



### **Nothing Lasts Forever: On the Fragility of Civil Society's Confidence in the Military**

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***Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the U.S. Military***

Author: Peter Feaver

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Peter Feaver, a professor of political science and public policy at Duke University, is one of the most important and prominent scholars of civil-military relations in the United States and the entire research community. Beyond his academic and research experience, he also served as a special advisor on the National Security Council under President Bill Clinton

and President George W. Bush. In his many publications, Feaver has developed a series of theoretical frameworks and innovative conceptualizations, some of which even challenge the doctrine of his mentor, Samuel Huntington, who, along with Morris Janowitz, was among the founders of the research discipline of civil-military relations. Feaver has written several seminal papers on the subject and has coauthored many more with prominent colleagues such as Richard Kohn. His 2003 book, “Armed servants—agency, oversight, and civil-military relations,” is one of the most important contributions to the field and set the standard for his impressive research work. In his writings, Feaver has developed a new and challenging theoretical framework in the field of civil-military relations, while adopting the agency theory. He introduced a new model through which he attempted to provide an answer to some of the weaknesses that he identified in Huntington’s theoretical framework, alongside weaknesses in other theoretical frameworks from the same field of research.

In his latest book, Feaver focuses on the issue of the American public’s confidence in the U.S. Army. According to Feaver, the American people’s confidence in the military is vitally important and perhaps even acute in the world of civil-military relations in democratic countries in general and the United States in particular, and the issue has remained something of a lacuna in the professional literature (p. 11). In this comprehensive book, crammed with details, graphs and surveys, Feaver maps out the six factors which influence the level of civil society’s confidence in the army. He identifies political affiliation and the need for social approval as the two most problematic factors:

1. Patriotism
2. Performance – the military’s ability to do its job
3. Professional ethics
4. Political affiliation (party)

5. Personal contact – having a direct connection to the military through family or friends

6. Social approval (public pressure) (p. 2)

After detailing and conceptualizing these factors, Feaver seeks to find a basis for the argument and his conclusions about the fragility of confidence in the military—which he calls “hollow confidence”—in a profound analysis of public opinion polls conducted in the United States since the 1970s by the Gallup polling company and others, as well as two focused internet polls that he conducted himself. Evidence of this fragility can be found in fluctuations in public confidence in the military, as seen in the graph that the author presents (p. 16), showing confidence levels from 1970 to 2021.

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The influence of political affiliation he ascribes to the acute political polarization in the United States, as expressed by a high level of confidence among Democrat voters when the Democratic Party is in power and a lower level of confidence among the same people when the Republican Party is in power. The same applies in the opposite direction for Republican voters. Moreover, Feaver points to an overall higher level of confidence among Republican voters and therefore, according to his interpretation, when a Republican administration or Republican elites are critical of the military, it has a broader and more profound impact on the overall confidence of the American people in the military.

Feaver’s explanation of public pressure, as manifested in opinion polls in general and particularly those dealing with public confidence in the military, bolster the argument

about the fragility of confidence in the military or its hollowness. Feaver argues that many of the respondents express confidence in the military because they think it is the right answer or what is expected of them by the pollsters, and that their responses are not an accurate reflection of the confidence they actually have. His working assumption, which he based on several questions in the internet poll he conducted, is that the level of confidence in the military is lower than the polls suggest.

The book is divided into three main sections. In the first section, Feaver deals with the question of who has confidence in the military. This section contains a historical oversight of the standing of the military in the eyes of civil society in the United States and the question of confidence. In this context, he also addresses the issue of confidence and the gaps between knowledge about the workings of the military, how the military is dealt with in American educational institutions, its place in a democratic, civilian society, the influence of the media and to what extent having a friend or relative serving in the military influences respondents’ level of confidence in it. In the second part of the book, the author addresses the question of why people have confidence in the military. In this section, he details the factors influencing confidence in the military and analyses the data from his selected opinion polls. In the third part of the book, which includes the conclusion, Feaver presents a coherent and detailed theory about the importance of civil society’s confidence in the military and says that follow-up studies are needed.

It is impossible to ignore Feaver’s deep concern when it comes to societal confidence in the military, even though that confidence has been at a high and relatively stable level since the early 1990s, after a marked drop after the Vietnam War and throughout the 1970s and 1980s. When it comes to war-like situations, there is a marked increase in confidence in the military, due to performance, to which the

public tends to react positively. This also squares with the patriotism factor, since rallying round the flag is a phenomenon that is familiar from other societies during times of war. This might not last forever, however, and Feaver warns that confidence is fragile and that there are elements which could undermine it—especially given the social and political situation in the polarized United States and the social alienation of the military in a reality where there are fewer and fewer Americans with relatives, friends or acquaintances serving.

The public tends to believe that the military has a high level of professional ethics, which increases the level of confidence in it, certainly when compared to other institutions, with the emphasis on the political establishment. This, it seems, is a universal phenomenon, which is certainly true in the Israeli case. Therefore, Feaver calls on the military to be very careful when it comes to professional ethics and to come down hard on any violations of these ethics in order to guarantee public confidence. Feaver explains how violations of professional ethics, like, for example, treatment of women and behavior that does not adhere to its apolitical nature, have undermined public confidence in the military.

The book is well constructed and filled with details and figures. The plethora of graphs and data can sometimes interfere a little with the reading experience, but Feaver has organized the book well, allowing readers to quickly take in the data and the conclusions he reaches. Given that he is a didactic and meticulous lecturer, he is at pains to structure and present his arguments cogently, guiding the reader through the intricate statistics covered in each chapter, presenting his methodology and succinctly showing his conclusions at the end of each chapter.

This book will not only interest researchers in the field of civil-military relations, but also members of the military, politicians and the general public. The findings, the analysis, the conclusions and the recommendations (which

are more general than the rest of the book) provide a profound and important insight into the field, including the challenges facing the military, the political establishment and civil society. Feaver highlights the lack of knowledge among large parts of society about the military, though he also finds that similar gaps exist in relation to the political establishment, as well as in the military regarding civil society. Therefore, he recommends educating military leaders, politicians and the general public, by exposing them to the values and norms needed in order to ensure a healthy relationship between the military and civil society. Feaver's approach is an analytical one, which also contains just a hint of a normative approach.

The results of the surveys and the level of analysis that Feaver presents cover a wide and diverse demographic range and allow for a detailed understanding of the dynamics that characterize the growth and erosion of confidence. Feaver moves from the particular to the general and uses highly detailed data, such as race, political affiliation, gender and economic situation to form a general argument regarding confidence in the military. Even if readers may sometimes feel that they have lost their way among the details and the graphs, the author never allows them to wander too far, by expertly condensing and summarizing the information and its significance in every chapter.

Feaver's main message to the military is that it cannot afford to rest on its laurels. It must ensure that it remains moral and safeguards its values and its professionalism, since these are important for building public confidence. His primary message to politicians is that it is their responsibility to safeguard this important asset and to value it by teaching about the military and protecting its honor, while ensuring that its activities remain apolitical, and that as an institution it is not used for political means. Feaver also has an important message for the public about the need to become much more familiar with the military and especially

respecting those who serve. This, of course, is reflected in the title of the book: “Thanks for Your Service.” The U.S. Army is a volunteer army, unlike the compulsory service model used in Israel, which means that many members of American society do not have a direct connection to the military through a friend or relative in service, which in turn leads to a certain distance between society and the military.

Feaver does not pretend to be able to generalize his findings and conclusions, and even calls for follow-up studies in other countries in order to validate or refute his conclusions (p. 282), but it seems that some of those conclusions and insights can certainly also be applied to civil-military relations and to

the factors that influence public confidence in the military in other democracies. Therefore, Peter Feaver’s book is not only important and recommended reading for anyone interested in a more profound understanding of the reality of civil-military relations in the United States and the factors that influence public confidence in the military there, but also in order to reach insights relevant to civil-military relations in any democracy.

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