

Message Gone AWOL:

Top Ten Mistakes Civilians Make When Talking About the Military



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Message Gone AWOL: Talking Points & Takeaways

Not Everyone in the military is a “soldier.” Soldiers are in the Army. Marines are called Marines, Sailors are in the Navy, and Airmen serve in the Air Force. The best term to use to refer to all members of the military is “service member.” It is also acceptable, but not as good to say “troops.”

Do NOT confuse politics with military service. Do not mistake military service with being for or against a war or a specific engagement. Members of the military take an oath to the Constitution, not a president, a policy, or a war. This is a hallmark of civilian control of the military.

Never say that someone killed or injured in war was harmed for nothing or died in vain. First of all, it's not true: service members go to war to protect the US Constitution and the democratic values it enshrines, as well as to help protect their friends in their units. To say that someone died in vain is to misunderstand democracy and the Constitution, as well as insult the individual – and his/her loved ones – who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Never treat the military as the underclass, under-educated, or peopled by folks whose motives are suspect. Education levels are higher in the military than in the wider population at every level, and hundreds of thousands join out of a sense of service to their nation.

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Discussing the Military: Talking Points & Takeaways

Talking About the Military is not about 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.

This presentation will identify 10 common mistakes, and teach you how to avoid them.

MISTAKE #1: Saying “national defense is important” followed by the word “but.”

Example: “Of course I think national security is important, *but* civil liberties are important too.”

Fix: Get rid of “but” – it robs the first part of the sentence of real meaning.

**“YES,
 BUT...”**

Better: “National security is our number one priority. Fighting this long war requires strategies that stand the test of time.”

MISTAKE #2: Functional illiteracy about military structure.



Example: *“We honor our brave soldiers.”*

Fix: Eliminate Common Misunderstandings

- Referring to the military interchangeably with the Army ignores the Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard
- Calling everyone a soldier - soldiers are just Army
- Confusing officers and enlisted
- Displaying ignorance of the range of missions



Better: *“We honor our brave troops.”*

MISTAKE #3: Confuse politics with military service.



Example: *“I’m in favor of some wars, but anyone who served in Iraq was wrong.”*

Fix: Do not mistake military service with being for or against a war or a specific engagement.

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.”*

MISTAKE #4: Saying “I support the troops” without meaning anything specific by that.

Example: “I support the troops, but I’m concerned about our policy.”



Fix: Show, rather than tell, how you support the troops.

Better: Visit a local military base and learn about the sacrifices of an individual service member.

MISTAKE #5: Declare that someone killed or injured in war was harmed for nothing or died in vain.

Example: “The president has squandered the lives of our soldiers.”



Fix: Understand the role that a civilian-led military plays in strengthening our democracy and Constitution regardless of the war & empathize with those who died to save friends in their units.

Better: *“Our soldiers pledge their lives to uphold the Constitution. When our president violated that Constitution, he undermines their sacrifice.”*

MISTAKE #6: Treating the “military group” like an ethnic group or self-interested constituency and pander to their narrow self-interest.

Example: *“We need across-the-board pay raises to support the troops.”*



Fix: Many join the military out of service and hold selflessness as a core value. Treating them as self-interested will alienate them.

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.”*

MISTAKE #7: Treating the military as the underclass, under-educated, or peopled by folks whose motives are suspect.



Example: *“People go into the army when they don’t think they have other choices.”*

Fix: The military, including enlisted, are more highly educated than the general population. Most people choose to enter, or remain, in the military out of patriotism, a desire to serve others and a wish to make the world a better place.

Better: *“People join the military to serve America and make the world a better place.”*



MISTAKE #8: Portray foreign policy choices as easy, civilian leaders as liars or stupid, or portray anything to do with war in dismissive or clever terms.

Example: "Of course we unseated Saddam easily."

Fix: Regardless of our military's strength, it is still difficult to win a battle or take a city - that difficulty should not be diminished.

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."*

MISTAKE #9: Describe war, the experience of being a warfighter or a military family member as though you have direct experience WHEN YOU DON'T.

*Example: "One can't help but be damaged by war"
"The military is broken"*



Fix: When in doubt, stick to facts and numbers or say what you want to say by quoting someone in uniform whom you have met or know.

Better: *Talk about an individual service member and tell his or her story.*

MISTAKE #10: Confuse militarism with military service.



Example:

“The military have hawkish views & tend to be rigid” or “The military is trained to blindly follow orders.”

Fix: Many in the military are there to promote peace and stability. They are taught to think for themselves and to think broadly.

Better: *“It is the military whose lives are on the line who want human rights guidance 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.”*