Judith Kelley:

Five years ago, Gallup reported that something like 75% of Americans said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military. Today that number has dropped to about 60%. Relative to other institutions like Congress or churches or the Supreme Court, that's still relatively high, but it's a significant decline of about 15%. My guest today is Peter Fever. Peter is a professor of political science and public policy here at Duke University where he runs the program in American Grand Strategy. His new book is called Thanks For Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the US Military.

I'm Judith Kelley, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy here at Duke. Welcome, Peter.

Peter Fever:

Well, it's good to be here. Thanks.

Judith Kelley:

Peter, can you sort of just briefly describe the movement in public opinion over the last, say, five decades? I think that while we've had a big drop in the last five years, my impression is that it's largely driven by a drop in the Republican confidence in the military, but also that we could go back to say the seventies or early eighties and the confidence levels would not be that shockingly different from what we're seeing today. Is that right? Or what are the trends you're seeing?

Peter Fever:

That's right. We can't go back much earlier than that, because it wasn't a question that was a staple of pollsters before that. Starting the mid-seventies, Gallup started to track this number and what you saw was confidence was middling in the military and along the lines of other government institutions, but then confidence climbed, particularly in the eighties, and then skyrocketed after Desert Storm. One of the interesting trends has been that while confidence in other institutions has declined over that time, most notably confidence in the Supreme Court ...

Judith Kelley:

Or universities.

Peter Fever:

Or universities, but the Supreme Court is especially interesting because for a time the Supreme Court and the military in the nineties was holding high while confidence in others were dropping. Then confidence in the Supreme Court dropped along with the others, but the military held high. Gradually a separation emerged between the military and the other governmental institutions where military became one of the few government activities that broad swaths of the American public had high confidence in.

Judith Kelley:

To what do you attribute the more recent decline? Is there anything, when you look about the most recent decline, that jumps out at you?

Peter Fever:

Well, the most recent decline is almost surely driven heavily by a change in Republican posture to the military. You can almost date it to the middle of September 2020 when President Trump, frustrated with the way he was being criticized by some former military leaders whom he had appointed to high office in his administration, and he sort of lashed out at them. That got picked up by other Trump supporters and Trump media figures. For a number of years now, there's been negative messaging about the military from opinion leaders on the Republican side, and that's helped cause a decline in Republican attitudes towards the military.

Judith Kelley:

What methods did you use to reach this conclusion, broadly speaking?

Peter Fever:

It's basically a series of analyses of polls, both historical polling data that Gallup collected over several decades, and then two very high quality, in-depth surveys, commissioned for this book, that allow you to use other survey techniques to really dig into what's driving public attitudes and can we move public attitudes in one direction or the other? Survey experiments built into the survey. The genesis of the book was trying to figure out why I was wrong on this question 25 years ago. I wrote an article 25 years ago that ...

Judith Kelley:

Please do explain, Peter.

Peter Fever:

Actually a book chapter that made the argument then, the late nineties, early 2000s, that public confidence was uncertain, high but brittle and was likely to go down. Ironically, if you put a pin in the graph on that date that I made the prediction, public confidence soared right after that and stayed high for another 15 years. This book was, in part, trying to understand, okay, I was wrong about the prediction then, let me understand it deeper. That's what makes it ironic that I reached the same conclusion I did 25 years ago, that public confidence is high but hollow and so likely to go down. I may be wrong, and then 25 years from now you and I can meet again and I'll explain why I was wrong then. Trust me, I'm right now. That's sort of how the book came about.

Judith Kelley:

I'll be looking forward to having the chance to talk with you again in 25 years. Factor number one you would think [inaudible 00:05:11] is patriotism. You say that patriotism itself is on the decline. How so? And talk a little bit about this factor.

Peter Fever:

Well, patriotism is the label I'm using for the war frame, the idea that there's a rally to the military when we're at war. Indeed, my article from 20 plus years ago was published right before the 911 attacks. 911 attacks caused a rally back to the military, a sense that the military was important and necessary to defend us from external threats. Confidence in the military spiked after that. That, still, is one of the major drivers. Are we at war or are we not at war? One of the reasons why I think public confidence is likely to decline, and this might also be explaining a little bit on the margins of the last several years, is a gradual dissipation of that war frame. Yes, we were still fighting in Afghanistan, but it wasn't the same kind of gripping combat that was attracting the attention of the American public the way, say, at the

height of the global war on terror, the war in Iraq was. The war frame is one of the big ones. If we get back into a war, then I would expect to see confidence go back up.

Judith Kelley:

Would it matter how we got back into the war? One thing is being attacked and then now we all rally. Another thing is if we were to say, "You know what? We're putting boots on the ground in Ukraine," now we're at war, would you expect that to have the same effect?

Peter Fever:

No, I don't think it would have quite the same effect. Of course, Ukraine, itself, is an issue on which there's a certain amount of disagreement. Ukraine divides the Republican Party, the way Israel divides the Democratic Party. The two major conflicts that are raging right now, as you and I talk, I don't think that the US getting directly involved in that would cause a spike in public confidence, necessarily.

Judith Kelley:

That makes a lot of sense and I think would resonate with a lot of people. Another thing that probably might resonate with folks is that they're probably likely to say, "Well, the reason my confidence in the military is lower is because they're doing a shabby job," or, "We just don't like how they're performing." My first question is how do we know it is not actually how they're performing, which is different from how they're perceived to be performing? Public opinion is potentially affliction of either one of those. I mean, perception may reflect reality or not. How do we know that it's not just reality that's driving this?

Peter Fever:

This was one of the questions that was motivating the book, in particular, because when I started this project 2018, 2019 or so, folks were saying, why is it that the public still has high confidence in the military when we don't appear to be winning the Afghanistan war, at the time, the Iraq war certainly wasn't a stunning success, didn't end as well as proponents of the war had hoped and thought it would, and there's lots of evidence of strategic missteps along the way. Why is that not reflected in lower confidence in the military?

When we dug into that question, a couple of things emerge. One is that public confidence does seem to move in response to events on the ground, whether it's a ... You capture Saddam Hussein, that's a good news story, or war is going poorly, that's a bad news story. There's a certain amount of movement in response to that, which is good because otherwise it would suggest public's not paying attention at all. The second thing is that when we use survey experiments to prime the public with information about the military doing better, doing worse, that you're able to move it down a little bit. It's hard to move it up. It turns out there's a ceiling effect that the public already has a pretty high expectation of the military performing well, hard to goose it up much higher. It is possible to lower it a little bit. So it's moving rationally in response to prompts.

Judith Kelley:

Just give me an example of the kind of prompts you would give people to suss this out.

Peter Fever:

You would say, "We've been at war since 911 and we haven't had a follow on mass casualty attack." That's success.

Judith Kelley:

Right. And you prime people.

Peter Fever:

In a survey experiment, you would divide up your sample, say, in this case into three randomly assigned groups. One gets just the question; what's your confidence in the military? Another person first is told, "You know, we've made it this far without a mass casualty attack. What's your confidence in the military?" That's goosing them up. Then a third group would get the prime that says, "We've been at war for so long and Afghanistan [inaudible 00:10:17]."

Judith Kelley:

This many people have died. Yeah.

Peter Fever:

The outcome in Iraq is uncertain. So sort of suggesting strategic poor performance. It moves down for the negative prompt, it moves just a little bit for the positive prompt. That suggests, okay, performance is part of the story and perceived performance and that you're effective. I think more interesting than those findings, because kind of intuitive, if it wasn't doing that, we'd be wondering what's going on. Well, I do think something more interesting is going on as well, and that is when you ask the public to assess how the war's going in Afghanistan, this is now in 2019, 2020, so before the Biden decision to leave, the public thinks the war is going better than maybe the elites would've thought it was going. There's partly a sense that the war isn't a total failure.

But more interesting than that is that when you're asked to assess credit or blame for positive or negative performance, the partisans and the public respond with a partisan blame game. Democrats say democratic political leaders did pretty well. Republican leaders messed this up, and the military and democratic political leaders perform pretty well. You ask the Republicans, they'd say Democratic leaders screwed this up. Republican political leaders and the military performed pretty well. The military can hide behind this partisan blame game. Both sets of partisan respondents were giving the military a pass, if you will, and assigning the blame to the party leaders of the opposite party. That suggests that this performance variable may be not as cleanly operating as we'd like, because the military may be shielded from accountability and oversight because the public is primed to blame the party, the partisan, the civilian leaders of the other party, but not necessarily the military.

Judith Kelley:

Right. But to the extent though that Republicans and Democrats are fairly equally simple, they should technically wash out.

Peter Fever:

Keeps the military sort of insulated. Exactly. This is one of those questions that it's worth following up. I hope students and others will keep investigating this question because now that we've left Afghanistan, there's an endpoint to the war in Afghanistan and it's a catastrophic end compared to the way the war began. It'd be interesting to explore does that partisan blame game still insulate the military or are those chickens now coming home to roost for the military as well.

Judith Kelley:

Right. We've mentioned Afghanistan a lot. If you Google various commentaries that were written on this new Gallup results, half of them are going to say, "Oh, it's all about that disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. That's why the confidence in the military has dropped." Why isn't this all just about Afghanistan?

Peter Fever:

One reason why I am pretty sure that it's not all about negative assessments of Afghanistan, it's the early polls, as the Afghanistan situation was most negative and unraveling and the images were the most shocking, did not show dramatic drops. It happened a little bit more over time. Second, we did not, in fact, have a national reckoning on what went wrong in Afghanistan. We didn't have the effective congressional oversight, in part because of dysfunctions in the legislative branch. The administration resisted, or at least has not done much in terms of a thoughtful candid self-assessment. They published some things that were remarkably self exculpatory and whitewashing. I don't think yet we've had the full reckoning.

Then the third and, probably most important reason, is that very quickly the geostrategic focus shifted from the Afghanistan to Ukraine. I do think that administration handled Ukraine in a more effective way than they handled Afghanistan. If you will, it allowed them to say, "Focus on this," and this is the current problem that's scab picking in the past, let's leave the historians to worry about it. Those are all reasons for why I think that Afghanistan is not the whole story.

Judith Kelley:

One of the other pillars that you have identified is just party and it's come up several times. Is that what you mean by party, is the politicization of it, or is it simply that Republicans and Democrats, and it depends on who's holding power at the time? In your book, what is that?

Peter Fever:

Okay. In the book what it means is that this finding that everybody knows that the American public on aggregate holds the military in high esteem, that's true, but that's masking very important partisan gap. That high number is composed of super high confidence among Republicans and then just moderately high among Democrats.

Judith Kelley:

All right, and the independent somewhere in between.

Peter Fever:

Yeah. A 30 to 40 point spread, depending on the time when it's asked, which is an enormous gap. It averages out to be high confidence overall, but that's because Republicans have this exceptionally high level of confidence. For a while there, confidence in the military is almost like a party marker. If you were Republican, that meant you had high confidence in the military. If you had high confidence in the military, chances are that means you're a Republican. It became kind of a partisan identification. In a sense, that's what makes Trump's move to start messaging in an anti-military way so interesting, because it's a break with what had been, decades long, since Reagan, a Republican branding issue.

Judith Kelley:

Right. There's Trump's messaging and that's a party difference, but there's also Trump's use of props as in high ranking officials. That perception that the military is being politicized itself, is that also part of this?

Peter Fever:

Yes. That's one of the more pernicious elements of public confidence in the military. Because the public has high confidence in the military, that creates an incentive for both parties to politicize the military by attaching their party platform to the military, if they can. The most tawdry version of this is every four years at presidential conventions, when they trot out former retired senior military officers whose first names are admiral and general, will say, I support her or I support him for president, giving the impression, so the party operatives hope, giving the impression that the rest of the military, if they could only speak, would likewise say this. That means you can trust that this candidate will be a good commander in chief. That politicizes the military. Of course, we do that because the military is held in high ... We, meaning civilian party.

Judith Kelley:

In high esteem. Right.

Peter Fever:

People do that because military's held in high esteem. They don't trot out professions that are held in low esteem.

Judith Kelley:

Professor Fever.

Peter Fever:

Yeah. You don't see Republicans trotting out all the professors who support the president.

Judith Kelley:

Is this a newer practice or has that always been going on?

Peter Fever:

Well, it became industrialized in the nineties. There was some of it in 88, but those of us who look at this issue closely say the watershed moment is really Admiral Crow endorsing then candidate, Governor Clinton, in 92. That was dramatic because, first of all, Clinton was struggling and was probably failing the commander in chief test at the time, because he had dodged the draft and said he loathed the military and he's running against an actual war hero, George HW Bush. Then Admiral Crow, who was the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff under President Bush says, "You know what? I want Governor Clinton." Of course that was a dramatic endorsement because he'd been in the room with President HW Bush, why is he not endorsing the person that he had worked with? What does he know that the rest of us don't know? It raised all those kinds of questions, and that was an important moment for candidate Clinton.

Well, fast-forward four years later, Republicans are not going to be caught flatfooted. In 96 they bring out the heavy guns, Colin Powell, but many, many others. Ever since then, it's just an arms race with

both parties recognizing that they have to produce a list, because if they don't, it'll look like their candidate can't generate a list and the other candidate can.

I want to make an important distinction. The politicization is when you're mobilizing the military as an endorser, not when retired military run for office. Admiral Stockdale was running for office. President Eisenhower was General Eisenhower first. President Washington was General Washington.

Judith Kelley:

That's we're okay with. Yeah.

Peter Fever:

That does not have the same effect as this. The politicization is even more pernicious than I just described because what the public means by politicization, we've able to uncover this from the polling, the public seems to say the military is politicized when it agrees with the other party. When the military is agreeing with me, then that's not politicization, that's just good policy.

Judith Kelley:

Thus, my friends, if you just want to read about human nature, you should read this book.

Peter Fever:

Exactly. It means that it's very hard for the military not to get sucked in because of course it's going to come down on one side or the other, and it has to implement the policies of its current commander in chief, whether it agrees with them or not. That's what's happening right now as Republicans are lambasting the military for implementing the policies that President Biden and his team have picked. That's a pernicious form of politicization.

Judith Kelley:

Right. So far the factors that we've discussed are ones that the military have limited control over, but another factor that you bring up that they may have some more control over is professional ethics.

Peter Fever:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

Talk to me a little bit about that.

Peter Fever:

Baked into our high confidence in the military is a sense that we, the American public, believe that the military holds themselves to high ethical standards. That's as it should be, right? You would expect that an institution that does not police itself, that does not hold itself to high ethical standards, you would have lower confidence in. Now, critics have said this is odd, because there's enough evidence of military scandals out there, evidence that the military, at this or that moment, is not living up to its standards. Why is it that the public still seems to hold the military in high esteem? My answer is that those scandals have not penetrated deep enough to change the overall attitude, but if you prime the public to think about that, it has the effect you would expect. It drops public confidence in the military. If I ask you, in that survey experiment prompt, to pay attention to the fact that there's lots and lots of general and flag

officers who've misbehaved, then that lowers your level of confidence. Your answer to the confidence is lowered.

Judith Kelley:

Some of this has been particularly around sexual harassment and issues that maybe surround the fact that we have both sexes in the military, et cetera.

Peter Fever:

Yes. In the conclusion of the book I emphasize that the military should be aiming for a high confidence that it deserves, which means it has to perform at a high level. In strategic terms, it needs to hold itself to a high ethical standard. When it has a problem as the sexual assault, sexual harassment problem, it needs to address that and take it seriously. Until it fully gets its arms around that problem, this is going to be a risk for lower confidence and understandably so.

Judith Kelley:

Right. Another topic that you've been studying for a while, sort of broadly, civil military relations, which is part of the public opinion piece, but you're also making the argument in the book that a basic core here is how much personal contact we have, how many steps removed we are from somebody who is serving. You are saying that as that gap widens, that also affects public opinion.

Peter Fever:

Yes. One of the drivers of public confidence in the military is did you yourself serve, then you have higher confidence. Did your family member, close family member, loved one serve? Then you have higher confidence. That's an important driver, because we know, demographically, those numbers are dropping. Passing of the World War II generation, the eventual passing of the large mobilization army of the draft army. In the last 30 years, we've increasingly recruited from within families who are already serving. We're recruiting from a narrower pool. So the number of people who do not have a personal connection with the military is going up, inexorably. You would expect some decline over time just as a function of that. Indeed, that trend was evident in the nineties, that's what was the thing I was hanging my hat on in saying that public confidence was likely to go down. Didn't factor in 911, as that was going to change it. It's not as if it can't be reversed by world events in the same way that 911 reversed this trend, but it is a significant one.

It's actually embedded in, I think, the Thanks For Your Service title of the book, because we have this phenomenon of high confidence in the military, low propensity to join the military. Thanks for your service, I'm glad you're doing it so I don't have to do it. This can create opportunities for alienation where we're putting the military on a pedestal. If you're on a pedestal, then you're looking down on the people who have put you on the pedestal. So an opportunity for alienation in that direction. Likewise, there's an opportunity for alienation in the sense of we're asking you to serve, we don't quite understand, we don't even have skin in the game or are paying attention to the things that we're asking you to do. The burdens of national security are being borne by few and not understood by the majority. These are concerning aspects of the phenomenon.

Judith Kelley:

So related to the fact that personal contact or the burdens of service are shifting ... We'll get to the question of how all this is affecting recruitment in just a second. Before we do that, I want to just talk about your last of the six factors, which was sort of a vicious circle, a little bit kind of argument, where

you say, well, other people don't have confidence in the military, so that's probably either the correct view or politically correct, or I'm just using that as a mental shortcut to assess the situation and going with the flow.

Peter Fever:

Right. This is what social scientists call social desirability bias, where we give an answer on a survey that we think the surveyor wants to hear, or because that's the politically correct answer, it's the socially approved answer. I wanted to assess how much of public confidence fits into that category. I thought probably some of it would, because you do feel an obligation to say, "Thanks for your service," and there's that wonderful episode in Curb Your Enthusiasm, where Larry David is at a dinner party and someone brings her date, who's in the military, and they go around the room and all say, "Thanks for your service. Thanks for your service." Larry David says, "Hi. How are you?" He doesn't thank him for the service. Well, that brings the dinner party grinding to a halt, because he didn't do the socially approved thing. It's a wonderful TV clip that captures this idea well.

Wanted to find out how much of that was going on. Over the decades, pollsters have developed techniques to try to tap into that, interestingly, developed around identifying latent racism. Over time it became inappropriate to openly say racist attitudes. Racist responses to direct questions dropped over time. It dropped faster and more dramatically than scholars thought. They thought maybe there's racism out there and that people just aren't saying it, aren't revealing their views. So they developed a technique called a list experiment, which helps to surface what might be the latent attitude. Using those techniques got anywhere from eight to 27 points worth of social desirability bias. A significant amount of ...

Judith Kelley:

Of the variation explained. Yeah.

Peter Fever:

Yes. Those are people who are saying they have high confidence, but maybe really don't. Of course, as you point out, it has a circular element to it because if it suddenly becomes acceptable to say you don't have confidence in the military, then the bias pressure no longer pushes you in that direction. I do think something like that might've been happening when President Trump and Tucker Carlson and others started openly criticizing the military. That creates a permission space for Republicans to join them in criticizing or maybe even a different kind of social desirability bias. Now I have to criticize the military to show my Trump credentials, if you will. Yes, I do think that's going on as well. The message to the military is don't believe your own blurbs, don't drink your own bath water. Don't overvalue the high confidence. Instead, focus on deserving high confidence, and that's the best way to go forward.

Judith Kelley:

All right. You put forth these six factors; personal contact, negative feedback loop, public pressure party affiliation. We talked about professional ethics, performance, patriotism, and yet the politicization itself isn't one of your core pillars. You kind of throw it in a little bit with party, but by party you really mean something quite different. Is that because it's just a newer thing you weren't able to capture because we didn't use to politicize it as much, or do you not think it actually explains that much?

Peter Fever:

This is one of the findings that went contrary to what I expected. I'd been saying for years that the military should learn from the lesson of the Supreme Court, that the Supreme Court developed a partisan identity, and once it did it, public confidence in the Supreme Court dropped because people started to view it only as a partisan institution. If that happened to the military and the military became viewed as politicized, as much as the average American views the Supreme Court to be politicized today, that would have a negative impact on public confidence. I still believe that's true in the long, long run, but it's not happening in the short run because the public is even more cynical about politicization than what I just described. They don't view it as politicization when the military is behaving maybe even inappropriately as long as it's in alignment with their party.

The public is not policing the military in quite the way they should, punishing the military for inappropriate behavior. This is one of the other big findings of public opinion in the military, is our public does not hold the norms that theorists like me who say, this is good, this is bad, public does not agree with them and does not enforce them or say they should be enforced with respect to the military. The public tolerates a lot of what I would consider bad civil military behavior. It's not affecting public confidence, perhaps even as much as it should, but in the long run, I think it still eventually is going to have an effect, but it's not an immediate effect.

Judith Kelley:

Okay. We've talked quite a bit about what explains patterns in public confidence. Let's talk a little bit about what some of the consequences might be, the most obvious one being recruitment.

Peter Fever:

Right. This is one reason why the military, rightly, is worried about public confidence [inaudible 00:33:43]. People with higher confidence, more willing to spend on the military and more willing to join or recommend others to join the military. The recruiting challenge is hard enough as it is, without having the extra weight of a low confidence in the military. That's why the military is rightly concerned with fixing its recruitment problem, but also would like to keep public confidence in the military higher. It's easier to recruit when the military is held in high esteem, than when it's held in low esteem.

Judith Kelley:

What does recruitment look like right now?

Peter Fever:

The military is facing very severe recruitment challenges, as severe as any in the 50 years of the all volunteer force. The main drivers of recruitment though, are not the things you and I have been talking about thus far. The main drivers of recruitment are labor economics and the pool of the public that is eligible to serve, because they meet the standards. Both of those are trending adversely, insofar as recruitment is going. Paradoxically, when the economy's in bad shape, that's a good time to be a military recruiter.

Judith Kelley:

Yes. Yes.

Peter Fever:

Well, our economy is roaring right now, and labor has the advantage. It's still hard to fill all the slots that we want, and therefore the average potential recruit is looking at pretty good civilian jobs or okay military jobs, and they're taking the job in the civilian world, which is an easier fit.

Judith Kelley:

Right now the military is missing the mark by some 25%?

Peter Fever:

Significant. It varies across the services. The Marines have hit their mark, but the army is in serious shortfall.

Judith Kelley:

So public confidence, you mentioned also earlier about spending, and we know from other issues like abortion that our elected representatives are not always representing public opinion. Is that the case or not, with just general allocation towards military spending? Does it fluctuate with public opinion or are elected officials pretty much committed one way or the other, and that's how they vote, regardless?

Peter Fever:

There is widespread public support for defense spending, but it ebbs and flows with the external threats. Reagan's defense buildup was broadly popular, then when the Cold War ended and when had the Soviet Union disappear it was very popular to cut defense spending and to reduce defense.

Judith Kelley:

It's a little difficult to disentangle because public confidence itself fluctuates with threat.

Peter Fever:

Exactly.

Judith Kelley:

And threat obviously drives need.

Peter Fever:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. I get that.

Peter Fever:

Both are in play.

Judith Kelley:

All right. Solutions.

Peter Fever:

When I talk to the military, I say focus on deservedness. You're right to watch this metric because it's a useful heuristic to sort of the thermometer of where the public mood is, but don't obsess on it and focus on deservedness. That's one. Then, two, be aware that the problem may be the gap between confidence in the military and confidence in civilian institutions, that that gap is, in some ways, just as problematic or pernicious as any decline in confidence in the military. It's not good that the military is the only institution that the public thinks is working. It'd be good that the public has confidence in many of the institutions of our democracy.

Judith Kelley:

But specifically, so something you think we could do that would address the drop in confidence?

Peter Fever:

Well, I think that the institutions need to reform themselves. It's hard to raise confidence in Congress when what we're witnessing is what we've witnessed over the fall of 2023. There's a good reason why the public holds the Congress in low esteem when they're behaving the way The House has behaved. This is a minor tweak that I want to make, but I think it's worth doing. There's a sense in which we say only military service is the public service that we celebrate. Thanks for your service, we'll say that if you're wearing a military uniform, but what if you teach eighth grade math? Thanks for your service. That's a hard job that the public needs done well. We don't celebrate that in the same way that we celebrate military service. We're right to celebrate military service, but I think we should celebrate other forms of public service as well. I tell the military, when you get thanked for your service, ask them what they do and then thank them for what they're doing because chances are it's contributing to the public good.

The one fix that I don't endorse, but many who work in this area do, is a return to the draft. Some have said, "Look, this is the problems of recruitment, there's a problem with the all volunteer force. This problem of lack of connection to the military, that's a problem with the all volunteer force. Let's solve all of this and let's go back to the days of the draft." I think that's a cure that's worse than the disease, and so I don't advocate for that.

Judith Kelley:

I don't think we're in any danger of implementing it anytime soon. You say in your book that civilian elected and appointed leaders should agree to treat the military as non-combatants in the culture wars.

Peter Fever:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Peter Fever:

This is directly aimed at the politicization problem. We have treated the military like they're combatants in the culture wars. One party will target the military, criticize the military using culture war language, and on the grounds of the culture war. Another party might hide behind the military and ask the military to defend more controversial policies using the shield of the public confidence in the military. Either way, that's putting the military in the line of fire in the culture wars, and this is not good for the

politicization of the military. It's also playing fast and loose with what is the guardrail of the republic, which is military professionalism. You don't want to be messing with that.

The third element of this is the military needs to learn how to talk about their values in a way that doesn't make them sound like culture warriors. This requires the military being, at least military leaders, more adroit in the way they talk about issues surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Those terms mean one thing in a university setting, but in our politicized, polarized DC environment, those terms mean something very different. My advice to the military is find ways of talking about your values without using those terms, which now are trigger words in partisan space.

Judith Kelley:

Is there any evidence that the decline in confidence in the military is having any effect on the average soldier themselves? Like; wow, the public doesn't really have a lot of confidence in us, and now I don't feel as good about what I'm doing in the military and therefore I may not even perform as well as I might otherwise have?

Peter Fever:

No, not in the way you just described. I've not seen any evidence of that. I've seen a little bit of evidence of the contrary, which is that the public holds the military in high esteem and therefore I must be much better than the rest of the public. The public has put me on a pedestal and, by golly, I belong there. I think the recent decline is really almost too recent to track those kinds of issues. I will say though, that there's some evidence that the targeting of the military in culture wars is causing a morale problem. Tuberville's holds on the senior flag and general officers, that's having a profound effect on morale at the senior military leadership level. Then I've heard many senior military leaders ask the rhetorical question, why would I stay in if the political leaders aren't going to have my back? I do think that kind of thing does have an effect on morale.

Judith Kelley:

Right. The reason he's doing that is because of the abortion access issue. Is there any evidence that the difficulty recruiting is related, at all, to concerns about whether or not I, as a woman, will have access to services I might need?

Peter Fever:

No, not yet. There is evidence that potential recruits to the military who are women, are sensitized to the sexual assault, sexual harassment issue. When asked, are you unlikely to join or what's a factor, they'll tick that option.

Judith Kelley:

Interesting.

Peter Fever:

So bodily integrity is an issue. Not any evidence yet that the abortion care, abortion access, that I've seen. The military tracks these issues closely, as you can imagine. The study that they've just in the process of finishing, the most recent one, which is surveying people in the wake of this controversy and the Dobbs decision, et cetera. Maybe there's some evidence in that survey. I haven't seen the results of it yet to know whether it ... Well, my sense is no, that's sort of a bank shot kind of issue. Even the

number of people whose access to that medical service was affected by the decision is actually quite small. The reality of the challenges is small, the perception of it might still be wider. It's still possible to have a bigger impact, but I think it's unlikely that that issue is driving a lot of public attitude.

Judith Kelley:

Excellent. Well, Peter, as a final question here, is there anything when you were writing the book that you thought was fun, surprising or particularly uplifting or all three?

Peter Fever:

Well, I did enjoy getting to quote Curb Your Enthusiasm and link to that in the book. I was looking for opportunities, because this is a serious issue and maybe not the lightest of fun topics, looking for moments where humor could perhaps make the point. That was good. I was surprised at the social desirability. I flagged that for my students to say, someone needs to do a follow on, graduate students, needs to do follow on studies because that number is higher than I expected. I wonder if once you kick the tires on that number and look at it in many different ways, the actual level of bias is lower than the high estimate. That's why I always describe it as a bounded estimate.

Judith Kelley:

Folks, you heard it from Peter Fever, who is a professor of public policy and political science here at Duke University and the director of the American Grand Strategy Program. His new book that we've been discussing is called Thanks For Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the US Military. It's just out from Oxford University Press. I'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelley.