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Op-Ed

A U.S. military worth saluting

The U.S. military is the most respected institution in American life, according to several polls.

By Karlyn Bowman and Andrew Rugg

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We see them in airports or on the news: Men and women in military uniforms, reporting for duty, going to new assignments, returning home. We watch their tearful partings and joyous reunions. We may not know their names, but we have high regard for them and the institution they serve. In fact, the military is the most respected institution in American life.

In poll after poll, the military and its leaders get high marks. That isn't true in many places around the world, where the military is often associated with corruption and brutality and has lost the trust of its citizenry. Americans consistently rank the U.S. military higher than almost any other institution. In a recent Gallup poll that examined confidence in 16 different American institutions, 76% said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military. By comparison, 20% expressed high confidence in organized labor, and 19% in big business. Congress was the most poorly ranked institution, with only 11% of respondents expressing high confidence in the body. In another poll, this one by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 75% of respondents said they were "very proud" of America's armed forces, the highest mark in the poll.

Why do Americans regard the military so highly? One reason is familiarity. Most of us know someone who has served or is serving in the military. One-third of those surveyed in an April poll by the Pew Research Center said they or someone in their household had served in the military. During the height of the Iraq war in 2005, 62% of the respondents in an ABC News/Washington Post survey told interviewers they knew someone who had served in Iraq. These personal connections boost the military's profile, and in this case, familiarity has bred respect.

The military, like big business, organized labor and Congress, is a large institution, but it is not seen as overly powerful or unaccountable. In an April Gallup poll, only 14% of those surveyed said the military had too much power. Yet 67% felt that banks and financial institutions had too much power, and 43% felt that labor unions did.

Big business, big labor and politicians are also seen as self-interested, while the military is not. Nearly two-thirds of the participants in a Kaiser/Harvard/Washington Post poll last year agreed with the statement that "government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." Barely 3 in 10 said it was run for the benefit of all the people. In recent years, 6 in 10 have told Harris Interactive pollsters that Wall Street is dominated by greed and selfishness. Hardly anyone would express these sentiments about the men and women in uniform.

The military is also perceived as more effective than other institutions in achieving its goals, and that is another probable explanation for its high standing. The military's mission to protect and defend the country is clearly and narrowly defined, and it performs these functions extremely well. The Navy SEALs' precision raid on Osama bin Laden's hiding place in Pakistan is only the latest example. In contrast, there's hardly an issue in which the U.S.

Congress isn't involved. Its mission is diffuse and sprawling, and there is a lot to criticize.

Outward performance matters, but the military has excelled internally as well. Americans have asked the armed forces to be a laboratory for social change, on issues such as integrating blacks and women, dealing with two-parent working families or, more recently, allowing homosexuals to serve openly. The military has often embraced these changes earlier than other institutions, and although the path has not always been smooth, it has addressed the challenges and moved forward.

And the military has been and remains an avenue of upward mobility for many. When Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Michael G. Mullen spoke at West Point's graduation ceremony May 21, 310 of the 1,031 graduating cadets were minorities. In addition, 225 were women, and 20 were combat veterans.

The military is an institution where accountability matters, and this may also account for its popularity. Very few institutions, including the military, have perfect records. Scandals have touched many of the key institutions in American life in recent years. But scandals involving the military tend to be short-lived, and they don't leave permanent scars on the institution. We have reviewed a number of scandals involving the military, and in almost all cases, people responded that the wrongdoing was not representative of the military as a whole.

One could argue that the photos from Abu Ghraib in 2004 were a low point for a military fighting an unpopular war. But in polls from the time, about 6 in 10 said the abuse represented an isolated incident. Roughly 3 in 10 thought the abuse was more widespread. Americans wanted the wrongdoers punished, and they were: 17 soldiers and officers were removed from duty. Eleven were convicted, sentenced to military prison and dishonorably discharged.

Americans value honor, duty and sacrifice. Institutions that inculcate and embody those virtues, such as the military, have our deep respect. In his West Point speech, Mullen reminded the cadets of the importance of reaching out to the civilian population that doesn't always understand the "full weight" of military service. Polls today show that after a decade of an exhausting war on terrorism, Americans' appreciation for men and women in uniform is strong and deep. Civilians have a responsibility to reach out too, and not just on Memorial Day.

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