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OPINIONREVIEW & OUTLOOK

Americans Are Losing Trust in the Military

The rise of woke politics has undermined public confidence in the brass.

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The current era is marked by fading trust in U.S. institutions, but confidence in one pillar has held up: the military. But now even that is eroding, and the question is whether the brass will get the message.

The Reagan Institute releases an annual survey of public attitudes on national defense, and this year only 48% reported having “a great deal of confidence” in the U.S. military in results first detailed here. That’s down from 70% in 2018, and within the margin error of last year’s 45%.

This is consistent with other surveys. Pew Research this year noted a 14-point drop since 2020 in Americans who said they had a great deal of confidence in the military to act in the public’s interest.

The Reagan poll asked Americans what is driving the decline. It isn’t the ability to carry out missions or win in a fight. It is “things going on outside the core competencies of the military,” says Reagan’s Roger Zakheim. “Call it politicization, call it wokeness,” but that’s where “you can connect the dots.”

Some 62% said “military leadership becoming overly politicized” reduced their confidence some or a great deal. That includes trust in civilians who give the orders. Americans offered some of the worst ratings for decisions made by Presidents, and the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan comes to mind.

Some 52% also had reduced confidence in uniformed officers. Half cited “so-called ‘woke’ practices undermining military effectiveness.” Some of these episodes—a brouhaha over maternity flight suits—are overblown. But others are revealing: An admiral suggested last year that to increase diversity the Navy should consider reviving the practice of looking at photos in promotion boards—i.e., to make decisions based explicitly on race.

General Mark Milley’s speech to Congress last year that he wanted to understand “white rage,” in response to reasonable inquiries about whether cadets at West Point should be learning critical race theory, was a low point in judgment. Milley

Point should be learning critical race theory, was a lapse in judgment. Many Americans think the military is no longer an institution that runs on excellence, merit and individual submission to a larger cause.

The Pentagon denies this is a problem, but it surely is if half the public believes it. The military relies on young Americans to sign up amid many other career opportunities. Fewer are doing so. Americans on the left have their own reasons for declining confidence in the military: 46% cited right-wing extremism, even though this scourge has been wildly overstated.

This drop in confidence comes at an ominous moment, as the public seems to know. Some 75% in the Reagan survey viewed China as an enemy, up from 55% in 2018, and the percentage of those worried about Russia has doubled. Some 70% are concerned China might invade Taiwan within five years, and 61% support increasing the U.S. military's Pacific footprint.

The good news is that these trends can be reversed, as they were in the years after Vietnam. As GOP Rep. Mike Gallagher put it to us, the poll is helpful in narrowing “what our failures are,” and it isn't the rank-and-file or even the equipment. “Ukraine has been one long advertisement for American weapons systems.” But “it seems to be the leadership.”

Americans want their military to focus on preventing or winning the next war, not on serving the latest political fashion.



U.S. Army soldiers attend in the 'Hoguk' military exercise in Yeosu-gun, South Korea, Oct. 19.

PHOTO: JEON HEON-KYUN/SHUTTERSTOCK

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