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Let the Generals Speak? Retired Officer Dissent and the June 2020 George Floyd Protests

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June 2020 was a remarkable month in U.S. civil-military relations. President Donald Trump sought to use active-duty forces to confront Americans protesting racial injustice in the United States. As he put it in a June 1 call with Defense Secretary Mark Esper and the nation's governors, Trump wanted the latter to "[dominate the streets](#)," potentially with military forces. His supporters echoed the call, with Sen. Tom Cotton urging the president in a controversial op-ed to "[send in the troops](#)."

In response, an array of former military leaders spoke out against deploying regular military forces to the streets, sparking the most intense division between a president and retired officers in a generation. Among them was retired Marine general and former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, as well as former

chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [Michael Mullen](#) and [Martin Dempsey](#). Some of the retirees were explicit in their criticism of the president, including [Mattis' pointed comments](#) about Trump dividing the nation. Others were [more circumspect](#), affirming the need for the military to remain “apolitical” or implicitly validating the protesters’ cause and methods by referencing the need to remove Confederate memorials and [re-name Army bases](#).

These statements were welcomed by many observers who were reassured that these officers were alarmed enough to publicly decry a potentially egregious use of force against American citizens. For them, it seemed a worthy cause for retiree activism. Yet such views are contrary to conventional ideas about the risks of public commentary that warn against retired officers engaging in political activism.

Who’s right? Should the generals have spoken out?

To help answer that question we explore the arguments about retired officer political speech — for and against — in context of the George Floyd protests. We find compelling arguments on both sides. The strongest arguments in support hinge on the exceptional nature of the events and the view that retired officer criticism helped forestall a deeply undemocratic outcome. On the opposing side are concerns that the speech had only minimal practical effect. It did little to affect the decision not to send forces to the street and instead helped normalize retired officer dissent. These questions about efficacy weigh heavily given the costs to civil-military relations and military politicization that retired officer activism generates.

While some might be persuaded by one side, we argue for a more nuanced interpretation of the events of June 2020: There is no obvious “right” answer to the question of whether or not retired officers should have spoken out. Rather, the case illustrates the conflicting loyalties and clashes between principles and consequences that can arise with acts of dissent by retired military personnel. Understanding these tensions is vital for retirees considering future acts of dissent against political leaders — and for the public that is the ultimate audience for such activism.

Why the June 2020 Case Matters

There are three reasons why the George Floyd protests represent an important case for examining retired officer activism. The first is the unique nature of events and the stakes involved. To be sure, there have been many prior incidents of retired officer speech. Often these have dealt with matters of military operations or armed conflict. Arguably the most noteworthy incident in recent memory — the “[revolt of the generals](#)” — against then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2006 stemmed from concerns over his management of the Iraq War. [Some senior retired officers](#) have also provided endorsements in political campaigns, while a few had previously [commented](#) on Trump’s leadership. Yet, what was on the table in June 2020 — a potentially unwarranted deployment of force to face off against U.S. citizens — was unprecedented in contemporary civil-military relations. It was also significant because of the way it politicized the military — that is, how it put the military into the center of domestic political disputes. When analysts discuss civilian politicization they often focus on politicians appropriating the military’s social esteem (using the military as [political props](#)) to appeal to voters or constituents. According to some [observers](#), what was at stake in June involved potentially using the military’s coercive power against American citizens for partisan advantage.

Second, the case starkly illustrates the sometimes underappreciated dilemmas of retired officer dissent, highlighting two intersecting sets of tensions. The first — explained in detail [in this War on the Rocks article](#) and in [a forthcoming book](#) — relates to the conflicting loyalties facing military officers and retirees. Military officers have obligations to the Constitution, to civilian authority, to the profession (and to helping it maintain its nonpartisan ethic), and to their own conscience. An act of dissent may uphold one loyalty at the expense of others. In addition, in considering whether to speak out, retirees should balance considerations of principle against instrumental concerns — is an act motivated by principle worthwhile if it does not actually advance a positive outcome? The case of retiree dissent during the June 2020 protests illustrates how both sets of obligations can come into conflict: those between respecting civilian authority, safeguarding the profession, and upholding the Constitution, and that between principle and efficacy.

Finally, examining the events of June are important because they may be a harbinger of things to come. There may (soon) be other moments in which retired military officers face similar decision points about whether to speak out about domestic political matters, including the use of regular military forces against protesters or armed groups. One could certainly foresee such a moment in the event of a politically contentious presidential election. Appreciating the dilemmas of retired officer speech is especially important now.

The Events of June 2020

In May 2020, [protests](#) emerged in the aftermath of the killing of [George Floyd](#) by a white police officer, as well as other incidents of police brutality against African Americans. In these protests there was in some cases significant property destruction and looting. In response, more than [20 states and the District of Columbia](#) activated the National Guard to assist in stabilizing the situation.

By June 1 Trump was [reportedly ready](#) to send 10,000 regular military troops to the streets — forces usually used in external conflict. He threatened to [invoke the Insurrection Act](#), which would have allowed him to deploy the troops without the governors' permission. [Active-duty troops](#) were brought to the Washington, D.C., area, including some from the immediate response force brigade of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division. For a few days it looked like Trump might send in the troops, precipitating the retired officer commentary detailed below. Ultimately the president did not invoke the Insurrection Act and the troops were sent home.

Three things are crucial to understanding this context and why the retirees spoke out. The first is that it was unclear whether the use of active-duty military forces was being considered by the Trump administration in the context of their necessity and appropriateness to address the protests, even if many [scholars agree](#) that invoking the Insurrection Act would have been legal. To the contrary, [no governor \(even partisan allies\) requested federal forces](#) to address property destruction, while [Secretary of Defense Mark Esper](#) stated that he did not believe the use of active-duty forces was warranted at that time. Police today have [substantial equipment](#) that in the past was reserved for military forces. National Guard forces, even unarmed, are [more familiar](#) with civilian riot control roles. While alarming, early incidents of violence in the Floyd protests also had not reached the level of intense civil disturbance observed in other instances, such as during the disturbances in 1992 that followed the [acquittal of police officers](#) in their trial for beating Rodney King. Those events left dozens

dead and thousands injured and California's governor then supported the use of federal military troops to calm the streets.

Also important is the president's history of violating norms against the military's [involvement in domestic politics](#). Trump has suggested to his supporters that the military is his [partisan ally](#) on numerous occasions. In fact, in tweets to his followers in early June, he portrayed the military as supportive of his response to the protests, and suggested that the military was happy to be complicit in acting as an agent of his [political agenda](#).

Trump also did not appear to be making idle threats. He had already signaled that he was willing to sanction using force against peaceful protesters through [the events in Lafayette Square](#) on June 1, when federal agents used pepper spray and other non-lethal methods to disperse peaceful protesters prior to the onset of curfew. Trump, accompanied by Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, then walked across the park to take a photograph with a bible in front of a historical church. Milley's subsequent [apology](#) for his role in the events underscored their political nature.

All of this sparked enormous controversy, leading several prominent retired officers to speak out, although with [slightly varied messages](#). Retired Adm. William McRaven and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell spoke about the military's oath to the Constitution — “not the president.” Mattis, breaking a notable silence since his departure as defense secretary in 2018, referred to Trump's actions as making a “[mockery of the Constitution](#).” Others contended that the deployment of the military was contrary to the rights of Americans to engage in peaceful assembly, or that it violated the contemporary tradition against using the military for [law enforcement purposes](#). Others expressed concern that the use of troops domestically would degrade public trust in the armed forces. [Mullen](#), for example, feared that “there's a very significant chance we could lose that trust that it's taken us 50-plus years to restore.” [Dempsey](#), who often avoids directly commenting on partisan issues, similarly observed that Trump's threat to use the military domestically [threatened public trust](#). Other retired officers characterized military suppression of the protests as further evidence of a general democratic decline in American governance, or “[the beginning of the end of American democracy](#).”

Finally, many retired officers expressed concern that the military's involvement in the government's response to the protests would politicize the military. Trump's actions represented a potential threat to the “apolitical” character of the military, as [retired Army Gen. Joseph Votel](#) remarked. Similarly, Milley's [presence](#) during Trump's appearance at a nearby church during the protests “[appalled](#)” [retired generals](#) like Michael Hayden.

The Generals Were Right

Those who applauded these comments made several arguments. The first is that the military dissent helped to bolster democracy. [Deborah Avant and Kara Kingma Neu](#) argue that the retired officers' comments made sense because they helped prevent a profoundly un-democratic outcome — the unwarranted use of force against the country's citizens. Building from global examples of non-violent social protest, they [observe that dissent by military leaders](#) and refusals to follow through on repressive orders are often a vital step to effectively protecting democratic traditions. They contended that the retirees' speech represented a short-term opportunity to harness military authority for

Constitutional purposes, while acknowledging that military leaders stepping into the public sphere may pose long-term costs and risks. The chief takeaway here is that retired officer speech is justified if it serves the specific purpose of bolstering democratic traditions. Their argument also illustrates some of the tensions inherent in the competing obligations facing retirees. The need to signal respect for civilian authority and abide what [Peter Feaver calls](#) civilians' "right to be wrong" was in conflict with the need to prevent degradation of the country's democracy.

In a related vein, [Carrie Lee](#) argued that the comments helped to defend the military's apolitical traditions. She contended that under "normal times" it is right to be wary of retiree political speech because it drags the military into domestic politics, but that sometimes "retired officers who speak out may actually preserve rather than degrade the norms of non-partisanship." In her view the retirees were saying no to having the military be used in a partisan manner to further Trump's political agenda. Inaction in the face of such efforts to use military forces for partisan gain amounts to complicity. It is therefore essential for retired officers to push back and correct the narrative under these circumstances.

Like Avant and Kingma Neu, Lee underscored a difficult (and a potentially no-win) prospect facing retired officers. On the one hand, criticism about the politicization of the military serves their obligation to the profession, but on the other, it comes at the expense of signaling regard for civilian authority. Even more complicated, the speech upholds the principle of maintaining a non-partisan military, as Lee convincingly argues, yet it may in practice also undermine the military's nonpartisan ethic. This is due to how those comments may interact with the intense partisan polarization of the citizenry and media observed today (dynamics we detail below). Stating that the military is apolitical in the absence of any affront to that status is not especially controversial, for either retired or active-duty officers. Both [Mullen](#) and [Dempsey](#) regularly made this point publicly during and after their tenures as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But making that comment pointedly when Trump is perceived as acting to politicize the military could be seen by the president's co-partisans as an attack on him.

A third potential argument is that the retired officers had the right to speak out given the nature of events. While this was not a prominent theme in the commentary surrounding the retiree speech in June, it follows a long line of argument that asserts that retired officers are private citizens who have a great deal to contribute to the public debate. As [Christopher Gelpi](#) puts it, "Retired Generals Are People Too!" Or as former [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Shalikashvili](#) once observed of those retired officers who publicly endorse political candidates, they are "true modern day patriots." In addition, retired officers are no longer bound by legal restrictions on political activity and insofar as they [establish a post-service career](#) outside of the military realm, these individuals can offer their opinions as private citizens. In some cases, they may even need to use their political influence to prevent irreparable harm to the country — such as that which arguably might have occurred in June 2020. Here once again we see the [conflict](#) between obligations to the citizenry [versus those to the profession](#), given the concern that exercising the right to speak risks politicizing the military and corroding civil-military relations. In addition, in this argument we see a privileging of individual rights and moral obligations over considerations of consequence — that is, the right to speak versus the wisdom of doing so.

This tension becomes even clearer as we consider the final argument made about the retirees' comments in June 2020. Some argued that the exigency of the moment required retired officers to act, and gave rise to a need to compromise on a particular norm for the sake of a higher principle. The founders were [apprehensive of maintaining standing forces](#) because they could abet tyranny: For some observers, the episode in early June was exactly the situation the founders worried about. Retired military officers, in this line of argument, should not be forced to politely oblige the norm of silence amidst such a threat. [Justice Robert Jackson](#) famously argued against a "doctrinaire logic" of uncompromising adherence to the defense of rights even when such risked the very existence of the state. Applied to the long-held proscription against retired military advocacy, this argument has the same logic: The normative code of civil-military relations — like the Constitution — is not a "suicide pact."

In other words, the exceptional circumstances of June 2020 permitted, warranted, or demanded such an outcry. Abiding the principle of civilian control enshrined in the Constitution (and the norms that support it) should not come at the expense of protecting American citizens' most fundamental civil liberties. So serious was the fear that Trump might require the unwarranted deployment of active forces to the street that Esper and Milley sought to ramp up the use of [National Guard forces](#). Guard helicopters subsequently flew low over Washington, D.C., neighborhoods in order to disperse protesters — a terrifying and potentially injurious use of force. With that prospect "[we actually cross the brink into constitutional crisis](#)," and the gravity of the situation was not negated for these observers just because the worst was avoided.

The Generals Were Wrong

Critics of the retired officer dissent in June 2020 make three main counterarguments. The first questions the efficacy of the speech. In this account, retirees speaking out had no clear, discernable effect on public opinion and probably didn't do much to influence Trump's decisions.

This argument stems from two problems with retiree political speech today. The first is that it is unclear whether the messages will reach the intended audience. If retired military speech is supposed to alert people to some grievous offense, the (often unintended) partisan implications or consequences of such statements limit whether they are covered by all media equally. Media outlets whose viewers disagree with the message are unlikely to report about it, or if they do they may misrepresent it in order to "[inoculate](#)" the audience against interpretations of events they might hear from other news outlets. Conversely, outlets that are receptive to the message will broadcast it, reaching audiences that are already likely convinced on the issue.

Equally important, even if the stories are reported that does not mean that viewers disinclined to like the message are persuaded by it. Even in a domestic political context where the military is rated by the public as the most "trusted" institution, retirees may not be able to influence public opinion even if they break through polarized media. [Military endorsements for presidential candidates](#), for example, seem to have weak substantive effects on shaping voter intent among partisans. More importantly, the hyper-polarized American political environment means that [on highly divisive matters](#) the audience has already formed strong opinions, making it difficult for even non-partisan actors like the military to

affect public opinion. In other words, there is little chance that contrary messaging by military retirees will breach the “echo chamber” of those not already in agreement.

This dynamic was clear in the way that retired officer dissent was received by the media in June 2020. Mattis, viewed favorably by many in Congress upon his nomination, later fell into disrepute with some of the partisan establishment after he [resigned abruptly in opposition](#) to the president’s foreign policy decisions in December 2018. Trump labeled the retired Marine general as “[sort of a Democrat](#)” before his retirement and “[the most overrated general](#)” after. The intent here was likely to discredit Mattis among Trump’s co-partisans and ensure that any subsequent criticism from him would be discounted by a Republican establishment with otherwise high regard for military figures. The effect of that effort appears to have been successful: Following Mattis’ comments, his June approval [among Republicans was only 21 percent](#) (compared to the 51 percent he had enjoyed with the same group after his resignation). Even comments from avowed non-partisans like Dempsey were not seen as credible statements from a trusted figure. At best they were seen as a curiosity — [at worst they were denigrated](#) as an offensive slur against the president.

Still, even if these individuals were discredited, they could have presaged a much larger — and harder to discredit — groundswell of opposition from retirees if the decision to deploy the military to the streets was made. However, the same [media processes](#) that can discredit one voice can work against many. We saw this dynamic clearly in how the media responded to the [Sept. 3 story in The Atlantic](#), sourced in part by a retired four-star general, which said that Trump called slain veterans of World War I “suckers” and “losers.” Conservative media pounced on the story, deeming it a hoax: Trump himself [launched attacks](#) on the Fox News correspondent who confirmed the story. He later followed up by disparaging his senior leaders as agents of the military-industrial complex. It is reasonable to expect that the media would [face few obstacles](#) in discrediting any number of military voices given its performance in these examples.

In addition, had more retirees spoken out against the president’s actions, retired senior officers who view themselves as his co-partisans might also have been empowered to speak out. In this way, such speech could have precipitated a veritable arms race of commentary for and against the president’s actions. In this context, not only would the speech have been ineffective in shaping White House decisions, it would also have been contrary to retirees’ obligation to protect the profession’s nonpartisan ethic.

Even if it did not affect public opinion, might these retired officer comments still have had an impact on White House decision-making either directly, or via the pressure exerted on the president by members of Congress? Perhaps the retiree comments told Trump where the military and veteran community — [key Trump supporters](#) — stood on the issues, or even shaped opinion within these communities. True, despite efforts to disparage speakers like Mattis in the public at-large, speakers like him still have long-established credibility with [military audiences](#). There is anecdotal evidence that some were upset by Trump’s threats to send the military to the streets. But whether Mattis and others’ comments really shifted public opinion is unclear, as is whether any shift was significant enough for Trump to have been influenced, given that veterans are [already disproportionately likely](#) to be Trump supporters.

One final way that the retired officer speech could have mattered is through its effects on the Pentagon leadership, which might have in turn shaped Trump's decision-making. Esper, on the same day that Trump threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act, stated on a call with governors and Trump that military forces should seek to "[dominate the battlespace](#)" of American cities. Yet, two days later, when Mattis publicly spoke out against administration policy, Esper retreated, asserting his desire to "[try to stay apolitical](#)" and opposed deploying active-duty troops domestically. The signaling from figures like Mattis may have mobilized intra-elite opposition within the current Defense Department leadership. Similarly, it might have been behind Milley's decision to apologize for his role in the events that occurred in Lafayette Square. But if so, this mechanism worked because there was already an existing preference in the Pentagon against using federal forces. The retired officer speech may have had some informational value, but the politics of the situation — in which the military opposed the deployments — are what really mattered.

The Costs of Retired Officer Dissent

There are two other reasons why some might doubt the wisdom of the retirees' speaking out in June 2020. The first relates to the impact on the military's nonpartisan stance. When retired officers speak out it increases the public's demand for politicization, and the military's willingness to supply it.

On the demand side, such retired officer commentary comes at a time when there is solid evidence that people like it when the military acts as their co-partisan. In a hyper-polarized environment, members of the public may in fact reward those who agree with them, and [sanction those who do not](#). Analysis of social media data has shown that [retired military officers](#) on cable news networks with strong partisan audiences can actually draw more partisan follower bases than elected members of Congress. Such commentary suggests to Americans that the military is comprised of partisans and normalizes the idea that military personnel take positions on domestic political issues. [Members of the public](#) can infer that within the military there are likely officers who are aligned with different parties or political currents.

Retired officer commentary also shapes demand for military politicization because of its effects on politicians' incentives to seek out allies within the military. As they observe retired generals endorsing or critiquing an opponent or her policies, politicians may solicit their own retirees to provide testimonials of their leadership or the merits of their policy positions. Politicians also face fewer inhibitions in violating the military's nonpartisan status if they witness norm violations by their opponents. This is apparent with the competing [lists of retired officer endorsees](#) compiled by presidential campaigns. This dynamic could generalize to non-election periods, or to a search for retired officers' endorsements on substantive issues. Observers saw as much in June, with [laudatory sentiments expressed](#) toward the retired officers who spoke out against administration actions during the protests.

Retired officer dissent also increases the supply of partisan behavior among active-duty officers. Consider that some in the active-duty military are already not especially supportive of the nonpartisan tradition. In a 2015 survey of more than 4,000 active-duty U.S. Army officers, [Heidi Urben](#) found that 35 percent of survey participants said that they had observed their active-duty friends using or sharing "insulting, rude, or disdainful comments directed against specific elected officials on a social media,"

while 50 percent said they had witnessed the same behavior directed at politicians running for office. A striking 33 percent said that they had seen their friends in the military make rude comments about the president on social media sites.

Retired officer dissent further legitimizes partisan speech, suggesting that perhaps such commentary is not really inappropriate, even if it remains prohibited for active-duty forces by [Defense Department regulation](#). A recent survey we did with Urban of nearly 1,500 West Point cadets found that 28 percent thought it acceptable for retired general and flag officers to express partisan views during elections. While it is heartening that the number is not higher, that more than a quarter endorsed the idea is noteworthy. Surely, seeing the generals speak out in June 2020 did little to convince cadets that it was bad for the military to engage in partisan politics.

Second, retired officer dissent harms civil-military relations between the president and senior military leadership. One concern about retired officer speech is that it raises questions about [whether military leaders will act impartially](#) in providing advice to political leaders. Even if a president anticipates that a senior military's private political affiliation diverges from her own, she can still have confidence in military leaders' advice if she believes they are committed to the nonpartisanship norm. Retired officers' dissent, however, raises questions about the norm's resilience and therefore whether the active-duty officers with whom a president interacts are indeed fully committed to it. The president might fear that a military leader will not just [bias his advice](#), but perhaps actively work to promote a partisan agenda, by for example leaking vital information to the public, or courting allies to oppose the president in Congress. They may simply marginalize them as a result, degrading the consultation process essential to healthy civil-military relations. Even worse, one perverse effect of retired generals criticizing the president in June 2020 could be to encourage Trump, or future commanders-in-chief, to be [more selective in who they choose](#) for senior military leadership positions. At the extreme, partisan affinity becomes a litmus test for appointment to senior positions in the military.

Once again, we see the clash between obligations. Was the obligation to uphold the spirit of the Constitution and prevent the unwarranted use of force against civilians worth the erosion of fundamental civil-military norms? Does that calculation change if we consider too that the speech may not have fundamentally altered the outcome in June 2020?

There Is No "Right" Answer

Ultimately, whether these costs to civil-military relations were worth paying in June 2020 is hard to judge and that assessment likely depends on where one falls in the debate above. For some, the nature of the exceptional moment and the democracy-affirming nature of the comments justified the generals speaking out. This obligation was more important than the harm potentially done to the profession and to the principle of civilian control. For others, the questionable efficacy and worrisome damage to the military's nonpartisan stance are critical. For the latter, the obligation to the profession and to sustaining crucial norms of nonpartisanship is of particular importance. These costs weigh heavily given that it is unclear that the retiree speech is what actually prevented the deployment of regular forces to the street in June 2020.

If nothing else, the events of June 2020 reveal that there are few clear right or wrong answers on the question of retired officer dissent, especially in tough cases. Rather, they call attention to the [need for](#)

[greater reflection](#) and education on the dilemmas of professionalism and the multifaceted obligations it entails. Classical [theories](#) of professionalism suggest that the abiding civilian authority is always correct — no matter the risks or costs. Yet, such a one-dimensional, reflexive view of the obligations and character of professionalism is [at best unconstructive and at worst counterproductive](#). It is better for officers to [understand the trade-offs and dilemmas](#) inherent in their responsibilities to the citizenry, to the standards of their profession, to the Constitution's protections of civil liberties, as well as to civilian control of the military. As the arguments above demonstrate, there is no set-piece answer to a complex situation like that which occurred in early June. Only through careful consideration and understanding of multiple, and at times conflicting, responsibilities and impulses can a military professional navigate such a fraught situation. As [concerns over the November election](#) draw military figures into new controversies, thinking carefully about these competing obligations and tensions between principle and efficacy of retiree political speech is going to be essential.

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