

DANGERS OF MILITARY ENTANGLEMENT IN PARTISAN POLITICS

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

DANGERS OF MILITARY ENTANGLEMENT IN PARTISAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

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Since the creation of the all-volunteer military, the membership of the military has become decidedly more conservative. This has led to an overt affiliation with the Republican Party. As a profession that requires support from Congress and the American People and acts on the orders of the President, this affiliation may have adverse effects on the effectiveness of the US military. The military needs to understand the cause of this underlying trend and determine if any action is required to try to change or mitigate this trend.

DANGERS OF MILITARY ENTANGLEMENT IN PARTISAN POLITICS

In the recent presidential campaign, a small news article appeared stating that the Republican candidate's campaign had filed a federal suit in Virginia to extend the state's acceptance of military members' absentee ballots by 10 days.¹ The reason was obvious to most Americans. The Republican candidate expected a majority of the military members to vote Republican. However, what was interesting about this article is that it never directly mentioned this assumption. It was a point that the writer apparently did not feel needed to be explained.

Coming eight years after the contested 2000 election when the military vote was one of the differences in the election of President George W. Bush, it hardly seemed as if it needed to be mentioned. In fact, the Senator John McCain campaign was right to be focused on the military absentee ballots. According to an *Army Times* poll, approximately 68 percent of all the military supported his campaign with only 23 percent supporting the eventual winner, President Barack Obama.²

The military's conservative outlook on politics has led to its support for the Republican Party for decades.³ As the United States military enters the 21st century and marks over 30 years as an all-volunteer force, it needs to look at the implications of this partisan affiliation to determine if unintended consequences may arise. In this paper, I explore the issue by looking at the history of the military and voting. How did we get to this point in time and where do the military political leanings currently stand? What are the cautionary lessons from other professions that have become associated with partisan politics? Finally, what could the military do to affect the current partisan stance?

History of the Military and Voting

Today's overwhelming military support for one party would have been a foreign concept to the military profession prior to the all-volunteer force. The military has not always been as readily identified with partisanship, much less a particular political party. From the mid-1800s until WWII, the military stayed out of political involvement believing that it did not mix with the military profession.⁴ During this period, the military consisted of a small standing force that was expanded by volunteers or the draft when required to fight wars. This pattern held true until WWII and was consistent with the original founding principles of the country to avoid the dangers of a large standing Army. This small, standing military did not participate in the political process.⁵ However, even if it did have the interest in voting, there were technical and logistical impediments that would have made the right to vote hard to exercise. With limited roads, slow transportation methods, and no electronic communication, large voting by absentee balloting was not feasible.

World War II brought a change to the situation. With a large number of draftees entering the military, there was a strong push to allow them to vote. The new philosophy that a citizen soldier fighting for freedom should be able to vote moved Congress to push through legislation to enable large scale voting across the globe during WWII.⁶ There was some push against this broad military voting, especially from southern politicians afraid that black Americans would be given a way to vote around the Jim Crow laws of the South. However, the push for voting was too strong. Federal ballots were provided to troops and counted in the election process. After WWII, the country found itself unexpectedly back in an era of conflict with the Cold War against the Soviet Union. In a battle of ideas, between communism and democracy, the push for continued

voting of citizen soldiers was maintained as the United States kept the draft in peacetime for the first time in its history.

This push for voting continued even after the return to an all-volunteer force was instituted in 1973 and communism fell. Part of the original rationale for pushing military voting was that draftees, who had not chosen to enter the military, should not have to give up their rights to vote and should exercise their civic duty.⁷ However, with the resumption of the volunteer force, the policy on voting was not changed. The earlier view that the military as a profession should remain apolitical had faded. This had the unintended consequence of leading to a military officer corps today that is solidly Republican.

Where the Military Stands Today

In the last election, polls projected that 68 percent of the military would vote for Senator John McCain. The *Army Times* conducted a poll that asked military members who they planned to vote for in the election (Table 1)

	McCain	Obama
All Military	68%	23%
All Enlisted	67%	24%
All Officer	70%	24%
African-American	12%	79%
White	76%	17%
Men	70%	22%
Women	53%	36%

Table 1 from *Air Force Times Survey*⁸

In the *Army Times* analysis, this support was found across all services, officer and enlisted and for every group except women and African-Americans.⁹ However, even military women and military African Americans supported the Republican candidate in

larger numbers than the population at large. Four percent of African Americans nationwide voted for Senator John McCain, but 12 percent of military voters supported him.¹⁰ 43 percent of females nationwide voted for Senator McCain while 53 percent of military women voted for him.¹¹

This overall result continues a trend that has been in place since the all-volunteer force was adopted. The civil-military gap in party affiliation has grown over that time period with the military's affiliation with the Republican Party growing from less than 40 percent in 1976 to the current 68 percent.¹² Surveys every four years have shown a constant march towards higher Republican affiliation that well outpaced any movement in the general civilian population.¹³ This affiliation with the Republican Party is also consistent with a more conservative outlook in military members. Surveys of the military leaders conducted by the Triangle Institute Security Studies found that only 4.4 percent of the military respondents surveyed held very liberal or somewhat liberal views compared to 28.5 percent of the general public while 66.6 percent of military respondents held somewhat or very conservative views compared to 38.4 percent of the general public.¹⁴ These various surveys convey the facts that the military has drifted towards membership that is significantly more conservative and Republican than the general public.

There are several underlying causes for this shift: changes in the two political parties' support for the military, a dramatic cultural change that led to a major shift in regional political party affiliation, and self-selection and regional recruiting that occurred under the all-volunteer force. The policy preferences of the two parties changed significantly over the last half century. After WWII, the military's priorities were split

between both parties. The Democratic Party supported “a larger budget and institutional autonomy for the military” while the Republican Party supported strategic weapons and lower budgets.¹⁵ Under this divided support from each party, the military had to maintain support from both parties to achieve its priorities and did not need to show a preference to either party.

However, during and after the Vietnam War and with the establishment of the all-volunteer force, Democrats became less supportive of military spending and autonomy while the Republicans become more supportive.¹⁶ Additionally, the Republican Party changed its philosophy on smaller defense budgets and supported a rapid build-up in the 1980s at the expense of budget deficits. Although both Democratic and Republican politicians continued to support the military, the anti-war movement found its home in the Democratic Party and its outlook on the military changed. Consequently, there was no longer a split of priorities across parties and the Republican Party and the military’s priorities overlapped. This realignment may not be permanent. President Bush’s policies on the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been criticized by retired general officers and certainly strained the all-volunteer force.

Dramatic cultural changes also contributed to a more Republican military. Before the mid-1960s, the South was solidly conservative and Democratic as were many of the military members who joined from the South. By the 1980s, the South was still conservative but had changed to Republican. One of the main causes of this change has to do with a series of social changes that swept the nation during the 1960s, among them the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement was important because it became one of the catalysts for a major realignment of the South from the Democratic

to the Republican Party. Prior to the 1960s, Republicans and northern Democrats were supportive of Civil Rights while southern Democrats worked to block progress.

However, in the 1960s after the Civil Rights law was passed, the focus of the movement changed from a “focus on civil rights to a focus on government-led redistributive efforts in behalf of blacks”¹⁷. This led to a loss of Republican support. The party did not want to back an agenda that required a powerful, proactive government role. This position by the Republican's appealed to the southern Democrats who had strongly opposed the original Civil Rights law.

During the same period, the country was struggling with the Vietnam War and the resulting student protests, the civil and women's rights revolution, and the perceived rapid disintegration of traditional social order.¹⁸ The Democratic Party fragmented over these issues while the Republican Party coalesced around conservative opposition to government-driven enforcement of racial discrimination remedies and the social changes hitting the country. This message pulled many southern Democrats over to the Republican Party. With the new support, the party went on to win congressional and gubernatorial seats throughout the South for the first time since Reconstruction leading to a solid, southern Republican stronghold with the election of President Reagan¹⁹.

Within this context of change, the military was in the process of reestablishing the all-volunteer force, replacing the draft as the way the military obtained new members. Although the draft did not draw a fully representative sample of the United States, it was a broad recruitment of men across the nation. With the volunteer force, self-selection came into the process. Certain members of the country agreed to enter the military. Danielle Allen, who analyzed where veterans live and which states contribute the most

recruits, shed light on the fact that the military is filling its ranks with more “red-state” citizens.²⁰ This suggests that the military has been able to fill its all-volunteer force, which is 50 percent smaller today than at the end of the draft in 1973, even as the nation’s population has grown 50 percent, from 200 to 300 million people, by drawing heavily from certain regions of the country.

By analyzing the states with the highest percentage of veterans in 2007 compared to 1969, Allen found that four big “blue states” have dropped off the most recent list: California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Illinois. In fact, this research found that New Jersey had actually dropped to the bottom, 50th of 50 states, with only 1 percent of its citizens having served in the military since Vietnam.²¹ These results were not primarily attributable to states where retirees settle. She cites studies that show that Montana, Alaska, Florida, Wyoming, Maine and Texas provide the most per-capita enlistees, while Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and New York provide the fewest. She explains that “what’s clear from the data is that a major national institution, the U.S. military, now has tighter connections to some regions of the country than others”.²²

Data from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy confirms this overrepresentation of the South and underrepresentation of the Northeast. When looking at the difference between the numbers of Armed Forces’ members relative to the region’s population, the South was overrepresented by 8 percent in 1997 and the Northeast was underrepresented by 4 percent.²³ At the same time, base closings decisions and overall military spending have tended to favor the South.²⁴ ROTC detachments also help to explain the higher proportion of officers from the South.

“While 29.1 percent of the nation’s college students come from the South, 41 percent of military officers do.”²⁵ A look at closed ROTC detachments shows some of the best schools in the country shutting out the military officer program.²⁶ Between 1968 and 1972 Harvard and Yale were among seven northeast universities that closed their ROTC detachments while 17 new detachments were opened in the South.²⁷ This trend continued with the downsizing after the Cold War. The South now produces 40 percent of all ROTC Army officers while making up 36 percent of the nation’s population.²⁸ The result is clear from a look at the results comparing Alabama to New York City. Last year Alabama ROTC programs “generated 174 Army officers, while colleges in New York City graduated just 34”²⁹.

There are other factors that may have contributed to a more conservative military. The influence of the majority may work to modify the outlook of the minority. There is also strong peer pressure to conform to the prevailing view of the organization. There were 23 percent of military that supported the Democratic candidate in 2008, but these same military members may not feel comfortable discussing their political view with their more conservative peers and over time they might even grow more conservative from exposure to their peers. Although there may be many mechanisms at work, the overlap of military recruitment trends against the political map provides key insights into the major dynamics that have shaped the military’s membership.

During the transition over the last 36 years, new members self-selected by volunteering to join the military and over time the military became heavily Republican. Although the military did not plan or intend to create a partisan leaning organization, today that is exactly what the profession has become. Many articles have been written

about the Civil-Military “Gap”. Will the military accept orders from a society that it no longer mirrors or represents? Much research has been conducted on this topic and although I feel comfortable that the answer is yes, that question is one I leave for others to argue. My interest is in another peril that may await the military with the problems that can arise when a profession becomes viewed as partisan or as a group that political parties can court. There are other professions that have lost their neutrality which provide lessons for the military as it grapples with how to address this gap.

Perils for Professions that Fall into Partisan Politics

The Armed Forces count on the support of the American people and Congress to sustain their profession and to support them when they go to war. The American public is often the center of gravity for any military activity and no military can be sustained without the support of Congress. So how do professions fare with the public and Congress when they become perceived as supporting a particular party? As a cautionary tale for the military, there are two professions which illuminate some of the problems that grow out of close attachment to a party.

First, the press has become more closely associated with a liberal perspective and has in general been sympathetic to the Democratic Party agenda. In fact, “journalists are still more than twice as likely to lean leftward than the population overall”³⁰ and are almost half as likely as the national population to be registered as Republicans (18% versus 31% nationally)³¹. Like the military, the press is specifically mentioned in the constitution. Journalists have the right to free speech guaranteed by the Second Amendment. Likewise, journalistic ethics require them to report the news and not mix that news with opinion. Journalists may provide opinion and commentary,

but they must clearly state when they are doing so to the reader. As stated by the Society of Professional Journalist Code of Ethics, journalists should remain independent, avoid conflict of interests, and clearly distinguish between news and advocacy.³² As with the military profession, the journalism profession requires self-policing and its rules depend on voluntarily enforcement from its members.

In the last presidential election, there are indications that the press lost its independence in the reporting of the news. The Pew Institute polled the public about which candidate they thought the press wanted to win the election. By a margin of 70 percent to 9 percent, the people surveyed stated that the press wanted President Obama to win the election.³³ The coverage that was perceived to be slanted even led a former CBS correspondent to write a book called, *A Slobbering Love Affair*. In the book, Bernard Goldberg highlights the press' significant loss of neutrality and its swing towards one party. The *Washington Post* confirmed this broad conclusion based upon its overall news reporting on the 2008 presidential election. In an article by the *Washington Post* Ombudsman, Deborah Howell, she concluded that what the reader "saw as a tilt toward Democrat Barack Obama" in the paper's coverage was real.³⁴

This obvious support for one party comes with a cost to the journalism profession. Various polls show the public has low confidence in the journalism profession. For instance, a recent Gallup poll showed only 24 percent of Americans had a great deal or a lot of confidence in the press as opposed to 71 percent for the military.³⁵ Along with this lack of confidence in reporting, there has also been a dramatic drop in viewership and readership of traditional media outlets, leading many newspapers to even stop publishing print versions of their daily paper.

Regardless of whom you thought was the best candidate to be president, there is cause for concern on any bias in coverage. Journalism is a profession that is responsible to provide the news and, like the military, has been given a special place in our country by the Constitution. While the military is charged with defending the nation, the free press is given the important role as watch dog over the government and society. The lesson to be learned from the mainstream media bias is to warn the military of the perils to its mission of allowing partisan bias to creep into their own profession.

A second profession to consider is education, specifically, the teachers' unions. The teachers' unions have aligned behind one party over the last several elections and even had a strong contingent of over 200 union representatives as delegates at the 2008 Democratic National Convention.³⁶ The strategy has worked well when the Democratic Party controlled Congress and the Presidency. However, when Republicans took charge in the 1990s, they pushed charter schools, school vouchers, merit pay and other ideas not supported by the teachers union. This led to the growth of charter schools across the nation and several school choice initiatives being debated. The *No Child Left Behind* legislation was passed under a Republican President and Congress with support even from Democratic Senators such as Senator Edward Kennedy. This legislation demonstrated the downside of supporting one party. When the Democrats were out of power, legislation was passed that the unions could do little to resist. Although the unions' strong tie to a single party has not hurt public support for teachers, their priorities in Washington are beholden to the party in power. With the Democratic Party back in power, the teachers' union may be able to roll back some of these

changes. However, their plight is a clear warning to professions like the military about the challenges of putting all of their support behind one party.

The point of exploring these two professions is not to argue one side or the other, but to highlight the types of challenges that confront any organization or profession that allow it to be seen as supporting one party or actively supporting partisan policy preferences. Either of these situations can lead to a loss of public support or legislative defeats when their party loses power. This has led to the teachers' unions becoming a political pawn in Washington, with Republicans raising the specter of having to break the teachers' unions in order to achieve their policy goals.

The larger issue for the military is whether its unorganized support for the Republican Party leaves itself vulnerable to the same loss of public or congressional support. Does the military want to be courted like any other interest group? Bi-partisanship provides broader support and avoids the vulnerability to power changes in Washington. The military should not profess policy preferences beyond the role of giving sound military advice to political leaders while not supporting a single party.

Both the press and the teachers' unions are not exact models for the military. The press does not depend on yearly funding from Congress and they need not fear most legislation because the First Amendment protects them from Congressional restrictions. Teachers remain popular with the public while their fate in Washington is tied to their unions' support of the Democratic Party. But the military's current partisan outlook opens it up to face similar dangers. It is not hard to envision a liberal blog or activist writing an article about the military's love affair with the Republican Party,

especially if it becomes clear in the future that the military vote made the difference in a close election.

Additionally, the threat of a Democratic Congress deciding to defund the military based upon political calculus is not farfetched. After the last election, Congressman Barney Franks suggested cutting the military budget by 25 percent because it might be necessary to free up funding for social spending.³⁷ This was not based upon any military analysis, but rather a desire to free up money to spend on Democratic constituencies and priorities. Luckily for the country and the military, the patriotism in our politicians is strong on both sides of the aisle and Democrats have been as strong in supporting the military and their families as Republicans. However, the military should not assume that this luck will continue and there is a need to avoid taking the partisan affiliated path that the press and the teachers' unions have taken.

Steps Available for a Partisan Free Military

One of the core tenets of the military in the United States is civilian control. In other words, those civilians, elected and accountable to the people, make the decisions of war and peace and the military implements those decisions. Additionally, the military profession has a requirement to not undermine "the state's democratic character".³⁸ The responsibilities of the profession along with the dangers of partisan entanglements call for considering potential remedies to the current overt Republican leanings of the military.

First, looking at the past may help to find a cure for today. As discussed, the military has not always been associated with partisan politics. In fact, for most of its history, its members remained apolitical. The period between WWII and the Vietnam

War drove a strong push towards the voting citizen soldier. Now that the military has returned to a professional military, as a profession it should consider returning back in time when voting was not emphasized and non-involvement in partisan politics was the norm. This would be a long term project and may not happen soon, but it is something that, as a profession, the services should start to consider.

Although this option may seem utopian, there may be precedent. A recent survey of journalists found that although Republican affiliations have not increased much, a larger number of journalists are describing themselves as independent and less as Democrats.³⁹ The study suggested that younger journalists may be deciding to avoid party labels. Perhaps this is a trend that the military as a profession could duplicate. As journalism struggles from some of the same self-selection issues as the military, although from the opposite ends of the spectrum, both professions have much to lose from their close affiliations with political parties and policies.

Recruiting a more ideologically and geographically diverse military would be useful as well. New ROTC detachments in the Northeast would potentially draw in more liberal officers to help balance the officer corps. One of the best ways to bring in a new crop of personnel shaped in a more liberal environment is through opening new ROTC detachments at Ivy League and elite universities in the Northeast. Even if more conservative individuals are drawn to the programs, they will still be immersed in a more liberal environment and form relationships with a very different group of people than at the service academies or other ROTC detachments.

The biggest impediment to the approach is that these universities may not want to open up ROTC programs for many reasons, not the least being concerns about the

military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy on homosexuals. When President Obama spoke at his alma mater, Columbia University, he chided it not having an ROTC program.⁴⁰ If the President makes some change to the current policy on homosexuals and/or personally was willing to pressure universities to make this a priority, reopening ROTC programs at Harvard and Yale would be a possibility. Although the numbers might be small, this would be a significant psychological boost to the influx of people into the military. In the meantime, pushing for more ROTC scholarships through state schools located in the Northeast would start the process and act as a backup in case these schools do not reopen programs.

Additionally, I believe the military should adopt political neutrality as a professional norm. As Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated, "The U.S. military must remain apolitical at all times. It is and must always be a neutral instrument of the state, no matter which party holds sway".⁴¹ He has delivered a similar message to retirees as well. Although the Chairman does not suggest that military members should not be allowed to vote, he does encourage them to vote their conscience but be ready to serve whomever the American people elect without hesitation.

Currently, military members are allowed to belong to political parties and contribute to campaigns. There are restrictions published each election cycle that do limit participation in campaigns. However, there has been no attempt by the military to try to encourage, as a profession, the value of neutrality in the political process. Registering as an independent would start the process of the appearance of non-partisanship. For instance, newly accessed military members could be indoctrinated on

not only how to wear the uniform and saluting superior officers but also on the benefits to the military of being politically neutral and the concept of registering as an independent. As a profession, the military is free to set standards and to encourage its own force to maintain them. By registering as an independent it would reinforce the military's role in the political process as an institution that takes orders from representatives elected by the people.

Regardless of the path chosen, the military should consider deemphasizing its quadrennial voting drives for the presidential elections. The original reason behind this drive, to ensure citizen soldiers who were drafted against their will and sent overseas to fight were able to exercise their right to vote, is no longer valid. The military is now made up of professional soldiers rather than citizen soldiers. The individual benefit derived from voting may come at the overall detriment of the military as a profession. Before the last election one of the most visible senior military members came to a similar conclusion. Gen David Petraeus confirmed that he would not be voting in the 2008 Presidential election.⁴² He explained his motivations as wanting to remain apolitical and that he did not want it to appear that he would have any problem working with either party in Congress and the elected President regardless of the outcome.

Another reason to take the military out of pushing absentee voting is that there is not the same need with today's technology as there was back in the 1940s. Technology has made absentee voting so much more accessible that any motivated voter has a reasonable chance of obtaining a ballot and successfully voting on their own. Additionally, the military push for voting, when a large percentage of the military will be voting for one party, could actually be construed as a partisan activity. This is not to say

that voting shouldn't be allowed. In 2008, 519,032 ballots were handled by the Military Postal Service from overseas locations.⁴³ However, the military spent \$25 million trying to develop an online voting system⁴⁴ to facilitate military members voting. This strong emphasis on voting is not necessarily in the military's professional best interest.

However, deemphasizing voting may be difficult since inevitably one party will believe they will lose votes. In the 2000 presidential election, it is distinctly possible that the military vote in Florida provided the winning margin to President George W. Bush. Encouraging fewer military members to vote might not be supported by the party that counts on that vote, but this also highlights the dilemma that the military profession has created for itself. Slowly removing itself from being actively involved in pushing voting would be a value added step for the profession.

Options for the Military Profession

With these ideas as a starting place, what combination of these steps, if any, make sense for the military to pursue? I would suggest there are at least three potential options that the military as a profession could choose.

First, make no changes. It can be argued that the military has been moving conservative and Republican for the last three decades and there is no direct evidence that it has negatively affected the profession. The military remains popular and trusted with the public and has received strong support from both parties. In his first speech to the Congress on February 24, 2009, President Obama pressed Congress to maintain the current plan to grow the military and raise military pay. Although there are cautious lessons from other professions suffering from partisan affiliations, the military has so far maintained a positive image.

This option does carry risks considering the current financial storm caused by the banking meltdown and the future challenges to pay for Social Security and Medicare for retirees. There may be a time in the near future when the current funding for the military of around four percent Gross Domestic Product will not be guaranteed and partisan leanings may be used against the military. Additionally, this seems like the easy road that ignores the calling of the military profession. It does not address the problems that can arise by growing the gap between the military's politics and the people they serve and the desirability of the military being courted by various political parties.

Another option would be to acknowledge the current conservative nature of the military but work to reinforce the focus that Admiral Mullen places on being ready to serve a government led by either party and remaining apolitical. This may be facilitated by some officers, particularly Generals and Admirals, abstaining from politics and not voting. Complementing this step would be the end of voting drives and leaving it up to military members to vote on their own initiative. Additionally, a drive to diversify the military by pursuing new ROTC and recruiting venues could bring a long term tempering of the current conservative view of the profession. The key focus of this option would be to ensure the military is viewed as an independent organization that has a role to play in the process and when they offer recommendations they are viewed as being professional and not tainted with a partisan or political viewpoint.

Finally, the military profession could adopt a new view on politics that is more restrictive than current law. As a profession, we could decide not to register to vote or at least register as independents and leave the decision to vote up to each member. Military education at all levels could emphasize the historical examples of military

leaders not voting and explain why they chose not to vote. With a military profession that has deemphasized voting, partisan wrangling and concern over the military would evaporate and the likelihood of being pawns in Washington power games would be reduced.

These three broad options or a combination of the three are all approaches that the military needs to consider. No congressional legislation or executive orders are needed. This issue is about the long term strength of the military; and, as with any profession, this is about self policing and setting its own standards of conduct.

The Benefits of Change

By addressing this problem head on, the military will be able to address multiple issues at once. The public doubts regarding a military that does not represent the society would be resolved by a less political and diverse military. Also, an independent military not focused on politics would keep it from being viewed as an interest group that can be courted. Political parties would have to defend their military positions to the American people as they stand for reelection without the worry that the military might not support a particular party that wins election. The military should be ready to accept the leadership of the elected officials without any reservations. Although the military member certainly has the right to register with any party and to vote, it would behoove the military to deemphasize political affiliation in order to allow it to perform its responsibilities to protect the nation from all enemies foreign and domestic.

Endnotes

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