

US Army War College

USAWC Press

Parameters Bookshelf – Online Book Reviews

Parameters and Associated Collections

5-20-2024

Book Review: Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the US Military

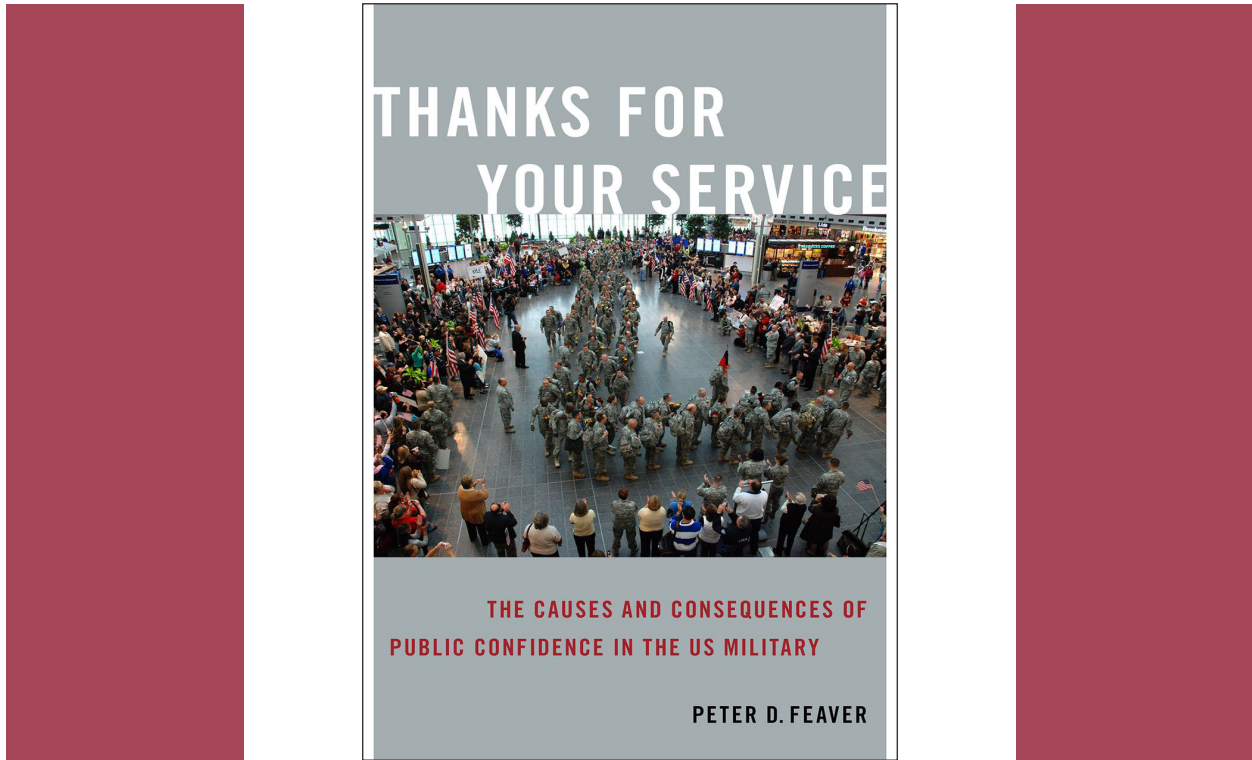
James "Andy" Nichols

Follow this and additional works at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters_bookshelf



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#)

— PARAMETERS BOOKSHELF —



Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel James “Andy” Nichols, US Army War College class of 2023

©2024 James Andrew Nichols

Peter D. Feaver’s *Thanks for Your Service* explores the drivers of high public confidence in the US military and how these factors could lead to a loss in public confidence if future ethical, moral, or battlefield failures occur. Feaver explores Gallup, National Opinion Research Center, and General Social Survey public polling data through six lenses—patriotism, performance, professional ethics, party, personal contact, and public pressure—to determine why Americans have high confidence in the US military despite its uneven performance since 2001. He uses 53 data tables to show the tensions inherent in respondent subcategories and demonstrates throughout the book how public perceptions are nuanced—however, the detailed statistical data and ensuing technical discussions can be overwhelming. Furthermore, Feaver’s proposed policy remedies—a public servant “thank you for your service” program, increased public civic education, and increased military professionalism—seem like afterthoughts, given the lack of supporting details. Ultimately, the author uses polling data sets to demonstrate the complexity of public opinion, offers decisionmakers three actionable takeaways, and identifies future research areas to focus on.

In 2019, Gallup polling revealed that 75 percent of Americans expressed high confidence in the US military despite a 20-year war in Afghanistan, a tenuous win in the Iraq War, and high-profile scandals involving Department of Defense strategic leaders. In the same poll, the next closest government institution, the Supreme Court, received a 38 percent confidence rating. The paradox between high confidence and, at best, uneven performance by the US military is at the heart of Feaver’s research. He identifies six critical factors for exploring polling data, and his discussions surrounding politicization (party) and public pressure are the most interesting drivers within the data discussion. Additionally, Feaver delves into public pressure (social desirability bias) and shows how public displays of support at sporting events and national celebrations have made it “popular to say good things

about [those] serving in uniform” (161). He identifies, however, that “Americans in the aggregate inflate their support for the military . . . [especially] among the highly educated, minorities, women, younger people, and those with no family in the military” (171). This juxtaposition highlights an unsettling subcurrent that could affect future recruitment and retention goals and support for high-level defense funding.

At times, the reams of statistics seem designed to showcase the author’s exhaustive fieldwork rather than present a substantial public policy discussion about the challenges and opportunities the statistics represent. Shifting the data into appendices would have provided more space for Feaver to make his argument without disrupting the narrative with data saturation.

Within this technical discussion, Feaver warns that high esteem and support for the military is fragile, and he recommends several steps to ensure continued high confidence, including thanking nonmilitary public servants, increasing public civic education, and focusing on military professionalism. His first recommendation, designed to thank public servants, seeks “to redress the fundamental imbalance in public confidence” in other government institutions (275). He provides a cursory description of the public servant “thank you” program and suggests military leaders could play a prominent reinforcing role in building support through public demonstrations of thanks. Feaver also recommends a “renewed push for civics education advanced by civilian leaders” and suggests “military leaders should launch a renewed push for professionalism among the uniformed ranks” (276). Finally, he writes, “the military must be responsible and resist . . . temptations to exploit their status to avoid accountability” (276). This last recommendation, a tantalizing suggestion offered without further explanation, reveals the book’s critical flaw—its underdeveloped recommendations for policymakers. Instead, Feaver pivots to areas for further research without providing evidence for why civic education or additional military professionalism are necessary.

Using the six drivers of public confidence to explore recent polling, *Thanks for Your Service* does an excellent job of empirically explaining why the public has high confidence in the US Armed Forces. This confidence is artificially high and susceptible to future degradation, however, if the military experiences systemic operational, moral, or ethical issues. The text advances policy discussions on public confidence in US government institutions, includes valuable quantitative analysis, and points to future research opportunities. Unfortunately, Feaver fails to provide policymakers with concrete, well-developed policy recommendations. Instead, his overwhelming focus on data obscures the key takeaways related to declining public confidence in American government institutions and the fragility of support for the US military.

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023 • 328 pages • \$27.95

Keywords: public confidence, civilian-military relations, patriotism, civics, professionalism

Disclaimer: Book reviews published in *Parameters* are unofficial expressions of opinion. The views and opinions expressed in *Parameters* book reviews are those of the reviewers and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.