

# UNDERSTANDING THE US MILITARY CODE OF ETHICS

The men and women of the United States Armed Forces do not serve any political party, individual leader, or ideology. They serve the **Constitution of the United States** and the American people.

To protect democracy and prevent abuse of military power, service members are bound by a strict system of ethics, laws, and professional standards. These rules exist to ensure the military remains disciplined, neutral, and loyal to civilian democratic control. Understanding these principles helps citizens recognize both the strength of America's military — and the dangers when these standards are ignored or misused.

## **The Foundation: An Oath to the Constitution (Not a person)**

Every service member swears an oath to:

“Support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

This matters because:

- They do not swear loyalty to a (the) president, (a) general, or political movement
- The Constitution — civilian government and rule of law — is the highest authority
- Orders must align with U.S. law and constitutional principles

The military exists to protect democracy, not to influence elections, intimidate citizens, or serve political goals.

## **The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ): The Military's Legal System**

The UCMJ is the body of law that governs all service members worldwide. It covers:

- Obedience to lawful orders
- Respect for civilian authority
- Prohibition of abuse, misconduct, or political activity while in uniform
- Protection of human rights and laws of war

Violations can lead to:

- Court-martial
- Prison sentences
- Dishonorable discharge

The military is held to legal standards even stricter than civilian life — because armed power demands accountability.

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## **Lawful vs. Illegal Orders — And the Duty to Refuse**

One of the most important ethical principles: Service members must follow lawful orders — and must refuse illegal ones.

Examples of illegal orders include:

- Harming civilians
- Using troops for political intimidation
- Violating constitutional rights
- Engaging in unlawful detention or punishment

“I was just following orders” is not a legal defense.

Military members are trained to question and refuse unlawful commands — even from high-ranking officials. This protects civilians, democracy, and the integrity of the armed forces.

## **Political Neutrality: The Military Must Stay Out of Politics**

U.S. military ethics strictly limit political behavior. Service members in uniform may not:

- Campaign for candidates
- Use military resources for political purposes
- Attend partisan events as representatives of the armed forces
- Express political positions in ways that imply military endorsement

Why?

- Because a politicized military threatens democracy.
- Armed forces must serve all Americans equally — regardless of political beliefs.
- Civilian leaders make policy. The military carries it out lawfully and professionally.

## **Uniform Regulations & Conduct Standards**

The uniform is more than clothing — it represents the authority of the United States.

Service members must:

- Wear it properly and respectfully
- Avoid using it to promote personal, political, or commercial causes
- Uphold dignity and discipline in public

Misusing the uniform — especially for political theater — undermines trust in the military and blurs the line between civilian life and armed authority.

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## Laws of War & Protection of Human Rights

U.S. forces are trained under international law, including: protection of civilians, the humane treatment of prisoners, proportional use of force, and respect for medical personnel and journalists

These rules exist to:

- Limit suffering
- Maintain moral authority
- Prevent war crimes
- Protect American service members from unlawful actions

Ethical conduct is not weakness — it is professional strength.

## Civilian Control of the Military

A cornerstone of American democracy is that the military is always subordinate to elected civilian leadership. This prevents military coups, armed political pressure, and rule by force

However, civilian control does not mean unlimited power. Civilian leaders must issue lawful orders within the Constitution. The military's loyalty is to democracy — not personal authority.

## Why These Ethics Matter for Every Citizen

When military ethics are respected democracy stays strong, power remains accountable, citizens remain free from intimidation, and the armed forces retain public trust. However, when these lines are blurred, troops can be used as political tools, civil liberties can be threatened, trust in institutions erodes, and democracy weakens. History around the world shows that once a military becomes politicized, freedom is often the first casualty.

## The Big Picture: A Professional, Apolitical Force Protects Freedom

America's military code of ethics exists to ensure:

- The armed forces defend the nation — not control it
- Laws govern power — not individuals
- Rights are protected even in crisis

These principles have kept the United States stable for over two centuries. They are not abstract rules — they are safeguards of liberty.

References:

- [The Uniform Code of Military Justice \(UCMJ\) Article 92](#)
- [The Posse Comitatus Act](#)

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