

FORUM

Response to Jordan Henricks's Reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint"

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Trent Lythgoe responds to Jordan Henricks's reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint."

Chaplain Henricks discusses a critical issue: nonpartisanship within the military. He rightly notes that partisanship is not merely a set of policy preferences, but a complex social identity often connected to deeply held values. He argues that convincing Service members to adhere to nonpartisan norms requires them to be attuned to their own personal identity.

Because I write about measuring and strengthening nonpartisan norms, I'm intrigued by this proposal. Scholars have paid increasing attention to strengthening nonpartisan norms in an increasingly polarized America. Heidi Urben, one of the coauthors of the article that prompted this conversation, has done incredible work on this topic.

That said, while Chaplain Henricks offers a plausible theory, it needs to be tested. He writes, "Military service members will likely remain as partisan as their civilian counterparts without strong awareness of their own personal identity." Then he argues, "efforts to assist service members in articulating their worldviews and lifeways can be expected to bring about more significant changes in partisan behavior among service members." Yet, research reveals a complex relationship between self-awareness and partisan behavior. In some cases, heightened self-awareness can reduce partisan bias and affective polarization by fostering empathy and understanding of others' views. In other cases, however, self-awareness has the opposite effect, reinforcing moral grandstanding and in-group identification.

While researchers continue to sort out the relationship between self-awareness and partisanship, military leaders can promote nonpartisanship in the ranks right now.

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First, leaders must realize that an apolitical military is an impossible fantasy. The U.S. military is not and will never be an apolitical institution. War is a political act, and everything the military does—from budgeting to training deployments to mandatory training—involves politics. The misguided idea that the military can or should be apolitical creates politically illiterate leaders who struggle to recognize their profession's political dimensions and, in wartime, connect military operations to political goals. Instead, military leaders must recognize that the military is a political instrument, and its leaders must be politically savvy while striving to be nonpartisan.

Second, leaders must focus on norms, not just rules. While the military has clear rules prohibiting some partisan behavior, it cannot regulate its way to a nonpartisan force. Servicemembers are still American citizens. It would be morally and practically problematic to prohibit all political speech in the military. Bridging the gap between what servicemembers can and should do requires strengthening nonpartisan norms-----the unwritten beliefs and expectations about what's appropriate regarding partisan politics. Leaders must promote norms discouraging partisan behavior that, while technically permitted, undermines trust in the institution.

Third, the military must develop politically literate servicemembers. Servicemembers must understand the difference between politics and partisanship. Politically literate servicemembers understand the political nature of the military and military operations. As a result, they can navigate politically dicey waters while avoiding partisan hazards. Military leaders should embrace political education and understanding rather than avoiding politics in the utopian pursuit of apoliticism.

Henricks's reflection can be read [here](#).

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