

ASHLEY: What is the military's role in protecting democracy? The question took on a new sense of urgency in the months after the riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th of last year. A deep partisan divide opened up over what happened that day, how to describe the chaotic events, and who should be held responsible. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. After decades of service in the U.S. military, retired Brigadier General Steven Anderson decided to speak out about the threat of future insurrections and the possibility of an attempted coup. General Anderson did TV interviews and commentaries and co-authored a widely read opinion piece in The Washington Post.

ASHLEY: In this episode, he tells us that America's armed forces can play a constructive role in strengthening our public institutions and finding common ground. Richard, you get the first question.

RICHARD: When most of us consider the role of the U.S. military, we think about foreign threats to our national security. What does the U.S. Constitution say about the military's function during a domestic crisis? Does the military have a role?

STEVEN ANDERSON: I swore an oath 43 years ago to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic. Forty-three years ago when I took that oath, we were concerned, of course, about the foreign threats, particularly the Soviet threat that was posed at that time. Never in my wildest imagination did I think that I'd be talking at any time about a significant domestic threat, but I believe that that's what is being posed against our nation right now, a domestic cancer that is growing within and to the extent that the military can maintain order and peace internally and do the right things to ensure that we protect our nation and our democracy from internal threats, that's what we need to do and what we need to be focused on.

ASHLEY: What about your personal political views?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Army officers are not supposed to get involved in politics so they can control the military as an absolute foundational aspect of our democracy. I can tell you that my 31 years in the military, I never knew the political persuasion of my bosses or my subordinates or anybody. I mean, you might occasionally hear something, but it's just not the kind of thing that was talked about. We were very apolitical. In fact, there were those who thought that it wasn't even appropriate for military members to vote back in those days. But I was Conservative/Republican, and I didn't share that with anyone, but that's how I voted. I voted for Reagan and both Bushes and Mitt Romney and everyone up until 2016, and then I realized that the Republican Party was taking a decided turn to the Right, and I did not support President Donald Trump. But I remained apolitical until the events of the 6th of

January of last year, and then I realized that people like me needed to speak up. So I did that. It's because of my perception that there is a significant domestic threat being posed to our nation and our democracy at this time.

ASHLEY: Well, you just alluded to this, but in our democracy, it's really critical to keep the military out of partisan politics, isn't it? What can the military do to keep it apolitical?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Well, we need to get extremists out of our ranks. We need to maintain that apolitical element of military. We need to maintain our neutrality, and there is no room in the military for people that have extremist views or, in particular, are members of extremist organizations. Now, the FBI maintains a list of gangs and extremist organizations. Military members should not be a member in any way, shape, or form of such organizations.

RICHARD: So, if the FBI found that a certain active member of the military was involved in an extremist organization or an organization that they thought was in some way a threat to the security and democracy of the United States, you think that person should be kicked out?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Yes, I do. I do. There is no room for having people with those kind of organizations, even memberships. Now, the Department of Defense recently published some guidance saying that they could be members of groups, such extremist groups, but they could not be active members. In other words, they couldn't attend meetings, they couldn't advocate on social media, etc., etc. I submit to you that that is not far enough. They shouldn't be members at all. Imagine the potential impact on unit cohesion morale if you had a company commander, a platoon sergeant that was an avowed member of the KKK. That would just simply be antithetical to everything that our democracy is all about and what our military tries to achieve. Serving in the military for 31 years was the most profound privilege of my life. Serving in the military is a privilege, and we can never forget that. It is not an inalienable right, and that is at odds with being a member of an extremist group.

RICHARD: There is one problem with that approach, and that is: how do you define an extremist group?

STEVEN ANDERSON: I would say the standard is the FBI's list of gangs and extremist groups, if you're a member of a group that's on that listing. There are hundreds of them. I truly realize of trying to determine what's extremist, what's not. Let's not get involved in that. Let's let the FBI do that. That's their job.

ASHLEY: If a U.S. president is fomenting or encouraging some kind of riot or revolt, at what point would you say it's the military's job to step in, and what should they actually do? What's the appropriate action for them to take?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Well, the appropriate action is probably inaction in that we're not a police force. We're a military force. So, if you have a president like Trump trying to use, for instance, the military to seize voting machines, that's not a legal order. Our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines should know that that would not be a legal order for us to get involved, for us to be seizing voting machines and somehow get involved in domestic elections. So the answer to your question is probably action through inaction. Don't take any directive that's deemed to be illegal, immoral, unethical, or antithetical to our Constitution.

RICHARD: You've spoken out publicly on the need for accountability for what happened last year on January 6th. What should that involve?

STEVEN ANDERSON: In order to find a common ground, I think one thing hopefully everybody can agree to is that we need to take appropriate action and hold those accountable who did the wrong thing on the 6th of January. There's 700 folks or so that have been charged with various and sundry crimes associated with that, and that's good. They need to be held accountable. I would submit to you, though, that we have not held accountable the leaders that fan the flames of insurrection. Unfortunately, that's the difficult place to find common ground because there is essentially one party, my former party, that has essentially done nothing but try to downplay what happened on the 6th of January. In fact, in some cases, they've even celebrated the people that have been charged with crimes. So it's a very difficult place to find common ground, I totally agree. I would hope that people would agree that holding those accountable that committed crimes against the United States is a good thing.

ASHLEY: In the case of something like January 6th, what is the appropriate role for the military?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Well, like I said, the appropriate role is no role. We're supposed to stand back and provide support as required. For instance, it would've been an appropriate role in the 6th January for the National Guard to deploy to the Capitol to help defend the Capitol. If there was another kind of a threat, a cybersecurity threat or some kind of a march or an attempt to take over an installation, obviously we would take appropriate defensive actions to ensure that didn't happen. But an appropriate role is that we're not involved.

RICHARD: To prevent to problem that extremists could be in the military, even in fairly senior jobs in the military, what should the U.S. Armed Forces be doing to prevent that not only now but for the future?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Education. We need to make sure that our soldiers understand Civics 101. We have a beautiful democracy. It's been working for hundreds of years. It will

continue to do so. But the knowledge of Civics 101, I believe there's a lot of soldiers, sailors, and marines who are confused and specifically on the point of allegiance to a person or a party versus allegiance to the Constitution in our country. They think that because a person like Donald Trump is the Commander in Chief, "Oh, well, if he's giving the orders, then I've got to obey them because I swore an oath." That's not right. You didn't swear an oath to a person. We do not have kings in this country. We have a constitution. We have a country. I'm a West Point graduate, and our motto is, "Duty, honor, country." It's not, "Duty, honor, party." Soldiers need to understand that distinction, and I think that when they do, they will get it. But education is the primary way to teach people and remind people how beautiful our democracy is, how the innate integrity that is built into our election system, the checks and balances of our government, and the processes in which we administer our elections.

ASHLEY: And do you think that education needs to begin in high school? Because there are plenty of members of the military who do not go to college.

STEVEN ANDERSON: Absolutely. I took civics when I was in 7th grade, but education needs to start at the beginning. It should be a part of it. Throughout my time in the military, I don't recall any specific training on Civics 101. There are probably a lot of people in the military that haven't gotten that kind of exposure through high school, and we need to fix that. I think that a lot of the things that happen in our society today are based on ignorance.

RICHARD: Our podcast is Let's Find Common Ground. Our guest is retired Brigadier General Steven Anderson. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. We've published more than 50 episodes of our podcast with a range of terrific guests all discussing different aspects of finding common ground.

RICHARD: If you like what you hear and want to support our work, consider making a donation to Common Ground Committee. We're a nonprofit organization. Go to our website at commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: Now back to our interview with retired Brigadier General Steven Anderson.

RICHARD: Our podcast is Let's Find Common Ground, and Common Ground Committee was started because of this crisis of bitter divides in the United States. One of those divisions is where people live and who people mix with. During World War II and right up until the 1970s, there was a military draft in this country. Now we have a all-volunteer military. Has that in itself created divisions at times between the military and the rest of American society?

STEVEN ANDERSON: I think that that probably is a valid point, a valid question. We have changed the demographic of the military because we don't have a draft anymore. We tend to get more folks from particular areas. We find a lot of people that come into the military have family members that were in the military that inspired them to do so. My family, my dad, my grandparent, my father, my wife's family, we've got dozens of members of the military, and there are a lot of people that don't. Donald Trump, there's not a member of his family that I'm aware of that's ever served in the military, that's ever served a day of public service anywhere in any form of government. So I do think a draft might help that, but I'm not saying we need to go back to that. I believe that through education we can address the issues that we need to.

ASHLEY: When you were in the military, especially when you were younger and first joined, were you finding common ground with others you might not have met otherwise?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Oh, absolutely. The military is a profound example of bringing people from disparate backgrounds, races, colors, and creeds together to achieve a common ground. There's so much that society can learn from the military. Look at how we integrated Black soldiers into the military. We've empowered women. Now we're empowering gay and lesbian members of the military. We've done a lot of things to help our society to grow, and we've been essentially a great testing ground, if you will, for how you can bring people together from diverse backgrounds and have them focus on a common mission or objective, work together, and say, "Hey, these guys are pretty good. I've got nothing in common with this guy that grew up in the inner streets of New York City, but doggonit, he's a hell of a good soldier," or, "she's a hell of a good soldier," or, "We can work together." I think that's one of the issues with common ground, is that we tend to gravitate to those that look like us and talk like us and think like us. So, when you bring people together in the military, you help break down a lot of those barriers.

RICHARD: You've mentioned that you had family members in the military. What prompted you to join the Armed Forces?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Free education. My dad was a Korean War veteran, and he was very proud of the fact that he worked his way through college. He went to Northwestern University, did it on a GI Bill, and, "My parents never had to pay a dime!" I was enamored with it. So I was looking for ROTC scholarships, and then I got a West Point appointment. That was really kind of what motivated me to tell you the truth. And I didn't realize that I would enjoy it as much as I ended up doing.

RICHARD: And you stayed in the military for a long time. Why?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Because I loved it. Some of the reasons I've touched on here is you're working with people from all kinds of different backgrounds, all kinds of experiences, and it's a great melting pot for your country, and diversity is a strength of our country, not a weakness. There's some people who would argue that. Not at all. Diversity is what makes the military great. It makes us the best military in the world. I always enjoyed the kind of people that you could work with in the military, the kind of things that we were doing, the educational opportunities that were just incredible and just all kinds of opportunities that might not have been afforded to me otherwise. So I found it was wonderful, a wonderful 31 years, and I'm very, very proud of my service.

ASHLEY: Am I right in thinking that you joined after the draft ended, right?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Yeah. I joined in 1974. Well, I went to West Point in 1974. The draft, I think, ended just shortly thereafter. But, yeah, it was all volunteer Army by the time I graduated from West Point in 1978.

ASHLEY: I bet when your dad joined... for so long, the military was almost universally regarded as a force for good, right? Most everyone had someone in their family who had served, knew someone who had served. In the '70s, that thinking was a little bit different. I just wonder what it was like joining at that time.

STEVEN ANDERSON: It was difficult because the post-Vietnam era was tough. I was spit on in Times Square, wearing a uniform, walking around down there back in the mid-1970s and called a baby killer and things like that. But that all changed, I think, with Ronald Reagan and the resurrection of the military and the way that we rebuilt our military, our Army and Air Force, Navy, Marines after Vietnam and some truly brilliant Americans that were architects of rebuilding our military and making it what it is.

RICHARD: Moving to overseas, the crisis right now over Ukraine has prompted a vigorous debate in this country about: what is the proper U.S. response? When there's a crisis overseas, is that an opportunity to find common ground?

STEVEN ANDERSON: Absolutely, absolutely. One of the things that our nation has done very well is we've responded to external threats in a unified manner. The 7th of December, 1941, on 9/11, every time that something like this happens in our nation, we come together, and we work together to achieve the common ground. I certainly hope that it's not going to be that kind of a moment for us here with Ukraine, but I definitely would like to think that we can find common ground in how we respond to this Russian aggression.

ASHLEY: You've said, and I quote, "Ultimately, our military is merely a reflection of us, you and me and America, and that the misinformation and hateful rhetoric that infects our

country and our political discourse weakens our national defense and vitalizes our adversaries." Talk about that for a moment.

STEVEN ANDERSON: Well, I think we're seeing a manifestation of that right now with what Putin's doing in Ukraine. I believe that he sees us as weak, that we can't find common ground, and that we won't be unified in a response to his aggression. He realizes that we have been weakened by this hateful rhetoric and political discourse that so discolors what's going on in our society right now, and I think he's taking advantage of that. To me, it's a profound threat to our national defense. We're empowering our adversaries by our inability to find common ground and work together.

RICHARD: You mentioned that you joined the military in 1974. That was a very dark time for the United States. A president had been forced from office. The U.S. was in the final throes of many years of involvement in Vietnam, and you said that you were spat upon. Do you think that, going forward, there could be hope that the military will be part of the solution and part of what brings us back together.

STEVEN ANDERSON: Absolutely. I spoke of my terrible experiences in the '70s, but I didn't speak about my incredible experiences since then. I can remember walking through the Atlanta airport with a standing ovation for about 10 minutes, walking in my uniform coming back from Iraq, where the entire plane erupted in cheers when the captain mentioned that we had members of the military that were coming back from Iraq that were headed home, things like that. So we really turned it around, and the support from most people now is just superb. I think that that is a reflection that there is really hope that we can achieve common ground and that we can unify around our military if we're called upon to do something in a place like Ukraine, that the American people will rally around us in an unified manner and achieve common ground that we all want to achieve.

ASHLEY: Do you have kids or younger relatives who have joined the military?

STEVEN ANDERSON: I have two children, both of whom are schoolteachers. I'm proud that they are both committed to public service, but I would try to get them interested. For instance, I'd say, "Are you interested in West Point?" Before I could say "Point," they'd say, "No." My daughter moved eight times in eight years. I remember one time I said, "Are you interested in the military?" She said, "What, and ruin my kids' lives like you ruined mine?"

RICHARD: You describe the journey of many parents being humbled by their children.

STEVEN ANDERSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah, but she's wonderful. She's wonderful, and she lives 10 houses away from me in Arlington with my grandson and her husband.

RICHARD: Retired Brigadier General Steven Anderson, thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

STEVEN ANDERSON: Thank you so much, Richard and Ashley. I enjoyed it very much.

ASHLEY: Thank you. Retired Brigadier General Steven Anderson. Thanks for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Before we go, a quick word about another member of The Democracy Group podcast network, the Village SquareCast.

SPEAKER 1: What I learned through my journey was that I was not as good as I thought I was, and they were not as evil as I thought they were.

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