to continue to fight even if they do not agree with the policy objectives or resourcing provided for the war. The evidence presented in the Pew report demonstrates the military’s high degree of professionalism. If most don’t agree with the war and yet they soldiered on, with many serving multiple tours, then Iraq and Afghanistan should be praised as a case study. The civil-military health of the nation is strong.

The Pew report should not be taken at face value. The immediate implication of suggesting veterans, and by association the active force, are opposed to the policy in Afghanistan and Iraq is reduced trust in the military. Seeds of doubt are planted in the minds of the Average citizen. To borrow a [concept](#) from Peter Feaver, has the military been shirking because it doesn’t agree with the policy? Has the average soldier not given his full effort towards winning this unwinnable fight? The nearly [7,000](#) killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan would argue otherwise. The military has offered its best military advice throughout the duration of these conflicts and has avoided setting policy with a few notable exceptions. Even these exceptions, such as the [dismissal](#) of GEN Stanley McChrystal, show the strength of our system. An elected representative of the people, the President, removed a famed leader for his remarks that were perceived to shape policy. The military should be praised for its subordination to the representative government it is sworn to protect.

Another implication of the Pew Report is the politicization of the force. The report lists results by survey respondents declared political party support. It indicates a sharp divide among those who self-identify as Republicans as more likely to support the wars than self-declared Democrats. What does this evidence reveal? Are military personnel who align politically with the Democratic party even more likely to shirk? Are they less likely to reenlist? Doubtful. The polling of veterans should not be associated with the active force writ large. The military has established a culture of non-partisanship for good reason. The Pew Research Center’s attempt to draw partisan lines amongst the military is more harmful than citizen-soldiers having these privately-held beliefs. When the citizens of a nation begin to believe the military has become partisan, only negative outcomes can occur. Military service members, regardless of political affiliation, have served honorably in America’s wars.

Let us assume the Pew findings are 100% valid. What do they reveal? A military opposed to the wars at the same rate as civilian respondents. This reveals the key to our understanding. The policy set by the elected civilian government is to blame. According to Bruneau and Tollefson in their book, *Who Guards the Guardians and How*, two factors are required to prevent “a dysfunctional relationship that paralyzes strategic choice and courts defeat.” Political leaders must “set clear [policy] objectives that support

national interests,” while “soldiers must clearly explain their capabilities.” If society is in alignment with the military on the worth of our involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq the policy is likely inadequate. The military has continued for 18 years to offer its advice while employing the resources allocated to it. They have not shirked despite what appears to be discontent or apprehension.

Healthy civil-military relations require a mechanism for reassessing strategy. Historically, nations that lack a professional military force or have weak underlying relations between the military and government cannot long survive unclear policy objectives that do not clearly demonstrate national interests. The fact that the majority of veterans and subsequently the active U.S. military doesn't see the worth in fighting our longest wars indicates the health of the American model. Strategic choice may be paralyzed but there is little concern the U.S. military will allow defeat.