



MESSAGE GONE AWOL:

The Top Ten Mistakes Civilians Make When Talking About the Military.

All italicized quotes emerged in actual conversation—and are great examples of what NOT to say! But this conversation is about far more than “messaging”—it is about building understanding, and through understanding, respect for the culture and beliefs that lead some men and women to help others through military service.

- 1. Only say “national defense is important” followed by the word “but.”** Adding "but" robs the first part of the sentence of real meaning. Just pause. Add a period.
“Of course I think national security is important, but civil liberties are important too.”
(Better: National security is our number one priority. Fighting this long war requires strategies that stand the test of time.)
- 2. Be functionally illiterate about military structure.** For instance, by referring to the military interchangeably with “the army” (only one of four services); calling everyone a soldier (only the Army has soldiers—not the Marines, Air Force, or Navy); confusing officers and enlisted (the biggest personnel distinction in the military); or displaying ignorance of the range of missions – e.g. see every servicemember as a grunt fighting the war, rather than as involved in intelligence, engineering, scientific research, preserving stability in the Taiwan Straits, etc.
“We honor our brave soldiers.”
(Better: "We honor our brave troops")
- 3. Confuse politics with military service.** Do not mistake military service with being for or against war or a specific engagement — men and women of the military choose to serve their country, they do not choose their wars.
“I’m in favor of going in to Darfur, but I could never trust the president to only use the military in a way I approve.”
(Better: Our military must follow their chain of command—they deserve civilian commanders who have a strategy for victory before they commit troops to a fight.)
- 4. Say “I support the troops” without meaning anything specific by that.** It comes across as glib and insincere unless it's tied to an actual action of support.
“I support the troops, but I’m concerned about our policy.”
(Better: visit a local military base and talk about the sacrifices of a single service member. Show, rather than tell, how you support the troops.)
- 5. Declare that someone killed or injured in war was harmed for nothing, or died in vain.** Service members choose to serve our Constitution--and by doing so, strengthen our democracy regardless of the particular war they are fighting, or the reason for which they die. Even if civilians have made tactical or strategic mistakes, their sacrifices have meaning.
“The president has squandered the lives of our soldiers.”
(Better: Our soldiers pledge their lives to uphold the constitution. When our president violates that constitution, he undermines their sacrifice.)

- 6. Treat the “military group” like an ethnic group or self-interested constituency, and pander to their narrow self-interest.** Many join the military out of service and hold selflessness as a core value--treating the military as self-interested is the quickest road to alienating them. When offering them help, phrase it in ways that make it clear we are upholding a promise to them they deserve.
“We need across-the-board pay raises to support the troops.”
(Better: We make a promise to our troops when they put their lives on the line--we must uphold our promise by providing them with pay that shows we honor them.)
- 7. Call or imply that the military is the underclass, under-educated, or peopled by folks whose motives are suspicious – either too poor to have other options, or war-mongering.** Most people choose to enter, or remain, in the military out of patriotism, a desire to serve others, and a wish to make the world a better place—the same reasons others enter public service or nonprofit organizations.
“People go into the army when they don’t think they have other choices.”
(Better: People join the military to serve America and make the world a better place)
- 8. Portray foreign policy choices as easy, civilian leaders as liars or stupid, or portray anything to do with war in dismissive or clever terms.** We have the world’s strongest military—but it is still personally difficult to win a battle, or take a city—that difficulty should not be diminished. The military tends to be filled with pragmatic, straightforward “do-ers”—they do not appreciate glibness.
“Of course we unseated Saddam easily.” or “Surely all it would take is shock, and not any awe at all” [in describing how easy it should be to go into Darfur].
(Better: Winning a war, when there is no front line, is hard, and our civilian leaders must make hard choices. But their refusal to look the facts in the eye and make choices based on fact is unacceptable.)
- 9. Describe war, the experience of being a warfighter, or a military family member as though you have direct experience when you don’t.** When in doubt, stick to facts and numbers, or say what you want to say as a quote by someone in uniform.
“War is basically dehumanizing.” or “One can’t help but be damaged by war.” or “The military is broken.”
(Better: Talk about an individual service member and tell his or her story)
- 10. Confuse militarism with military service.** Many in the military are there because they want to promote peace and stability. In our modern military, they are also taught to think for themselves and to think, and experience, broadly. For instance, the services talk about the "strategic corporal," a junior rank that nonetheless has to make decisions with long-term, far-reaching implications.
“The military have hawkish views, and tend to be rigid.” or “The military is trained to blindly follow orders.”
(Better: It is the military whose lives are on the line who want human rights guidance, and the military who understands the need for a flexible, supple strategy in the fight for hearts and minds. But rigid civilian leaders are fighting against the military's demands.)