



**OCTOBER**  
2012

## **Military Campaigns** *Veterans' Endorsements and Presidential Elections*

By James Golby, Kyle Dropp and Peter Feaver



Center for a  
New American  
Security  
*Fifth Anniversary*

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The views expressed herein are those of the authors alone and do not reflect the position of the reviewers, the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.

### Cover Image

Retired Army General Tommy Franks salutes during his speech at the Republican National Convention in New York, September 2, 2004.

(DENNIS BRACK/Bloomberg)

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MILITARY CAMPAIGNS:  
VETERANS' ENDORSEMENTS  
AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the last six presidential campaigns, candidates have sought high-profile endorsements from retired military personnel. Recently, competition for these endorsements has intensified, with each campaign seeking to best the numbers and ranks put out by the other side in the last election. But do these endorsements actually persuade voters? And, if so, do they produce other, unintended consequences?

Our research shows that military endorsements affect citizens' views of the 2012 presidential candidates. While military endorsements do not provide a statistically significant boost in overall support for candidates, our research indicates that they may persuade a small but significant portion of two groups – independent voters and voters who report low levels of foreign policy interest – to favor President Barack Obama. Republican nominee Mitt Romney does not receive a similar boost.

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Even minor boosts in support can matter in a tight election and we expect campaigns to continue to compete for these endorsements, especially if they believe there is no downside to doing so. Some experts on civil-military relations have warned, however, that such endorsements may damage perceptions of the military as a nonpartisan institution. We find some modest evidence that this might be happening, but our evidence here is more tenuous than our evidence about how endorsements affect voters' attitudes about the candidates. Campaigns might be willing to forgo the minor boost from military endorsements in the future if a taboo against this practice emerges. Because we believe the potential downsides of endorsements do outweigh the benefits, we suggest steps campaigns can take to help establish this taboo.

## II. INTRODUCTION

Since General George Washington ran for president, politicians and their campaigns have understood the political value of distinguished military service. Many presidents have run on their military records, and many more would-be presidents have tried doing the same.

Candidates who lack a military service record – or perhaps have one that could use burnishing – have often sought endorsements from groups that speak on behalf of veterans. The process was institutionalized after the Civil War, when veterans and their families became a voting bloc large enough to court. Since the end of World War II, the parade (sometimes literally) of politicians aligning themselves with veterans' groups has become a staple of the electoral process.

In recent decades, however, a variant of this ritual has emerged: high-profile endorsements of presidential candidates by individuals or small groups of veterans who band together for this express purpose. This new variant goes beyond candidates seeking explicit or implicit stamps of approval from formal veterans' and military organizations, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the Association of the United States Army,<sup>1</sup> and results in explicitly partisan organizations, such as Veterans & Military Families for Obama or Vets for Romney. Particularly prized are retired generals and admirals, whose senior rank confers sufficient newsworthiness on their endorsement to break through the media fog, at least temporarily. The message of such endorsements is clear and unmistakable: "I am a distinguished military voice speaking on behalf of the military. Because 'we, the military' trust this person to be commander in chief, you can, too."

Former University of North Carolina professor Richard Kohn traces the modern evolution of this phenomenon to the 1988 election, when retired

Commandant of the Marine Corps P.X. Kelley endorsed the incumbent, President George H.W. Bush, in a primary.<sup>2</sup> However, media coverage of such endorsements increased dramatically four years later, when retired Admiral William J. Crowe Jr., a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and some 21 other retired flag officers endorsed Democratic nominee Bill Clinton. Running against Bush, a war hero with an impressive foreign policy record and other national security credentials, Clinton struggled to pass the "commander in chief test" because of his earlier efforts to avoid military service during the Vietnam War. The enthusiastic endorsement of Clinton by one of the highest-ranking officers to have served under Clinton's opponent, and the image of a large group of distinguished military officers seconding Crowe's endorsement, helped Clinton counter a storyline that portrayed him as a draft dodger during the Vietnam War.<sup>3</sup> Bush countered with military endorsements of his own, and the cycle has continued – and grown – ever since.

In subsequent elections, campaigns sought to best the endorsement tallies put out by the other side in the last election. Republican nominee Bob Dole, a wounded and decorated veteran from World War II, made his own military service – and the anger of some veterans regarding President Clinton's military policies – a central theme in his 1996 campaign, buttressed by the prominent endorsements of retired generals and admirals, including the famous and popular General Colin Powell.<sup>4</sup> Both Al Gore and George W. Bush competed enthusiastically in the military endorsements race in 2000, a race Bush narrowly won with more than 80 individual endorsements.<sup>5</sup>

By the 2000 election, the practice drew criticism from civil-military scholars who considered it a breach of the norm of a nonpartisan officer corps.<sup>6</sup> Even some retired generals complained.<sup>7</sup> However, these concerns had no discernible effect in 2000 or in 2004, when both campaigns again made the



considered views of senior retired military officers a central part of their narrative for why their candidate should win and the other should lose. At the 2004 Democratic National Convention, 12 generals and admirals appeared on stage to endorse John Kerry shortly before retired General John Shalikashvili, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, addressed the convention and threw his support behind the senator.<sup>8</sup> The same year, retired General Tommy Franks endorsed President George W. Bush during an address at the Republican National Convention.<sup>9</sup> Civil-military experts escalated their criticism – indeed, national security scholar Eliot Cohen compared the endorsements to pole dancing in Las Vegas<sup>10</sup> – and the quiet behind-the-scenes effort to organize retired flag officers *against* endorsements increased.<sup>11</sup>

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But the lure proved irresistible once again in 2008, when both Republican nominee John McCain and Democratic nominee Obama competed to put out the longest list of retired endorsers. By this time, both campaigns were well aware of

the controversial nature of such endorsements; however, neither was willing to cede the advantage to his opponent. For the McCain campaign, the decision was obvious; according to Randy Scheunemann, who helped organize the endorsements, “Given John McCain’s decades of military service, we saw it as natural to seek endorsements from retired military.”<sup>12</sup> McCain’s position inevitably influenced Obama’s. Richard Danzig, who organized the effort for the Obama campaign (and is the current chairman of the board of directors at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS)), observed, “... retiree endorsement is rather like military armament: when one side engages in the practice it’s risky for the other to disarm.”<sup>13</sup> This was particularly the case in 2008 because McCain’s war record and service on the Senate Armed Services Committee gave him some credibility on national security issues and an incentive to attack Obama on this front. The then-Illinois senator had no such record and his resume, by contrast, included only a few years as a junior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In response, the Obama campaign aggressively engaged retired military officers, who leveled some of the most pointed criticism from official campaign surrogates of the entire election.<sup>14</sup> In the wake of the 2008 election, Admiral Michael Mullen, who was then chairman of the Joint Chiefs, became the first high-profile, active-duty officer to call for an end to the practice of endorsements by retired senior officers.<sup>15</sup> The current chairman, General Martin Dempsey, has been an even more outspoken opponent of the practice.<sup>16</sup>

Political campaigns again have disregarded the advice from Mullen and Dempsey in 2012. At a time when confidence in political leaders and the news media is at an all-time low, more than 75 percent of Americans say they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military as an institution.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, both campaigns continue to have a strong incentive to utilize

prominent military endorsements to gain a political advantage.

During the 2012 Democratic National Convention, retired Admiral John B. Nathman spoke out on behalf of Obama, flanked on stage by more than 30 other veterans and retired officers.<sup>18</sup> As this report goes to press, the Romney campaign has not yet countered with its own high-profile military endorsement – a made-for-national-TV image of the candidate basking in the glow of the approval of prominent military representatives – but that may be more by accident than by design. Reportedly, the campaign originally had an event featuring veterans planned for the Republican National Convention until disruptions caused by Hurricane Isaac trimmed a day off the convention schedule.<sup>19</sup> Flanked by a number of veterans, Romney was supposed to be streamed live into the convention hall in Tampa from a speech he was giving at the American Legion in Indiana at the time.<sup>20</sup> Romney since has featured “Veterans for Romney Endorsements” from this event on his campaign website.<sup>21</sup>

By now, such endorsements are a ritualized tradition of American politics. But do they work? And, even if they do, do they produce other, negative consequences?

### III. DOES THE AMERICAN PUBLIC RESPOND TO MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS?

To the best of our knowledge, no scholars or independent pollsters have published results of surveys designed to gauge the effects of military endorsements on public attitudes. Doubtless, political campaigns have poll-and-focus-group-tested such endorsements, but those results are not generally available.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, we conducted a controlled, randomized survey experiment of a nationally representative sample of 2,517 registered voters during the 2012 presidential campaign.<sup>23</sup> We asked respondents a range of questions designed to draw out their views on politics and foreign policy and, in particular, to test whether military endorsements have any discernible effect on expressed opinions of voters.

The survey randomly assigned registered voters to one of three groups. The control group (n=837) got the straightforward vote-choice question: “If the general election for President were held today, for which of the following candidates would you vote?”<sup>24</sup> A second “Obama treatment” group (n=841) received a special prompt: “According to recent reports, most members of the military and veterans support Barack Obama. If the general election for President were held today, for which of the following candidates would you vote?” A third “Romney treatment” group (n=839) received the analogous prompt: “According to recent reports, most members of the military and veterans support Mitt Romney. If the general election for President were held today, for which of the following candidates would you vote?”

Our survey prompted respondents with the generic “most members of the military and veterans support” rather than a specific name of a prominent general or admiral, or the slightly less specific “some senior retired military officers.” We are trying to tap into the underlying endorsement effect,

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*[Military] endorsements are a ritualized tradition of American politics. But do they work? And, even if they do, do they produce other, negative consequences?*

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rather than the specific power of certain names. Our assumption is that, with the exception of a very few retired generals (nowadays, perhaps Colin Powell and David Petraeus), the endorsement effect, if there is one, comes not from the popularity of individual military officers but rather from the perception of a broader endorsement by the military. This is why campaigns try to cluster the endorsements, as if to say, “See, here are a large number of retired military officers who support the candidate. Many more probably do, too, including the active-duty military, who are forbidden from speaking out.” Our wording captures well that basic message: This candidate has the broad support of the military and veterans.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it is flexible enough to account for the influence of other campaign-organized veterans’ constituency groups that have been prominent in the 2012 campaign, such as Veterans & Military Families for Obama or Veterans and Military Families for Romney. Of course, the effects of endorsements offered by retired senior officers and veterans’ groups may be different (or they may not). While our current survey design cannot clearly distinguish between these two potential effects, we offer the first systematic study on this topic and hope to spur further research in this area.

Overall, our survey tracked well with other national surveys conducted at the same time. For instance, our survey generated an Obama/

**TABLE 1: THE EFFECT OF ENDORSEMENTS  
ON AGGREGATE VOTE PREFERENCES**

|                               | SUPPORTING<br>OBAMA | SUPPORTING<br>ROMNEY |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| No Military endorsements      | 45%                 | 41%                  |
| Told military supports Obama  | 48%                 | 41%                  |
| Told military supports Romney | 48%                 | 40%                  |

Romney split of 47 percent to 40 percent in favor of Obama (not including leaners – respondents who claimed they were not supporting a candidate but leaned in favor of one of the candidates; including partisan leaners turns it into a 51 percent to 45 percent Obama advantage). This compares to the 47 percent to 44 percent split found in the RealClearPolitics average of polls from the same time period. Our sample contained 48 percent self-identified Democrats, 40 percent self-identified Republicans and 12 percent self-identified independents.<sup>26</sup> About that time, the Gallup poll showed a split of 46 percent Democrats, 41 percent Republicans and 11 percent independents.<sup>28</sup> Within our sample, 18 percent were military members or veterans, while Gallup polls show that 13 percent of the general population are veterans.

The result, at the most aggregate level, is that political endorsements from military members and veterans do not persuade voters, as reflected in Table 1. While Obama does slightly better in both treatment samples than he does in the control, the result is not statistically significant.<sup>33</sup>

### Veterans and Party Preferences

The survey speaks fairly conclusively to another related debate: Do veterans disproportionately favor Republicans? Consistent with previous research,<sup>28</sup> we found that veterans are far more likely to identify as Republicans than any other option. With 37 percent of veterans identifying as Republicans and 24 percent identifying as Democrats,<sup>29</sup> if the only thing you know about a person is his or her veteran status, it is likely that the person is a Republican.

However, also consistent with previous research,<sup>30</sup> we found that veterans are not more likely to identify as Republicans than other groups that match them on the key demographics of gender and age. Veterans lean Republican, but it may be in large part because veterans tend to be older men, and older men skew Republican.

As one would expect, this party advantage translates into a vote-choice advantage: Veterans favor Romney over Obama by 54 percent to 34 percent.<sup>31</sup> However, contrary to the arguments of some Obama supporters,<sup>32</sup> we found no evidence in our survey that this Republican advantage among veterans is about to be erased as younger generations of veterans replace the dying World War II and Korean War cohorts.



#### IV. DIGGING A BIT DEEPER

If aggregate results were all that mattered, our survey results suggest that military endorsements have so little effect they may not be worth the trouble.<sup>34</sup> However, digging into the data a bit further reveals ways in which the military endorsement effect might be more consequential, at least for Obama.

When we disaggregate by party identification, a different pattern emerges. As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, the treatment (military and veterans support Obama/Romney) has a markedly different effect, depending on whether it is administered to self-identified Democrats, Republicans or independents.

Independents who were told that most military and veterans supported Obama swung 9 points in his direction compared with the control group which received no prompt about such endorsements. Romney, however, did not receive a similar bump.<sup>35</sup> The movement among self-identified partisans was less dramatic. These overall effects are depicted graphically in Figure 1 on the next page.

The effect is even more pronounced among those independents who report that they do not follow

foreign policy news very closely (see Figure 2). For this group, Obama garners a 14-point bump when respondents are told that he has the support of the military and veterans.

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*For [independents who do not follow foreign policy news closely], Obama garners a 14-point bump when respondents are told that he has the support of the military and veterans.*

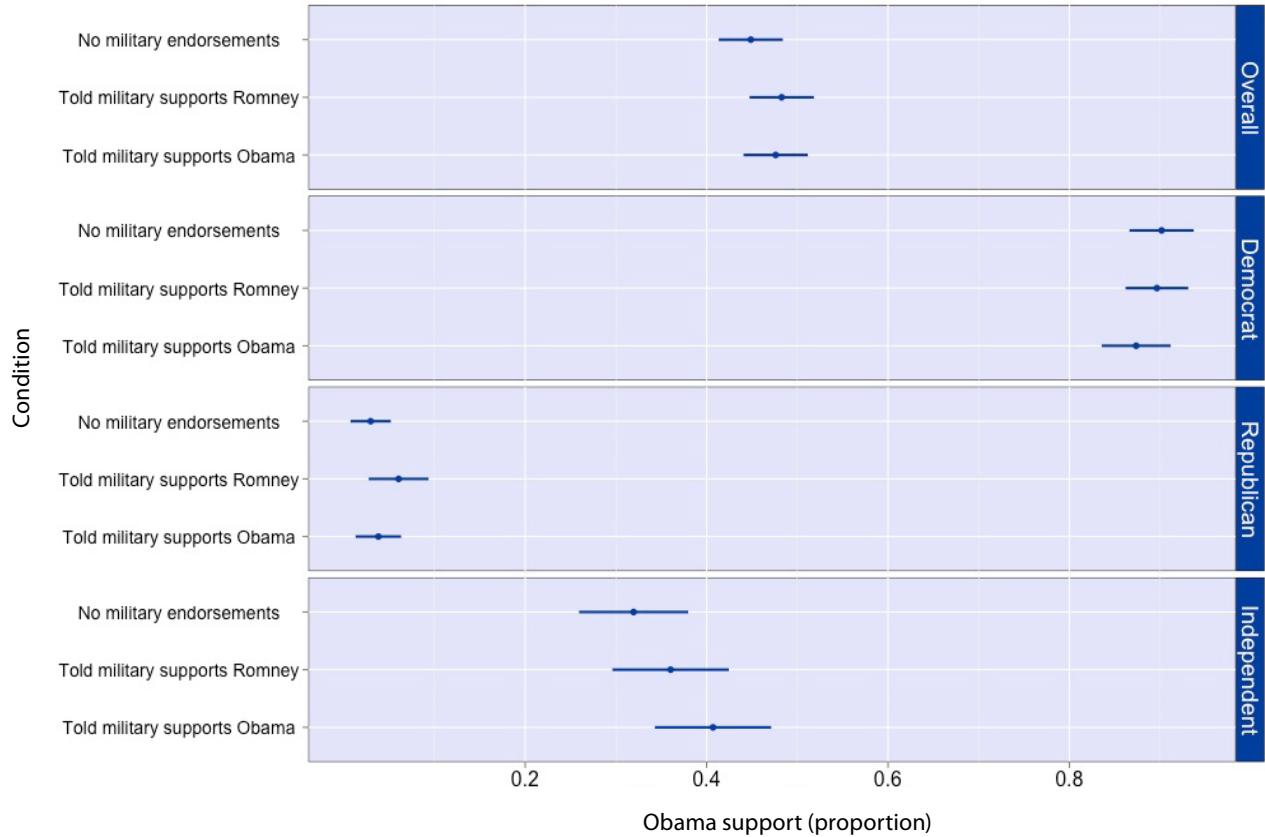
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However, when we include in the “independent” category those self-described independents who indicate that they are actually leaning toward one candidate or another, Obama only receives a 4-point swing among independents; this effect is no longer statistically significant, even among those who do not follow foreign policy closely.

**TABLE 2: THE EFFECT OF ENDORSEMENTS ON VOTE CHOICE BY PARTY IDENTIFICATION**

|                               | SUPPORTING OBAMA |      |      | SUPPORTING ROMNEY |      |      |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------|------|-------------------|------|------|
|                               | DEM.             | REP. | IND. | DEM.              | REP. | IND. |
| No military endorsements      | 90%              | 3%   | 32%  | 6%                | 89%  | 42%  |
| Told military supports Obama  | 87%              | 4%   | 41%  | 6%                | 88%  | 41%  |
| Told military supports Romney | 90%              | 6%   | 36%  | 4%                | 87%  | 43%  |

FIGURE 1: MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS AND THE 2012 ELECTION



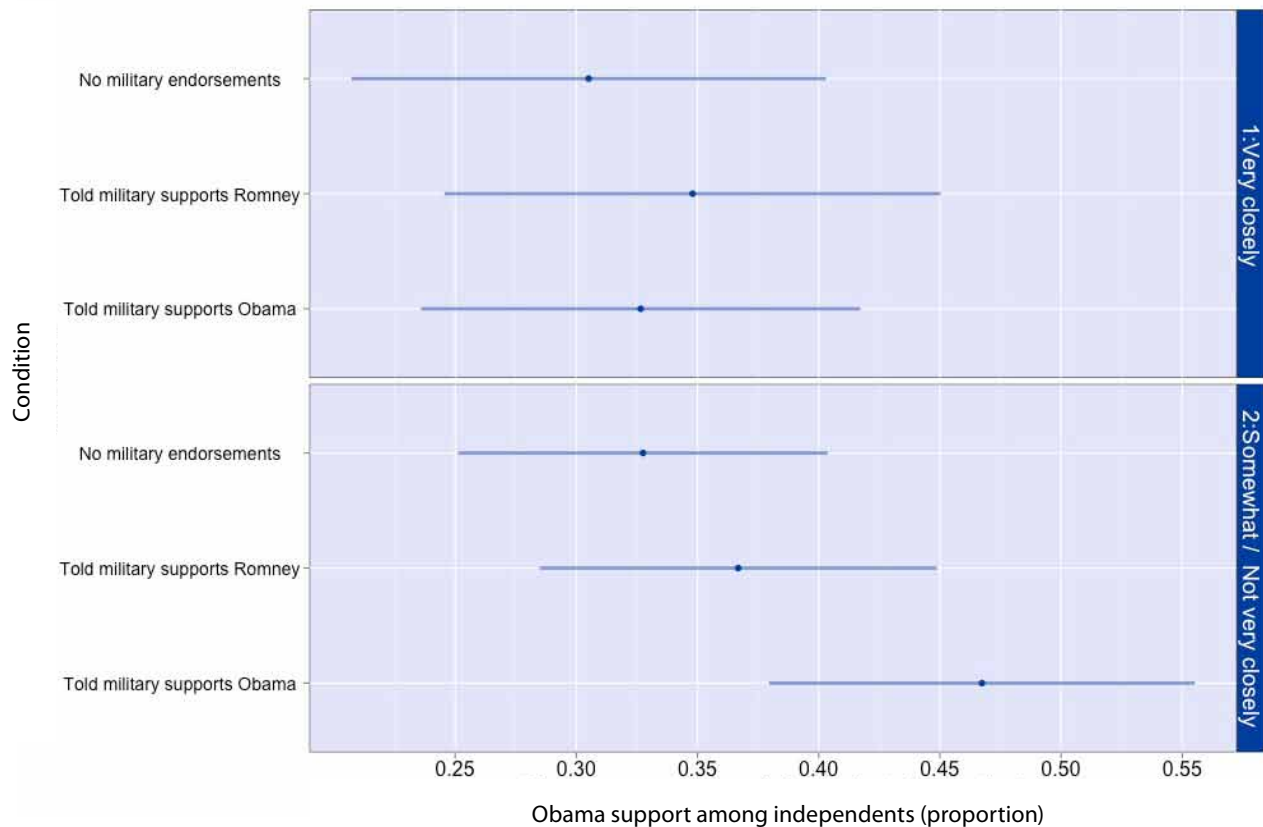
Since leaned vote choice typically is a good predictor of one’s voting intentions, this difference suggests that the net effect for Obama among all independents is quite modest. Nevertheless, it does indicate that military endorsements would potentially help Obama shore up his support among independent voters who are considering voting for him, but who have not yet made up their minds.

Although Obama does appear to gain more from perceived military support than Romney does, there is at least some evidence suggesting that military endorsements also could help Romney among one key group of voters: “pure” independents, those respondents who refuse to choose a party even when pressed to do so. When we restrict our

analysis to such pure independents, both candidates appear to benefit. Among this group, which represents approximately 12 percent of our sample, Obama receives a 12-point bump compared to a 10-point move for Romney. Neither of these differences is individually statistically significant, but they are jointly significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level with a two-sided test.<sup>36</sup> Even a 10-point swing among pure independents could well be decisive in a very close election.

Still, our analysis suggests that Obama probably stands to gain from military endorsements more than Romney. One reason might be long-standing Republican “issue ownership” of foreign policy and national security during the past six decades.<sup>37</sup> Surveys show that until

**FIGURE 2: THE EFFECT OF MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS ON INDEPENDENTS WHO DO NOT FOLLOW FOREIGN POLICY NEWS VERY CLOSELY**



2012, voters have consistently claimed to trust a generic Republican leader more than a generic Democratic leader when it comes to national security and foreign policy. Thus the military endorsement might benefit Democratic candidates more, by counteracting voters' historical tendency to distrust them on this issue. However, President Obama has enjoyed a sizeable advantage over Romney on national security and foreign policy during the current campaign and did so during the time we conducted our survey.<sup>38</sup> So perhaps another factor is at work, which we discuss in more detail later in this report: perhaps the public believes that veterans are more likely to support the Republican candidate and so information about veterans endorsing Obama is

surprising and salient. Since voters might already expect veterans to support the GOP candidate, Republicans may not benefit much by the additional endorsement.<sup>39</sup>

Put another way, if Obama's tacticians are counting on both appealing to their own partisan base and wooing independents, then a military endorsement might seem a comparatively easy way of doing so. Romney's tacticians might see less of an upside for seeking the endorsement but may not want to cede the terrain entirely to the Obama team. Both, then, may have just enough incentive to seek military endorsements, though not, according to our survey, enough of an incentive to necessarily outweigh any other potential

### The Effects of Veterans' Support on Other Veterans

When we compare veterans to nonveterans, we find another interesting result. Veterans in the control group favored Romney over Obama, 50 percent to 38 percent. Veterans who were told that most other military and veterans supported Romney tilted even more decisively toward Romney, 55 percent to 34 percent. Yet, interestingly, veterans who were told that most other military and veterans supported Obama tilted still more decisively toward Romney, 57 percent to 29 percent.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps this is an artifact of low numbers in individual cells when the sample gets sliced multiple ways (the cell of veterans who received the Obama treatment was  $n=168$ ). Or perhaps respondents were reacting negatively to what they considered to be misleading information supplied by the survey administrators. After all, most veterans do support Romney and, if some veterans are aware of this (or suspect it), they may react angrily to being informed by academic pollsters that the opposite is so. Further research based on follow-up surveys could disentangle this effect. At a minimum, however, this result underscores our basic message of caution. Campaigns should be cautious about the benefits of military endorsements, which are not as straightforward as they might appear.

costs. Of course, even this modest conclusion might exaggerate the overall effect since in the real campaign voters are bombarded with competing messages about military endorsements that might cancel each other out. On the other hand, we get this effect with one cue in a single survey. It is also possible that if the cue gets repeated many times, the impact might be larger.



## V. DO MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS HAVE OTHER EFFECTS?

A number of specialists in civil-military relations have encouraged campaigns to forgo the competition in military endorsements on the grounds that it politicizes the military as an institution. Our survey provides, at most, limited support for the claim that endorsements politicize the military in the short term. However, it does provide some evidence that endorsements and politicization may undermine confidence in the military as an institution over the long term.

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*Retired senior officers may think they are drawing fine distinctions between the formal institution of active-duty military and their own views as retired citizens, but the truth is that no one, especially not the campaigns, is very interested in their views as private citizens.*

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The argument against military endorsements goes like this: While retired members of the military have the right to free speech and therefore can endorse candidates, when high-ranking veterans attach their names so prominently to campaigns they contribute to an impression that the military as an institution endorses one candidate over another. The military, however, is officially non-partisan, and numerous legal restrictions prevent active-duty members from speaking or acting out

in public on partisan issues.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the military is obliged to serve wholeheartedly whichever candidate wins, and public participation in the campaign process undermines the perception that it can or will do so if the vote goes against members' preferences.

Retired senior officers may think they are drawing fine distinctions between the formal institution of active-duty military and their own views as retired citizens. But the truth is that no one, especially not the campaign team, is very interested in their views as private citizens. Rather, it is their symbolic role – their role as spokespeople for the military – that gives their endorsements significance.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the senior officers may be deceiving themselves about the basis for their own endorsements. Recent research has found that retired four-star officers are more likely to make campaign contributions to the party of the president who nominated them for their fourth star.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps retired officers' endorsements are based on their own partisan leanings or political self-interest rather than on their military expertise, if it is even possible to unravel all of those threads. Regardless of how the motivation is parsed, the effects may be impossible to disentangle.

Endorsements by retired military officers can diminish the perception of the military as a nonpartisan institution serving the nation and increase the perception of the military as just another interest group serving its own bureaucratic and political interests. The argument applies generally to all veterans, but applies with greater force the more senior the rank of the veteran involved because of the way the public likely perceives higher ranks. It is unlikely the public would see a retired private as speaking authoritatively on behalf of the military, whereas the public may well perceive someone with the rank and stature of a General Powell, particularly in the years right after his retirement, as doing just that. Of course, there are always exceptional

cases of midlevel veterans whose prominence may eclipse more senior veterans, so the norm is best stated in general terms: The more a veteran can be perceived (rightly or wrongly) as speaking on behalf of the institution, the more problematic that veteran's political endorsements would be.

Dempsey, the current Joint Chiefs chairman, has weighed in compellingly about this issue recently. In a prominent message to the troops, Dempsey wrote: "In my judgment, we must continue to be thoughtful about how our actions and opinions reflect on the profession beyond active service. Former and retired service members, especially generals and admirals, are connected to military service for life. When the title or uniform is used for partisan purposes, it can erode the trust relationship."<sup>44</sup>

Not everyone agrees. Danzig, who organized Obama's outreach to senior retired military officers, doubts that endorsements have negative effects and, indeed, points to a little-noticed positive benefit: "I personally have reservations about asking senior retired military to endorse candidates: it tends to politicize the military. But I don't think the politicization effect is strong. In my experience retiree endorsements had no apparent effect on trust between political appointees and serving members of the military ... Besides the electoral benefits [Obama's outreach] yielded, it also introduced streams of advice and developed relationships that expanded the campaign's perspectives."<sup>45</sup>

Our survey does not adjudicate decisively between these competing views, but it does suggest some possible problems. For example, this type of politicization already may have had an impact on trust and confidence in the military: Sixty-five percent of Republicans report having "a great deal" of confidence in the military, compared with only 44 percent of independents and 34 percent of Democrats who do the same. Moreover,

Republicans who believe that most members of the military affiliate with a party are 10 points more likely to report a great deal of confidence in the military than those who do not think the military is political, while Democrats and independents who think the military is political are nearly 9 points less likely to have confidence in the military than those who do not. In other words, the perception that the military has a partisan tilt reinforces Republican trust in the military while undermining Democratic trust; both effects could intensify any perception of the military as a partisan institution. Moreover, this perception could contribute to recruiting difficulties among certain segments of the population.<sup>46</sup> This finding also may help explain why Obama is more likely to benefit from a military endorsement than Romney. If voters already assume that the military supports the Republican candidate, a military endorsement for a Republican candidate may be no surprise. In contrast, an endorsement for a Democratic candidate may be quite surprising and, consequently, informative.

We also asked respondents to assess different aspects of the military institution, including:

- How much confidence do you have in the military?
- Do most members of the military affiliate with a political party, and, if so, which one?
- How would you describe the political views of the military on a very liberal to very conservative scale?
- Is it proper for members of the military to publicly express their political views?
- Is it proper for members of the military to publicly advocate the military policies they believe are in the best interests of the United States?
- Are members of the military educated, religious, violent, selfless, homophobic and racist?

We can compare whether respondents who were not told about military and veteran political endorsements differed from those who were told, which may help answer the larger question of whether such endorsements might change public perceptions of the military as an institution.

Our survey results suggest that the effects of military endorsements, if any, are quite modest. However, these modest effects are prompted by a single endorsement. If the cue were repeated many times, the impact might be larger. Our survey does not show any effect on public confidence in the military; there is no difference between respondents who received no prompt about military endorsements and those who were told that the military endorsed either Obama or Romney. Seventy-seven percent of both groups report having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military. Fifty-nine percent of respondents who saw a military endorsement said most members of the military affiliate with a political party; the same proportion in the control group gave that response. However, 52 percent of Democrats and independents who received the Obama treatment think that “most members of the military affiliate with a political party,” compared with 60 percent among those who received the Romney treatment; approximately 64 percent of all Republican respondents think that members of the military affiliate with a political party with no differences across treatments.

There also are slight but discernible effects in public attitudes regarding whether members of the military should be allowed to express political views just like any other citizens. Despite norms that call for more circumspection from the military, in general, the public claims to be quite supportive of allowing the military to speak out (60 percent agree or agree strongly), and the number is even higher (64 percent) among those who were prompted with information about military endorsements. The public is a bit more

skeptical about whether it is appropriate for the military to advocate publicly for military policies it believes are in the best interests of the United States (only 49 percent agree or agree strongly), but that number climbs by 5 percentage points when respondents are primed with information about military endorsements. Perhaps telling the public about military endorsements convinces some that such norms are obsolete.

Similarly, endorsements seem to produce slight but discernible changes in the way the public views the military as an institution, at least according to the range of attributes (educated, religious, violent, selfless, homophobic and racist) we measured. An interesting pattern emerged. People who were told that the military endorsed one candidate or the other were more likely to think that one of the qualities that was obviously negative – violent, homophobic, racist – in fact applied to the military. Telling respondents about military endorsements increased by 3 to 5 percentage points the (admittedly) small number of people who thought that a given negative attribute applied to most members of the military. That pattern did not show up on qualities that were obviously positive – educated, selfless. Regarding those positive qualities, the answers from respondents who were told about military endorsements were statistically indistinguishable from those who were not told about military endorsements. On the one quality that might be positive or negative depending on one’s perspective, religion, the pattern was reversed but not statistically significant. Respondents who were told about military endorsements were *less* likely to think that the members of the military were religious than were respondents who were not told of endorsements, but the effect was statistically indistinguishable from zero.

## VI. ENDING THE CYCLE OF MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS

According to our analysis, military endorsements are just attractive enough for campaigns to use them, yet not so attractive that it is impossible to think they would ever stop. In the current election, our survey results suggest that the Obama campaign has the biggest incentive. But the Obama campaign likely only gets that payoff if the Romney campaign does not respond in kind, creating a strong incentive for counter-endorsements. Our survey did not simulate the net effect of competing waves of endorsements, but the modest effects of one-sided endorsements suggest that it may be minimal.

Likewise, the damage of such endorsements, at least as measured in our survey, is modest enough for a determined campaign operative to ignore. According to our survey, the endorsements do not translate automatically into a precipitous drop in public trust or respect for the military.

We did not find conclusive evidence that such partisan endorsements are already producing the most troubling negative effects civil-military experts have warned might happen. Yet, our survey suggests that such endorsements do affect the way the public views the military and that endorsements may undermine trust and confidence in the military over the long term. The public already views the military as having something of a partisan cast. A majority believes that most members of the military affiliate with a political party, and the public is split between those who think the military is mostly Republican and those who think there is an even divide. In short, perhaps in part because of the military's prominence in presidential elections, the public already sees the military as something of a participant in partisan politics. Moreover, endorsements may increase this perception, harming confidence in the military over the long

term, especially among Democrats. This perception also might undermine military recruiting efforts and hinder effective civil-military relations.

Accordingly, we support those like Dempsey who would seek to eliminate military endorsements in presidential campaigns. Competitive cycles such as these can only be broken if a taboo emerges against the behavior and if both sides use incremental confidence-building measures to walk back from the competition.

Such a taboo would not violate the civil rights of veterans. No one disputes that veterans have the right to say whatever they want about politics, and we are not suggesting the use of any legal coercion to stop them. Moreover, we are not suggesting that veterans (or active-duty military, for that matter) forgo voting. Rather, we are suggesting that senior veterans avoid the prominent endorsements that have become increasingly the norm in recent presidential cycles as a voluntary measure to shore up the larger norm of a nonpartisan military institution.

Identifying exactly where to draw the line for a norm against political endorsements is no easy task. All retired officers are not equal in terms of reputation or influence. An endorsement from retired four-star generals, such as Stanley McChrystal, Wesley Clark or David Petraeus, may carry more weight than endorsements from two-star generals, such as Scott Gration or James Marks. And not all four-stars are equal; McChrystal, who to our knowledge has not endorsed a candidate, has a higher public profile than John Nathman, who has endorsed a candidate, and so McChrystal's endorsement would probably matter more. Some retired officers who never made it to flag officer, such as former CNAS President John Nagl, may have more name recognition than many retired flag officers, though these cases seem to be rare. It seems clear to us, however, that retired officers and veterans – be they privates



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*Retired officers and veterans*  
*– be they privates or generals*  
*– always cross a line when*  
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*By attaching their partisan*  
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*to the reputation of the military,*  
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or generals – always cross a line when they claim to speak for the military institution itself. Groups like Veterans & Military Families for Obama, the Special Operations OPSEC Education Fund and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth all gain their notoriety primarily because of they are seen as part of the military “establishment.” By attaching their partisan political causes and candidates to the reputation of the military, they undermine the military’s nonpartisan ethic and identity.<sup>47</sup>

Retired generals and admirals also may be qualitatively different from officers who did not achieve flag rank. Once an officer achieves flag rank, it seems likely that the broader public would view his statements as “official” even if he tried to claim they were his own private, personal views. Choosing flag rank as a clear cutoff also seems plausible for one other reason. Presidential campaigns typically have not touted lists of majors and colonels; their clear targets instead have been generals and admirals. Consequently, an effective taboo must focus on flag officers at a minimum.

Another way to cultivate the taboo is to stigmatize the use of veterans in attack ads. It is one thing to praise Candidate A as being a worthy commander-in-chief. That raises questions about how the military would consider Candidate B, but it leaves those questions hanging in the air. It is far worse to attack Candidate B as being unworthy to be commander-in-chief, for that implies that members of the military will disrespect that candidate, should he or she win office. When veterans of any rank explicitly or implicitly suggest that they are speaking on behalf of the military as an institution, they have crossed the line and are risking considerable damage to the norm of a non-partisan military. In that regard, the attacks by the former SEALs on President Obama and the numerous attack ads aimed at Republican candidates and created by VoteVets are especially troubling.<sup>48</sup> Both ads portrayed a series of individuals, with their former rank and military service prominently highlighted, denigrating the readiness or performance of one of the candidates as commander-in-chief. They warn that the nation’s security would suffer grave harm if the candidate remained as or became commander-in-chief.

A taboo might already be emerging around prominent military endorsements. Indeed, cultivating that taboo seems to be the express intent Dempsey’s communications to the troops. The first step in constructing such a taboo is to get prominent voices, such as Dempsey’s, to articulate it and then for the elite within the profession to emphasize it. A vigorous discussion among the most senior retired officers – a small and cohesive enough group for such a discussion to take place – could very well establish a code of conduct that treated campaign endorsements as taboo, crossing a professional line that is not worth the loss of face that comes from violating a group norm.

The taboo could be buttressed if individual endorsements were met not with competing endorsements for the opponent, but rather with

commentary from other retired officers about how this action breaks with professional norms. And the taboo could be significantly strengthened if coupled with punishment measures – explicit, implicit or tacit – that ostracized the most prominent violators of the taboo. The negative treatment the most partisan of generals have already received is evidence that such taboo enforcement is possible.<sup>49</sup> For instance, prominent endorsers could be excluded from private briefings, mentoring assignments and other consulting opportunities that keep the senior-most military officers integrally linked to the active-duty force even years after retiring. Over time, this might reduce the supply of senior officers available for the endorsement competition.

The emerging taboo could further be reinforced by additional confidence measures from the campaigns themselves. The campaigns could agree not to give senior military officers or veterans speaking roles at conventions or in advertisements, negotiating the terms much as they negotiate the rules surrounding the presidential debates. Any violation of the rules would likely provoke enough commentary about the campaign's perfidy to negate the tiny advantage our analysis suggests the endorsements provide.

Measures such as these will take effect only if the campaigns convince themselves that the costs of the military endorsements exceed the benefits. Our analysis suggests that both benefits and costs may be less than people think. Since our method is better suited to measuring benefits than costs, we believe that the cost-benefit calculation may be even worse for military endorsements than our data indicate. Moreover, while political candidates have an undeniable interest in winning elections, they also have incentives to win in ways that do not make governing more difficult, if they can. Incoming administrations have a more difficult time governing if civil-military relations are poisoned by

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*The prudent course is to adopt norms of behavior that create the brightest possible line between the sphere of partisan politics that picks the American commander in chief and the sphere of military professionals who must serve unreservedly regardless of what the other sphere produces.*

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widespread suspicions of a partisan overlay on top of normal bureaucratic friction.

The prudent course is to adopt norms of behavior that create the brightest possible line between the sphere of partisan politics that picks the American commander in chief and the sphere of military professionals who must serve unreservedly regardless of what the other sphere produces.

## ENDNOTES

1. Non-profit organizations such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and Association of the United States Army are precluded by law from partisan political activity. Nevertheless, members of these groups or their political action committees (which have separate leadership structures) often can and do offer explicit or implicit support to candidates.
2. Richard H. Kohn, "Military endorsements harm national interest," *The Washington Times*, October 15, 2000.
3. Edwin Chen, "Clinton Backed by 21 Former Military Leaders," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1992.
4. Linda Bowles, "Powell Lets Dole Have It Both Ways," *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1996, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1996-07-17/news/9607170010\\_1\\_colin-powell-bob-dole-reagan-revolution](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1996-07-17/news/9607170010_1_colin-powell-bob-dole-reagan-revolution).
5. Franklin Margiotta, "Retired military's right to speak out," *The Washington Times*, October 22, 2000, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2000/oct/22/20001022-012152-7222r>; Rowan Scarborough, "Bush endorsements by ex-officers hit," *The Washington Times*, October 4, 2000; and Steven Lee Myers, "When The Military (Ret.) Marches to Its Own Drummer," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/01/weekinreview/the-nation-when-the-military-ret-marches-to-its-own-drummer.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.
6. See, for example, Kohn, "Military endorsements harm national interest"; and Richard H. Kohn, "General Elections: The Brass Shouldn't Do Endorsements," *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2000.
7. Retired Lieutenant General Bernard Trainor sent an email to other Marines complaining that endorsing a politician was akin to "prostitution." Thomas Ricks, "Bush's Brass Band Raises Some Questions," *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2000.
8. Charles Babington, "Generals and Admirals Battle Perceptions of Kerry," *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25812-2004Jul29.html>.
9. "General Tommy Franks Discusses His Republican Convention Address," PBS NewsHour, September 2, 2004, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/july-dec04/franks\\_09-02.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/july-dec04/franks_09-02.html).
10. Eliot A. Cohen, "General Malaise," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2004, <http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB109157496351782215,00.html>.
11. Email correspondence with Richard Kohn, August 22, 2012.
12. Email correspondence with Randy Scheunemann, August 11, 2012.
13. Email correspondence with Richard Danzig, August 11, 2012.
14. For instance, General Merrill McPeak mocked Republican nominee John McCain for putting on too much weight. Rowan Scarborough, "Pentagon Notebook: McPeak calls McCain too fat," *The Washington Times*, June 26, 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/jun/26/pentagon-notebook-mcpeak-calls-mccain-too-fat/?page=all>. General Wesley Clark said, "I don't think riding in a fighter plane and getting shot down is a qualification to be president." Brian Knowlton, "Democrat with military background assails McCain's credentials," *The New York Times*, June 29, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/29/world/americas/29iht-campaign.4.14081913.html>. And, as one of a few designated spokespeople on the campaign, retired Major General Scott Gratton served up attacks such as "When the next president is tested, the American people can have John McCain's judgment of siding with George Bush and Dick Cheney on every major national security decision . . ." and "John McCain's desperate and dishonest attack on defense spending only makes the point." Joseph Curl and Christina Bellantoni, "McCain calls Obama unqualified," *The Washington Times*, October 30, 2008; and Michael Abramowitz, "McCain Links Economy, Security," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/29/AR2008102903839.html>.
15. Admiral Michael G. Mullen, commencement address (National Defense University, Washington, June 11, 2009), <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1203>.
16. General Martin Dempsey, "Civil-Military Relations and the Profession of Arms," DoD Live blog, June 25, 2012, <http://www.dodlive.mil/index.php/2012/06/civil-military-relations-and-the-profession-of-arms/#more-33951>. See also Martin Dempsey, "From the Chairman," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 65 (2012), 5.
17. Gallup poll, *Confidence in Institutions* (June 07-12, 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions>.
18. "Military Show," The Associated Press, September 6, 2012, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/military-show>.
19. This also helps explain why Romney's convention had so few mentions of the war in Afghanistan: In the scramble to adjust to the shifting weather, the convention script kept changing and in the confusion some messages did not get the prominence they otherwise would have. Mike Allen and Jim VandeHei, "Inside the Campaign: How Mitt Romney Stumbled," *Politico*, September 16, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0912/81280.html>.
20. Sarah Huisenga, "Romney Leaves Tampa to Seek Veterans' Votes in Indiana," CBS News, August 29, 2012, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-57502954-503544/romney-leaves-tampa-to-seek-veterans-votes-in-indiana/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57502954-503544/romney-leaves-tampa-to-seek-veterans-votes-in-indiana/).
21. Team Romney, "Veterans for Romney Endorsements: American Legion Commanders," August 29, 2012, <http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2012/08/veterans-romney-endorsements-american-legion-commanders>.
22. There is other evidence of a possible effect. For instance, Obama did better among veteran voters than Kerry did, and perhaps that was due to the intensive veteran outreach done by the Obama campaign. See Beth Reinhard and Kevin Baron, "A 'Military Vote' That Doesn't Really Exist," *National Journal*, May 28, 2012, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/2012-election/analysis/a-military-vote-that-doesn-t-really-exist-20120528>.

23. The 2,517 registered voters were drawn from a full sample of 2,750 adult Americans. All of our analyses in this report are based only on the registered voter subsample. The 2,750 interviews in our database are a sample matched on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology and political interest to be representative of the general population, as determined by the 2007 American Community Survey. The matched sample came from 3,079 interviews YouGov conducted between July 12, 2012 and July 28, 2012. YouGov administered the survey via Internet. Unless otherwise noted, all reported numbers are based upon only those respondents in our sample who identify themselves as registered voters.

24. Response options were: "1. Barack Obama, the Democrat, 2. Mitt Romney, the Republican, 3. Other, 4. Would not vote, 5. No Opinion." The ordering of Obama's and Romney's positions in the response options was randomized.

25. In follow-up studies, we hope to test this assumption by using different wordings, including, as appropriate, using the names of actual endorsers.

26. Self-identified Democrats include those who claim not to be Democrats but lean in that direction; the same is true for self-identified Republicans.

27. When we do not include party leaners, our sample consists of 37 percent Democrats, 28 percent Republicans and 30 percent independents, compared with 30 percent Democrats, 27 percent Republicans and 41 percent independents for Gallup. See Gallup poll, *Confidence in Institutions*.

28. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

29. Another 35 percent of veterans identify themselves as independents. When we asked independents if they leaned toward one party or another, the partisan difference among veterans including partisan leaners grew to 55-32 Republican to Democrat.

30. Jeremy Teigen, "Veterans' Party Identification, Candidate Affect, and Vote Choice in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election," *Armed Forces & Society*, 33 no. 3 (April 2007), 414-437.

31. When we include leaned vote choice, 62 percent of veterans favor Romney, compared with 35 percent who support Obama.

32. See Jason Dempsey, "Just Where Is the 'Veteran' Vote?" The Huffington Post, August 7, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jason-dempsey/where-is-the-veteran-vote\\_b\\_1752102.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jason-dempsey/where-is-the-veteran-vote_b_1752102.html).

33. A t-test on the aggregate result yields a t-score of 1.22 ( $p = 0.22$ ), which suggests an impact but is definitely not statistically significant. These results do not include leaned vote choice, but including leaned vote choice in our analysis leads to substantively and statistically similar results: Obama receives 49 percent in the control group, compared with 51 percent in the Obama treatment and 52 percent in the Romney treatment, and Romney receives 46 percent, 46 percent and 44 percent in each of the respective categories.

34. Since we conducted our experiments in the context of the current election, we cannot say definitively whether these negligible effects are a product of the fact that national security has so far not been the central campaign issue in 2012. It is possible that endorsements might have more influence during an election in which national security issues are more prominent.

35. This shift in independent response is statistically significant at  $p < 0.1$  with a two-sided test ( $t = 1.68$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ).

36. These results are substantively and significantly similar to those reported when we use leaned vote choice. These effects also appear to be more pronounced among those voters who are less likely to follow foreign policy news, though they fall just outside conventional levels of statistical significance because of the smaller population size.

37. John R. Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study," *American Journal of Political Science* 40 no. 3 (August 1996), 825-850; and John R. Petrocik, William L. Benoit and Glenn J. Hansen, "Issue Ownership and Presidential Campaigning, 1952-2000," *Political Science Quarterly* 188 no. 4 (Winter 2003-2004), 599-626.

38. This advantage has slipped a bit since the killing of the U.S. ambassador in Libya, however. See Neil King Jr. and Danny Yadron, "Obama Extends Lead In New Poll," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 19, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443720204578004562877476102.html>.

39. In the current election, neither candidate is a veteran. Future research also could identify whether one's veteran status influences the effects of endorsements.

40. When using leaned vote choice, these results were: 1) control group – 57 percent to 39 percent, Romney over Obama, 2) Romney treatment – 61 percent to 36 percent, and 3) Obama treatment – 67 percent to 30 percent.

41. The regulatory authority for this claim derives from Department of Defense Directive 1344.10.

42. Another possible problem endorsements create is that the prospect of a future endorsement gives serving military officers more bargaining power with the president now. They can hint that if their preferred plan is not followed, they might endorse the president's opponent when they retire, or vice versa. Although one standard argument is that endorsements create an incentive for presidents to game senior military assignments for generals and admirals, sitting officers also may be able to game the system to their advantage.

43. Major James Golby, "Duty, Honor, Party: Ideology, Institutions, and the Use of Force" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, June 2011).

44. Dempsey, "Civil-Military Relations and the Profession of Arms"; and Dempsey, "From the Chairman," 5.

45. Email correspondence with Danzig, August 11, 2012.

46. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Gates Warns of Growing Gap Between Country and Military," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2010.

47. We would also distinguish between veterans endorsing political candidates and veterans running for office themselves. When a veteran crosses over the apolitical divide and joins the partisan fray directly, he or she is explicitly leaving the military profession to join another, the political profession. What is problematic is when a veteran tries to straddle the two, taking partisan action while also maintaining a foot in, and therefore seeming to speak on behalf of, an institution that must remain nonpartisan.

48. See the attacks by the former SEALs on President Obama: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFZkA\\_uRz08](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFZkA_uRz08); and see the ads created by VoteVets against Republican candidates (from an earlier election cycle): <http://www.votevets.org/video/ads?id=0017>.

49. See, for instance, Spencer Ackerman, "Wesley Clark Goes From 4-Star General to Reality TV Punchline," Danger Room blog on Wired.com, August 13, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/08/wes-clark/>.





# Appendix

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WEBSITES WITH CAMPAIGN MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS 27



OCTOBER 2012

**Military Campaigns**  
*Veterans' Endorsements and Presidential Elections*



## APPENDIX: WEBSITES WITH CAMPAIGN MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS

### MITT ROMNEY 2012

<http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2012/07/veterans-and-military-families-romney-leadership-team>

### BARACK OBAMA 2012

[http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2011/11/wes\\_clark\\_touts\\_obama\\_military.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2011/11/wes_clark_touts_obama_military.html)

### BARACK OBAMA 2008

<http://web.archive.org/web/20081122152221/http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/veteranstestimonials>

[http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2008/03/sweet\\_in\\_chicago\\_obama\\_flags\\_m.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2008/03/sweet_in_chicago_obama_flags_m.html)

[https://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post\\_group/ObamaHQ/CRJT](https://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post_group/ObamaHQ/CRJT)

### JOHN MCCAIN 2008

<http://web.archive.org/web/20081031030528/>

### GEORGE W. BUSH 2004

<http://web.archive.org/web/20041002192240/>

<http://www.georgewbush.com/veterans/flagofficersendorsements.aspx>

### JOHN KERRY 2004

<http://web.archive.org/web/20041017074742/>

[http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/releases/pr\\_2004\\_0915b.html](http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/releases/pr_2004_0915b.html)





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