

The Generation of Trust: How the U.S. Military Has Regained the Public's Confidence Since Vietnam.

Key Findings

How Trust Has Changed:

- In 1971, 27 percent of Americans had “a great deal of confidence” in the people running the military. In the days before 9/11, that number had risen to 44 percent, which is the largest increase of any public or private institution for which we have data. In the aftermath of 9/11, confidence in the military has consistently topped 65 percent.
- Over the same period, public approval of virtually every other public institution has dropped precipitously. Confidence in doctors and the medical community dropped 29 points; universities dropped 11 points; confidence in law firms fell 10 points; faith in major companies dropped 7, and so on. The U.S. military is a significant anomaly.

Who Does (and Does not) Trust the Military:

- Young people, those in the Millennial Generation born since 1976, are by far the most trusting.
- Baby boomers, most notably ones born in the early 1950s who came of age during the Vietnam War, remain the least likely to trust the military.
- Among baby boomers, Vietnam veterans are the least likely subset to trust the military, but veterans of other wars have more confidence in the military.
- Blacks have less confidence in the military than whites do; likewise women are less trusting of the military than men.
- People who identify themselves as either “very conservative” or “very liberal” are less likely to trust the military. The far right and the far left are strange bedfellows, but they share certain skepticism of the U.S. military.
- People who watch a lot of TV are much more likely to trust the military, as are religious fundamentalists and people who grew up in relatively poor households.

Why Has Trust in the Military Grown:

- The U.S. military has become more professional.
 - The draft ended in 1974, and the armed forces began extensive training programs to lure recruits.
 - Racial discrimination in the military has become far less than in the private sector.
 - The military virtually eliminated illicit drug use in the 1980s while the civilian sector was overwhelmed with the crack cocaine epidemic.
- Military performance has improved.
 - The Gulf War was a turning point for public approval of the military, but it came in the wake of successes in Grenada and Panama.

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—Military successes are more likely today because of a revised military doctrine that emphasizes overwhelming force and because of the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act, which has eliminated a fair amount of interservice rivalry.

- Most notably, the military has benefited from two decades of relatively good press.
 - With the rise of the All Volunteer Force, the Pentagon began advertising to appeal to future recruits, targeting middle-school children and using many of the techniques that colleges and universities have found to be successful.
 - The Pentagon subsidizes Hollywood movies and television productions by providing military equipment to projects that place the military in a good light. Often, the Pentagon requires script changes before subsidies are provided.
 - Movies and television programs unacceptable to the Pentagon have become relatively expensive to produce and fewer are made as a result.
 - The Pentagon's closely controlled images of the 1991 Gulf War gave young people a sense that the war was more like a video game than a real war.

Why We Should Care:

- Confidence in the military is critical during times of war.
- There is a strong generational component to whether a person trusts the military. The roots of that trust may be deep or shallow.
- To the extent that young people trust the military primarily because of images they have seen in the wake of the first Gulf War—rather than based on their own experiences—the current support levels may fall rapidly if reality clashes with image.
- Other public institutions, though, can learn from the military's successes by:
 - Enforcing professional standards widely respected by the public.
 - Reforming outdated command structures.
 - Aggressively advertising successes.

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