

Dr Katharine M Millar

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Q and A with Dr Katharine M Millar on Support the Troops: Military Obligation, Gender and the Making of Political Community

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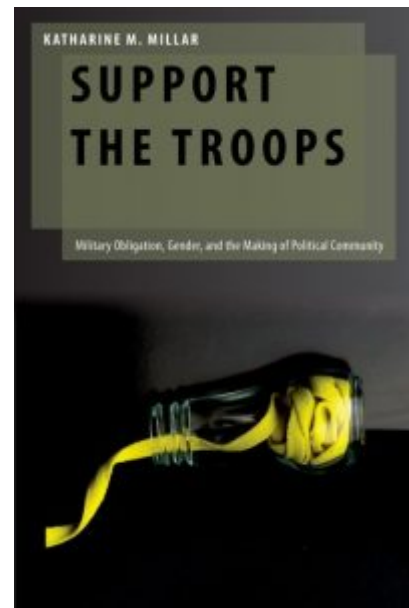
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*We speak to Dr Katharine M Millar about her new book, **Support the Troops: Military Obligation, Gender and the Making of Political Community**, which examines the gendered politics of ‘support the troops’ discourse in the US and the UK, focusing particularly on the early years of the so-termed ‘war on terror’.*

*Dr Katharine M. Millar will be **launching Support the Troops at LSE** on Thursday 23 March 2023. Find out more about how to attend on **the event’s webpage**.*

Q: What inspired you to examine ‘support the troops’ discourse in the US and the UK during the early years of the ‘war on terror’?

I was in secondary school at that time and was really interested in the way people in my community – I’m from a small town in rural Canada – navigated those early years of the so-called ‘war on terror’. The imagery associated with supporting the troops in North America, particularly the yellow ribbon, appeared everywhere, somewhat suddenly. I was taken with how people attempted to be in community, support the families of deployed military personnel and also hold some complicated perspectives on Canada’s involvement in the invasion of Afghanistan.



That experience of the quotidian politics of lived civil-military relations stuck with me, and eventually made its way into my academic work, which had been broadly concerned with the politics of war and militarism in liberal democracies. Since the US and UK were so central to the politics of the ‘war on terror’ – and the decision to invade Iraq – I focused my attention on those states.

Q: How has ‘supporting the troops’ become positioned as a seemingly ‘common-sense’ and universal obligation?

In the book, I argue that the expectation to ‘support the troops’ is best understood in the context of changes in the way many liberal democracies do war and relate to the armed forces. In the past, it was assumed that all good citizens, as good men, would serve in the armed forces in wartime. In the present, liberal democratic states increasingly rely on small, volunteer militaries deployed in distant wars of choice. Lots of cultural myths of ‘good wars’ – think of World War Two – teach

us that everyone ought to serve. But today, the vast majority of people don't.

And so, we're seeing seemingly stable understandings of the relationship between military service, citizenship and gender norms – particularly idealised notions of masculinity – being unsettled by changes in the nature of warfare. This trend is producing uncertainty about what it means to be a 'good' citizen, 'good' person and, crucially, 'good' man in a context where neither war nor military service easily align with existing cultural myths about wartime obligations and collective sacrifice.

I argue that 'supporting the troops' is an attempt to grapple with what 'good' citizenship and 'good' masculinity mean in an era characterised by professional armed forces and (for people in the US and UK) distant wars. I show that 'supporting the troops' is starting to supplant military service as the key marker of 'good citizenship' and 'good masculinity' (noting that gender norms of masculinity pertain to everyone, regardless of their embodied gender identity). Support, in other words, is the new service.



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Q: How did the idea of 'the troops' as an entity needing support emerge in the US and the UK?

The idea of 'the troops' as a collective noun for a group of soldiers has existed for a long time. But the idea of 'the troops' as a distinct group, not quite the same as the military, not quite the same as citizens, not quite the same as veterans, requiring support, emerges across the 20th century.

In the US, 'supporting the troops' is primarily associated with the war in Vietnam. Though today we tend to see it as a spontaneous, grassroots and often personal practice, the phrase was initially used by successive US administrations attempting to counter the Vietnam anti-war movement. It framed peace protestors as opposed, or even dangerous, to 'the troops', a particularly powerful charge during a war involving conscription. Later, the call to 'support the troops' was understood as an attempt to make up for the (fairly contested) idea that the US public had betrayed soldiers, and later veterans, serving in Vietnam. After Vietnam, and particularly through the First Gulf War in 1990, 'supporting the troops' comes to be seen as a normal obligation of being a US citizen – and an attempt to ensure this purported experience of betrayal never happened again.

In the UK, the discourse and practice of supporting the troops articulated a bit differently. In the mid-20th century, the UK military didn't have a high public profile and wasn't necessarily broadly popular, as it was engaged in the small wars winding down the British empire and the violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This began to change with the Malvinas/Falklands conflict, when the rhetoric of supporting 'our boys' – a common UK twist on 'supporting the troops' – once again became popular. The UK tabloids really dialled up their use of pro-military language and imagery. Interestingly, during the First Gulf War, the language of 'supporting the troops' started to become more

common in the UK, but primarily used by anti-war groups. They used the phrase in the sense of 'support the troops by bringing them home'. This framing of the troops as also potential victims of war has become common now.

In the early 21st century, the UK starts to see the more overt romanticisation of the relationship between the armed forces and society associated with the US. We witness this, for instance, in the inception of the Armed Forces Covenant in 2000, the *Sun's* longstanding partnership with Help for Heroes and the rapid growth of the military charity sector and the shift from marking Veterans' Day to a broader Armed Forces Day in 2009.

'Supporting the troops' is primarily associated with the US – and it doesn't work in quite the same way or with the same pervasiveness in the UK – but there is more similarity between the two states than might initially be expected, more than I expected when I began the project, certainly. In both places, 'support for the troops' is naturalised as an expectation of wartime citizenship.

Q: How does 'support the troops' discourse obscure the violence and harms involved in military conflict, especially when such wars are waged by liberal democracies?

I argue that 'supporting the troops' has a really depoliticising effect on war. During the 'war on terror', a lot of the public discussion of the war hinged on the issue of support for the troops – either people proclaiming their own support, or critiquing the seeming failures of others to support (or to support in the 'correct' way).

At the same time, the violence and harms associated with the wars, primarily suffered by civilians far away in the theatres of conflict, faded from view. Instead of discussing the legitimacy of the war, its aims and its consequences for people living in Afghanistan and Iraq, the central

ethical question came to revolve around the troops and domestic civil-military relations. Put bluntly, the discourse of 'supporting the troops' tends to vanish violence and suffering – particularly of the people most directly affected – from discussions of war.

Q: How has the expectation to 'support the troops' affected anti-war dissent?

In addition to vanishing the violence of war, 'supporting the troops' also tends to vanish the politics of war. 'Support the troops' discourse tends to elide the fact that the 'war on terror' – and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – was a political decision made by elected politicians. Instead, the wars were constructed as agentless, almost like the weather, as something that just befell 'the troops', and with them, the US and UK, rather than an active decision embedded in a political process.

The pervasive – and powerfully gendered – nature of the obligation to 'support the troops' facilitated an odd flip in how we typically understand the duties of democratic citizens. Instead of participating in public debates, 'good' citizenship and 'good' masculinity came to be primarily associated with troop support – and thus an *abstention* from participating in democratic debate about the wars. 'Supporting the troops' is seen as entirely apolitical, but debating or even discussing the war comes to be seen as 'political' and thus inappropriate.

This puts anti-war dissent in a real bind, as critiquing the war comes to be seen as implicitly critiquing the troops – and thus a betrayal in wartime. This is partially where the popularity of the phrases 'support the troops, oppose the war' and 'support the troops, bring them home' come from. They're an attempt (a heartfelt and genuine one) to get across an anti-war message without being cast as inappropriately 'political' or discredited as 'bad' people. While this can be effective in getting a fair hearing for anti-war dissent – no small thing – it's not able to tackle the underlying association between the military, masculinity

and citizenship that underlies the obligation to 'support the troops'. Working within the 'common-sense' discourse only takes you so far.

Q: Have you encountered challenges in researching the workings of 'support the troops' discourse?

I'm really tempted to give you a procedural answer about sporadic government internet archiving practices and the way NGOs rarely archive their materials. Trying to get the data together in a workable way for this project was a challenge, which I talk about in the methodology appendix of the book.

The central challenge of the project, though, came right at the beginning, when I struggled to convince anyone that 'supporting the troops' was interesting or surprising. Lots of practitioners and academics responded to the project with a version of 'so what?' 'Supporting the troops' isn't interesting, it's an obvious result of unpopular wars. What else do you expect people to do?

I found that really frustrating – until I realised it was actually the key to the entire project. And my question shifted from 'why do people support the troops fighting wars they oppose?' – though I still care about that – to 'how did it become so normal to support the troops regardless of the context and what does that do to war and to politics?' Sometimes the problem with a research project is actually the answer.

Support the Troops: Military Obligation, Gender and the Making of Political Community is out now from Oxford University Press.

Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The interview was conducted by Dr Rosemary Deller, Managing Editor of the LSE Review of Books blog.

About the author



Dr Katharine M Millar

Katharine M Millar is an Assistant Professor in International Relations at the London School of Economics. Her research examines the relationship(s) between politics, violence, gender, sexuality, and the making of political community. Katharine also frequently works with governments, international and regional organisations and civil society groups on policy relating to gender, equality, cybersecurity and/or the armed forces. Support the Troops is her first book.

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