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# Democracy ‘crisis’ is not within the ranks

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Our democracy may be threatened by the U.S. military, but not in the way you might think.

Three retired generals recently called on the troops to prepare now to defeat an insurrection in 2024. Specifically, they shared their concerns about “the potential for lethal chaos inside our military” following a contested election.

The threat is real, but it’s not from within the ranks.

The civil-military crisis is being stoked by this type of inappropriate behavior by senior retired military officers. For example, the trio of generals raise the specter of the “potential for a total breakdown of the chain of command along partisan lines” and “rogue units organizing among themselves” to support an alternate commander in chief. This is nonsense.

I served for more than 20 years in uniform, including deployments overseas. Today’s troops are bright, educated, and mindful of their sacred oath to support and defend the Constitution. Each soldier, sailor, Marine, airman, and Guardian understands their duty to follow only lawful orders or face tough consequences under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). These volunteers are not mindless robots but careful thinkers who do not suffer fools lightly.

There is no military groupthink when it comes to domestic politics. As the three generals note, our troops “draw from a diverse population,” to include different political persuasions. Individual beliefs are kept mostly private since UCMJ and Defense Department directives constrain political speech and assembly on the grounds of maintaining good order and discipline. While political affiliation is not easily measured, countless studies indicate that the those in uniform do not predominantly support one party or another.

What is most laughable about warnings of potential “rogue units” is the idea that service members could: (1) Actually agree on an unlawful course of action; (2) Mobilize sympathetic service members across various branches and locations to provide illicit combat and service support; and (3) Keep the planning and execution of these criminal schemes from other troops, civilian law enforcement personnel, their families, and their neighbors. If a coup plot were brewing, it would not remain a secret — and once revealed, the small group of plotters would be quickly scooped up.

Collective political activity by military graybeards is a deplorable trend. Over the last 30 years, hundreds of retired military leaders have published group endorsements of Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, sometimes including scathing rebukes of the sitting commander-in-chief. It is wrong whether done by generals who promote Democratic talking points about the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, or the 124 retired flag officers who signed a letter in May 2021 backing former President Trump’s views about the contested election.

Instead, it would be better for America if retired military officers exercised self-discipline and refrained from joint political action.

Retired officers still hold their military commissions and a formal link to the profession of arms, with norms and traditions reaching back to the Founding that prohibit retirees from mobilizing and engaging politically. In addition, they are still bound by UCMJ’s Article 88, “Contempt Toward Public Officials,” and must refrain from slandering their commander-in-chief and other government leaders.

Hoary military retirees offer a poor example of professional officership when they publicly amplify the positions held by one political party while denigrating the other, collectively advocate for a particular candidate, question current military leadership, impugn hypothetical disloyal service members, call for troops to ignore the lawful orders of the president, and encourage the ejection of the sitting president. This used to be unheard of; not any more.

These activist retired officers trade on the prestige of their rank at serious cost to those still in uniform. Research by civil-military relations experts Peter Feaver and Jim Golby shows that the public fails to effectively distinguish between retired and active-duty officers. Thus, any political activity tarnishes the military’s reputation and the long-standing American norm of service nonpartisanship. In addition, Feaver and Golby found that when the military is linked to controversial policies, the public’s trust and confidence in it becomes markedly diminished.

This type of collective political activism also demeans their own record of service. Retirees devoted decades of their lives to safeguarding the interests of the United States and deserve respect for that work. But we use the word “retired” for a reason — the nation truly needs them to fade away. It is pure hubris to persist in trying to provide military leadership. In their new status, each retiree must carefully refrain from claiming to speak on behalf of the troops. Because they don’t.

The best way for retired military officers to continue serving our country is to curb their collective political activity and re-professionalize the retired ranks.

Those who feel compelled to get involved in partisan politics should do so as private citizens, eschewing the use of their former military titles. As consolation, they can take justified pride and express faith in — not fear of — the men and women they trained who now maintain the watch.

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