

„Corona in den USA –Der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies“

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„Exposing the Fault Lines: How Corona Has Affected American Civil Military Relations“

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Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to this week’s edition of “Corona in den USA,” the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University. My name is Anja Schüler, and today we will be taking a look at how the COVID-19-pandemic has affected American civil military relations. The German view of the American military has for a long time been dominated by the presence of U.S. forces in our country. We have certainly profited from this presence for decades, but it has become somewhat controversial recently on both sides of the Atlantic. Today, I’m looking forward to getting an inside view of the American military and its role in the current crisis, but also of its larger position in American politics and society. I will be talking about these issues with David Eisler, who is a doctoral candidate in the Graduiertenkolleg “Authority and Trust.” He is about to finish his dissertation on civil military relations and American war fiction. He has also served five years on active duty in the United States Army with tours in Germany, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Welcome to the podcast, David.

David Eisler: Thank you so much for having me.

Anja Schüler: It’s great to have you. So let us first take a look at the position of the American military in the world. Do you think it has changed in recent years, especially when we consider the changing global role of the United States?

David Eisler: I think there’s a lot of different ways to answer this. The way that I’m going to start with is to look at how the U.S. engagement in global affairs, at least from a military perspective, has remained relatively constant. Although there are a number of controversial points, as you mentioned, that have come up recently. One that’s kind of near and dear to my heart and is quite important over here is the proposed or planned reduction of nearly 12,000 troops here in Germany, including relocating the U.S. European Command Headquarters from Stuttgart, where it is now,

to Belgium. This is something that came out maybe a few months ago, that President Trump announced. And it's hard to tell whether or not everyone is really going to implement this. In the end, the Congress has the power of the finance and could potentially overrule this, or maybe some people were dragging their feet to see what will happen with the election. It's hard to say, but nonetheless, I've got a lot of people thinking about the role of the U.S. military abroad and in the world. So I'm unsure if there is a way to characterize the way that the U.S. military has operated in the last years. Some commentators talked about sort of hawkish isolationism that's happened under President Trump, where there's been a reduction in certain overseas commitments. But nonetheless, we still see that since the Iraq war, which was controversial and I think cost the U.S. a lot of international standing, at least in Europe in particular, and as well as the continued operations in Afghanistan that don't seem to end. It's really hard to look at this whole situation and say that the U.S. is taking a step back from world affairs, at least when you look at it in a more granular way. The rhetoric, of course, remains pretty isolationist. And "America first" is not exactly a beaming slogan for international cooperation. But nonetheless, I think that the way that the military is perceived, at least on a global scale, is difficult to quantify in those ways. But we can start to see when we look at the U.S.-German relationship, at least one place where we can drill down and start to wonder how exactly have the last three, four years, if not longer, affected the U.S. military standing around the globe?

Anja Schüler: So globally, things are somewhat in flux where the perception of the U.S. military is concerned. Do you think it is fair to say that in the U.S., the military remains one of the country's most respected institutions?

David Eisler: Absolutely. This is one of the more surprising developments, I suppose, when it comes to American politics. In most surveys, the military hovers around 75 to 80 percent when it comes to questions about whether or not the military will act in the best interests of the public, that's applied to multiple different institutions. And this is a survey that Pew Research tends to do, not annually, but every once in a while, the last one, I think, was 2018. And that number for the military is far higher than for many other institutions. And Gallup organization does this as well. They do an annual confidence in institutions trends. They've been doing this for decades. So it allows

you to track this over time, and they aggregate a great deal of trust. So that's the answer. As you say "Do you have trust in this particular institution?" And if someone says, yes, I have a great deal of trust in this institution, they aggregate that number. And you get for the military, as recently as this year, I think, 72% of respondents said they have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the military. And when you compare that to the trends going all the way back to the mid-1970s, which was just over 50% after Vietnam, which was a contentious issue in the United States at the time, particularly as it applied to the military. But even when you compare the military with other institutions. So for this year, you can compare it with organized religion, which was at 42%, Congress, which is at 13%. And really Congress has been in these kind of low teens and nine, ten, eleven, twelve percent since around 2007. Big business, the media and newspapers, all of these institutions are usually around the 19, 20, 30 percent. But the military, we're talking about 72% of people have quite a lot or a great deal of confidence or trust. So from a pure numbers perspective, trust in the military as an institution remains incredibly high and resilient in American society compared to trends for other institutions.

Anja Schüler: That's interesting. And now we're in the midst of a global pandemic with no end in sight, as it seems. How has that pandemic affected U.S. forces at home and abroad at the basic level?

David Eisler: We still have infections in the military. The last I saw was something like 55,000 total cases in the active duty military across all branches. And that's coming from the Department of Defense. And that includes 48 deaths. You see it affecting what's called readiness, so all the training exercises and other things that the military does in preparation for either planned or expected or potential operations. And this is something that doesn't go away. The military is not isolated from this. And even as recently as yesterday, I saw that the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, which is my old unit I served with over in Bavaria, had to go on a 14-day lockdown because of new infections. The Department of Defense has been somewhat careful in terms of releasing information about this. They release the aggregated numbers of how many cases there are, infections across the military. But as you might imagine, for the questions of readiness they don't necessarily want to say how affected the forces have been, how much power they've lost, how much capability they've lost. They're not

going to talk about anything like that. They just talk about numbers. But you can see what happens when things don't get contained. I mean, I think it was back in late March or early April when the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, the aircraft carrier in the Pacific, had an outbreak on the ship. And the captain, Brett Crozier, wrote a letter to his superior officers requesting assistance and saying, we need to get the sailors off the ship, and we need to disinfect, etc., essentially taking this aircraft carrier out of commission for its typical patrolling missions, etc. A line that was often quoted in his letter that came out was "We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die. If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset, our sailors." He made a big deal about this. I think where the tension came from was that he sent this letter to a lot of different people up his chain of command, and somebody around there leaked it to the media, and it went public. He was relieved of command, and it went from being a military issue to a political issue. So it highlights some of the different challenges that the military has had to face throughout the pandemic, not just ones of readiness and operational capability, but also finding itself in political crosshairs for very contentious issues.

Anja Schüler: Well, we can certainly all imagine how the pandemic can spread in close quarters like an aircraft carrier, and many of us remember that footage of Captain Crozier leaving his ship, and his soldiers cheering him on who have certainly trusted him, I think. Another role of the military that we have been observing is that it has also been utilized to contain the pandemic. For example, the National Guard was called out to help with testing in many states. Can you tell us a little bit more about that role?

David Eisler: Absolutely, and this is one of those cases where, you know, the National Guard has been an important component of the Department of Defense's operational capability now going back to the beginning of the Iraq war. And this is a place where they really get to showcase some of the capabilities that they have and what they bring to state response. So as of April during the height of what at the time would have been the first wave, there were something like 45,000 National Guard troops that were mobilized across all 50 states as well as the territories. So these troops were called up by the authority of their governor. And that's a distinction that's important when it comes to distinguishing between the National Guard and the federal

military. So in this case, there are differences of duty status that allow the states to call up their troops for a certain limited period of time and activate them. And they can also get federal financing, which I think a majority of these National Guard units that have been activated or mobilized are getting. And they're performing a wide range of tasks, as you alluded to. I mean, they're operating test sites across the country. They're distributing equipment and supplies and food, as well as aiding local law enforcement where necessary. I even saw a story that the Indiana National Guard was helping to fill staffing shortages at a prison after a number of guards came down with the virus, and they didn't have enough staff to fulfill their rotations. So it's kind of impressive when you think about what the National Guard is capable of and the different roles that they've been asked to play throughout the pandemic. It really highlights something that's important when it comes to the distinction between what we would think of as a reserve or part-time soldier who in the past operated under the slogan of "one weekend a month, two weeks a year." That part-time enlisted military service doesn't really apply as much anymore. I mean, the National Guard has played, as I mentioned, an operational role for years, including lots of sustained rotations to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as during disaster relief operations. Any time there's a hurricane that hits, you see the National Guard getting called out. So these troops are used to being activated. But one wonders what's the breaking point for how often they can be called up to do these kinds of operations before they can say "I'm not really part time anymore."

Anja Schüler: Let me pick up on something you just said about our understanding of service, what service really means. We used to use that word very, very restrictively when we talk about military service. But now it almost seems to me as if the meaning of the word has really been expanded.

David Eisler: Yeah, absolutely, and in the U.S. in particular. It's less of a thing in Germany, which is a cultural distinction that I find kind of fascinating for lots of historical reasons that we don't have time to get into now. But this phrase of "Thank you for your service" has been almost universally applied to military in the last 15 years or so, if not longer, going back to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So somebody serves overseas in the military, they wear the uniform. You immediately see them and say "thank you for your service." This has almost become sort of a

robotic reaction that people have within American society. And it's one that that often gets made fun of within the military community, saying "I'm not really sure how to feel when someone says thank you for your service." So with the pandemic, we start to see a lot of this rhetoric bleeding into places outside of the military. That has good sides and bad sides to it. On the one hand, when you see it's very easy to grasp for military terminology and rhetoric when it comes to talking about these issues from calling it a "war on the coronavirus" to speaking of health care workers as "heroes who are serving on the front lines." And eventually what happens is that you have an inevitable rhetorical link between the idea of sacrifice, which in a war is saying someone is going to die for their country. And by reappropriating this type of language for health care workers, the cynical version of this and what I agree with is that you prime the country to accept a level of death that it otherwise wouldn't. I mean, if you look at the number of deaths in the United States right now, over 150,000 deaths, I think, if not even more, and it's not showing any signs of slowing down. There were not even 60,000 service members who were killed in action in the Vietnam War. So we're talking about numbers that are far greater than we've seen killed in action and war recently. And yet somehow this rhetoric helps prime the public to accept it as a necessary sacrifice. But at the same time, if you want to be somewhat more positive about this, I think by using concepts of service to apply to health care workers, and educators, and doctors, and other sectors of society that have typically been ignored from this particular type of praise and thanks, I think it makes it far more broad and inclusive to understand what service to country actually means, particularly in an actual crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic has shown itself to be.

Anja Schüler: I would like to talk to you about a couple of images that really struck me in the last two months that involve the military. In early June, America's most senior military officer, General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, participated in that infamous photo opportunity in front of St. John's Church in Washington, D.C., after troops and police had cleared a path for the president so he could stand there and hold up a Bible, and Millie was in that picture. That was one picture. And another one was a couple of weeks ago at the virtual Democratic Convention. We saw military officers in the background when Samoa cast votes for the presidential candidate. So both these images strike me as rather unusual appearances for members of the U.S. military in uniform. Is that true, or do you have

a different opinion?

David Eisler: Well, leveraging the military as a political prop is sadly not as unusual as it should be. In fact, the Department of Defense policy specifically bars service members from participating in political activities while they're in uniform. They have every right as citizens outside of uniform, but they're not supposed to use the symbolic value of their uniform to do political activities. I'll start with what you mentioned about General Milley, who recognized or at least he felt the pressure afterwards of his actions and sort of walked back on his participation and said that he should not have been there. He admitted that. And I don't actually know if the same thing happened with the Democratic Convention, with American Samoa. In that case, it was two Army reservists who happened to be wearing their uniforms in the background of the roll call. And then, of course, during the Republican National Convention, something similar happened where two Marines were holding open the doors for President Trump as he walked through to perform this naturalization ceremony as part of the Republican convention. So in each one of these cases, we have images of uniformed active duty military personnel or uniformed military personnel who are serving sort of a symbolic role in the background. And it's not surprising, given what we said earlier about the Americans trust in the military, that you would see sort of a political tug of war for military support and the image of that. In each of these cases, you can you can sort of see when you think about it for a minute, you can see why there shouldn't be the case. I mean, the military is supposed to be an apolitical organization that serves everyone in the country and not just a particular political group. So when you start to have military personnel appear at political events and lend their support to political candidates or anything like that, it starts to call into question this apolitical nature of the institution and makes the likelihood that the military will become yet another partisan instrument even higher. This is something that a lot of people are thinking about right now, at least within the civil military relations community. People are worried about this. I think some senior military officials themselves are probably thinking about this as well and not the political appointees necessarily. But they're going to have to find a way to thread this needle a little bit better and avoid being put under these circumstances where they can be perceived as having some kind of political bias in a way that they really shouldn't. And the fact that General Milley has had to come out and say that the military will

play no role in the election and the transition is when we stop and really pause and say, wow, I can't believe that this even needs to be said. That's such a monumental violation of what we had thought of as the norm in American civil military relations, that it warrants sitting down for a minute and saying, how far have we really come?

Anja Schüler: Do you think the broader public notices these violations?

David Eisler: I'm not sure that they noticed them on a conscious level. I think when they see these things there's obviously a large group of people out there, with experience and understanding of the military and the policy, who see these images and go, "Wow, I can't believe that they just did that. Somebody is going to get a phone call from their commander." But the average American citizen who's watching any of these events, I don't think it registers in their mind that this is somehow wrong or that it should be considered as wrong. But in the end, when we're talking about norms, and that there are norms for reason, and I think if they're continually violated over and over again, those norms tend to go away and remove the window of what's possible to someplace that we didn't actually want to be from the very beginning. And I think that's the real problem is that what Americans will accept as "normal behavior" or a "normal relationship" with their military will change over time to a place that's not at all healthy for the republic.

Anja Schüler: Since we're talking about violations of civil military norms, another thing that has been quite contested is the role of the military and other federal troops at the ongoing protests in American cities. Would that undermine the public trust in the military as well?

David Eisler: I think it certainly could. And in the end, what happens is when you see troops or heavily armed and uniformed personnel on the streets of American cities, the average person does not know to look at their shoulder patches and say, well, what is that person? Is that law enforcement? Is that special forces? Is that active military? Is that a National Guard unit patch? They don't know. They just see somebody holding a weapon, riding around in an armored vehicle, and wearing a military looking uniform, wearing camouflage. And I think that blurring the distinction between these different organizations could end up having dangerous consequences.

And it certainly could erode some of the trust that's been built in the American military since the shift to an all volunteer force after the end of Vietnam. I mean, we've seen the military deploy troops in emergency situations like Hurricane Katrina and even the L.A. riots back in 1992, I think it was. We see National Guard troops get called up during that disaster relief. But I don't know that the average person looking out their window can tell the difference between a National Guard soldier who's distributing supplies and conducting Corona tests versus a law and federal law enforcement special forces who is putting down riots right versus a federal or active duty military unit? I don't know that there's a difference in their eyes. I think they just see uniforms, weapons, and equipment. And to them, there's no distinction.

Anja Schüler: You said at the beginning of our conversation that the military has remained remarkably resilient against trends of declining trust. But you're also saying that increasing politicization could, after all, lead to an erosion of trust.

David Eisler: I think that's correct. In fact, there's been some interesting recent civil military relations research that's showing that there's a correlation between the military's participation in a controversial political issue and a loss in public trust. For example, one of the case studies was President Trump's deployment of active duty troops to the U.S.-Mexico border. I think it was last year or the year before, sometime recently. And this was a controversial issue. The military was put in this awkward position of having to carry out orders that it was asked to do. And nonetheless, you can see that this might lead to a lack of trust. Other issues are things when you see the military getting used politically. I mean, President Trump's decision to grant clemency to several people who were convicted war criminals, Eddie Gallagher, the U.S. Navy SEAL among them. And these people go on to appear on conservative talk shows and things like that. I think that is incredibly unhealthy for the civil military relationship. And in the end, I'm not sure that all of these things put together, when you combine them with even some of the stuff that I've done in my own research, which is to show how cultural images of the military tend towards stereotypes of heroes and victims. And you really only get this reinforcement of the idea that for an all-volunteer military, the only people who choose to serve are those who don't have any other choice and have nothing else that they could do and that anybody who serves overseas in war comes back broken and traumatized. You know, when you combine those cultural productions with these real time real world images, there's a lot of mixed

messages that go on. And I wonder if that over time will have the sustained effect of eroding some of the trust that Americans have in the military. All that said, though, the numbers haven't borne it out yet. So this may be something that is a longer term issue. It will take longer, a longer amount of time to really observe changes in the trends. It's not something that you can necessarily see in real time. So it's something that I, as a person who's interested in this issue, will continue to monitor for a while now. But I actually do wonder what it would really take for Americans to lose trust in the military.

Anja Schüler: Well, it's going to be interesting to observe how this will play out in the weeks leading up to the elections. Thank you very much for those insights, David. And we are certainly looking forward to seeing your dissertation.

David Eisler: I'm looking forward to finishing it.

Anja Schüler: You have been listening to "Corona in den USA," the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, my name is Anja Schüler, and I've been talking with graduate student David Eisler about U.S. civil military relations during the pandemic. As always, thank you for tuning in. As the United States moves towards the presidential elections in the coming months our podcast will shift perspective, but we're not quite done looking at the pandemic and its repercussions. My next guest will be HCA Founding Director Detlef Junker, and I look forward to talking to him about U.S. presidents and their reactions to profound crises. Don't miss that episode, which will air in two weeks. Until then, please stay safe and healthy.