The DoD Times (Redacted)
WALK THE TALK FOUNDATION · INDEPENDENT. UNCLASSIFIED. UNFILTERED.
SATURDAY · JULY 4, 2026
ISSUE 129
WEEKLY INFORMATION FOR SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS & FEDERAL CIVILIANS
walkthetalkfoundation.org

THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

When The Cause Becomes Your Cause: Mission Creep in the Military Advocacy Community

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I met Officer X around 2021. At the time, they were in the midst of a campaign to eradicate bullying and racism within a uniformed service branch. Well, I thought that was the mission.

Coming off the heels of my own very public whistleblowing in early 2022, I was looking to team up with allies active in the arena of whistleblowing in the uniformed services. Officer X had the bona fides: they had blown the whistle, and when the branch and its parent department didn't investigate with due diligence, they took it to Congress and illuminated the systemic issues. I was quick to join their campaign to raise awareness because the themes were almost identical to what I had experienced in the military. The cause felt shared. The partnership felt natural.

Then I began advocacy work in earnest.

Over the course of the next three years, multiple people from the same branch and department came to us seeking assistance. I reached out to Officer X. Both times, they were unable or unwilling to engage. No consultation, no email with guidance, no word of encouragement. I don't know what was happening on their end — burnout is real, bandwidth runs out, and advocacy takes a toll that isn't always visible from the outside. But the silence was notable, coming from someone so publicly committed to fighting the very malfeasance these people were describing.

Then came the clarifying moment.

This year, Officer X — now retired — contacted several advocacy groups asking them to sign a petition lobbying Congress to block the promotion of their abuser and bully. I declined. They followed up. I was incredulous. The person who had no time for other victims of misconduct within the same institution was now able to organize, coordinate, and lead a multi-organization Congressional engagement effort — to seek personal accountability for themselves. The word they would use is "accountability." Others in the community weren't so sure.

I am not here to judge the underlying grievance. The harm may have been real. The abuser may deserve exactly what they're seeking. That's not the point.

The point is the pattern. And the pattern has a name…

MISSION CREEP WITH A HUMAN FACE

There is a particular kind of corruption that doesn't look like corruption at all. No money changes hands. No laws are broken. The person at the center of it often believes, with total sincerity, that they are still doing the Lord's work. But somewhere along the way, the cause stopped being the point. They became the point.

In the military advocacy world — among veterans' service organizations, nonprofit founders, Gold Star family groups, combat veteran coalitions, and legislative champions on Capitol Hill — this phenomenon is well known and rarely discussed openly. Call it what it is: ego-driven mission creep. The moment when someone's crusade quietly becomes a crusade for themselves.

What Officer X demonstrated was not a dramatic fall from grace. There was no scandal, no embezzlement, no public unraveling. It was quieter than that — a pattern of selective engagement. Energy available for causes that served the self, less available for causes that merely served the mission. When other members of the branch came forward, there was little response. When their own promotion block needed organizing, the coalition-building instincts returned — fully operational, well-resourced, and ready to go.

That asymmetry is the tell.

THE ANATOMY OF DRIFT

Mission creep in military advocacy rarely announces itself. It doesn't arrive as a villain's monologue. It seeps in.

It often begins with a legitimate and painful origin story. A veteran who lost friends to inadequate VA care. A widow who turned grief into action. A combat amputee who decided that his suffering would mean something. These are not cynics. They are, at the start, exactly the kind of people the advocacy world needs.

But advocacy success brings something unexpected: visibility. Speaking invitations. Media profiles. Congressional testimony. Donor dinners. And with visibility comes identity — a new self-concept built on the role of champion. Before long, the cause and the *champion* become difficult to disentangle, even in the champion's own mind.

The warning signs tend to cluster around a few patterns:

Monopolizing the megaphone. Legitimate advocacy builds coalitions and amplifies other voices. Ego-driven advocacy centralizes. The founder becomes the singular spokesperson, the mandatory face on every press release, the person whose name must appear before any partner organization's. Allies get sidelined. Peer organizations get treated as competition. The cause's tent gets smaller as the figurehead's ego gets larger.

Conflating personal attacks with attacks on the mission. When an advocate genuinely serves a cause, criticism of their methods can be separated from the cause itself and engaged with honestly. When the cause has become self-serving, any challenge to the advocate reads as an attack on veterans, on Gold Star families, on the fallen — on sacred ground. This rhetorical sleight of hand is both effective and pernicious. It places the individual beyond accountability by draping them in the flag.

Organizational self-perpetuation over outcomes. A mission-driven organization measures itself by whether the problem is getting solved. An ego-driven one measures itself by its own growth — headcount, budget, media mentions, social media following. The telltale sign: when actual policy wins or program improvements happen through *other* organizations, they are minimized, ignored, or quietly claimed as derivative of the advocate's earlier work.

Selective engagement. Perhaps the most revealing sign of all: the advocate who shows up for causes that generate visibility and personal benefit, and goes dark for causes that simply need help. When colleagues and fellow victims reach out and are met with silence — but the political machinery roars to life the moment a personal score needs settling — the hierarchy of priorities has made itself plain.

There is, however, a simpler test than any of the above — one that anyone in the advocacy community can apply in under a minute.

> *Ask yourself: Can I clearly state what this person's cause is?*

Not their origin story. Not the injustice they personally suffered. Not the name of their organization or the title of their last congressional testimony. Their cause — the problem they are trying to solve for others, described in a sentence that doesn't begin with the word "I."

Genuine advocates answer this question easily. Their cause is legible because it exists outside of them: reforming the military's whistleblower protection apparatus, ending retaliation against uniformed personnel who report misconduct, holding federal agencies accountable to their own investigative standards. The cause has edges. It can be measured. Someone else could carry it forward if the original advocate stepped away.

When the question proves difficult to answer — when every attempt to name the cause keeps circling back to the advocate's own experience, their own unresolved grievance, their own name — that difficulty is itself the answer. A cause that cannot be articulated without its champion at the center may not be a cause at all. It may be a campaign. And the distinction matters enormously to the people who are asked to lend it their credibility, their time, and their name.

THE STRUCTURAL PROBLEM

The military advocacy ecosystem has features that make it unusually susceptible to this dynamic.

First, the emotional valence is nearly unassailable. Advocating for veterans and military families is among the most culturally protected positions in American public life. To challenge an advocate — even with evidence of self-dealing or ineffectiveness — is to risk looking like you're attacking the troops. This asymmetry of moral authority insulates bad actors and discourages healthy criticism.

Second, many advocacy organizations are built around a single person's credibility: their service record, their sacrifice, their proximity to tragedy. This is not inherently wrong. Personal authenticity is powerful, and in advocacy it can open doors that polished professionals cannot. But it creates organizational fragility and governance weakness. Boards become rubber stamps. Staff become loyalists. The founder's judgment is presumed correct because questioning it means questioning their sacrifice.

Third, the supply of causes is essentially infinite. Veterans' issues are complex, sprawling, and emotionally resonant. An advocate who has exhausted one issue — or whose issue has been successfully addressed — can migrate to the next without anyone noticing that the common thread is not the cause, but the advocate.

And fourth, the whistleblower community specifically carries an added layer of complexity. Whistleblowers are, by definition, people who have suffered for telling the truth. That suffering confers moral authority. But moral authority derived

from past suffering is not a permanent license to act without accountability. The willingness to endure retaliation for speaking truth is admirable. It does not automatically translate into the wisdom, selflessness, or consistency required of an effective advocate.

THE COSTS

When advocacy becomes autobiography, the people who need help lose.

In Officer X's case, the cost was borne by the uniformed personnel who came forward with legitimate complaints, sought coalition support, and were turned away. Those are real people, with real cases, who may have had different outcomes with effective advocacy behind them. The resources — contacts, Congressional relationships, institutional knowledge — existed. The will to deploy them for others simply did not.

There is also a subtler cost. Military culture prizes service above self. The military community watches its self-appointed champions, and when those champions turn out to be serving themselves, the cynicism runs deep. It damages trust not just in advocacy organizations but in the concept of collective action itself. If the person who rallied you to the cause can't be bothered to show up for your cause, what was the rally for?

When other advocacy groups were asked to sign Officer X's petition this year, they faced a quiet but pointed choice: lend their credibility to an effort organized entirely around one person's personal grievance, by a person who had declined to lend their credibility to efforts organized around others' grievances. Some may sign anyway. The political ask might even be legitimate. But they should do so with clear eyes about what they are endorsing — and what they are normalizing.

WHAT ACCOUNTABILITY LOOKS LIKE

None of this is to say that personal passion is disqualifying, or that advocates shouldn't be recognized for their work. The best ones are driven by something real, and they deserve credit. The question is whether the infrastructure around them — peer organizations, fellow advocates, journalists — is doing its job.

Peer accountability matters. The veterans' and military advocacy community has, at times, circled the wagons around figures who deserved scrutiny. The instinct toward solidarity is understandable. But solidarity with a self-serving figure is not solidarity with veterans — it's just tribalism with better branding. When an advocacy group is asked to lend its name to a petition, it is entitled — obligated, even — to ask: has this person shown up for others the way they're asking us to show up for them?

Reciprocity matters. Advocacy networks function on trust and mutual investment. An advocate who takes from the network — visibility, coalitions, contacts, institutional credibility — and withholds when others need the same is not a partner. They are extracting. Naming that clearly, without apology, is not a betrayal of the community. It is the community holding itself to its own stated values.

And transparency matters. When personal grievance and policy advocacy blur together, the organizations and individuals who get pulled into the orbit of that effort deserve to know which one they're serving.

THE FINE LINE: FUEL VERSUS FIXATION

There is nothing wrong with anger. There is nothing wrong with a person who was wronged deciding that the wrong will not stand — and building something from that resolve. The most effective advocates in American history were not dispassionate

technocrats. They were people who had been burned, and who used the heat.

> *The question is never whether the personal experience exists. It almost always does. The question is what the advocate does with it — and, more precisely, who benefits when they do.*

Personal experience, at its best, functions as *fuel*. It provides motivation that sustains an advocate through the grinding, unglamorous years when change is slow and the institution pushes back. It provides credibility that opens doors and earns trust from others who have suffered similarly. And it provides specificity — the kind of granular, lived understanding of a broken system that no policy paper can replicate. A whistleblower who has navigated a federal agency's retaliation apparatus knows things about it that a think-tank researcher simply does not. That knowledge, deployed in service of others, is genuinely valuable.

But fuel can also power something that isn't going anywhere useful. The same personal experience that motivates an advocate can calcify, over time, into something narrower and more self-referential. The cause stops expanding outward and starts contracting inward, toward the original wound. The goal is no longer to fix the system for everyone it damages — it is to achieve a specific outcome for a specific person: the advocate themselves.

The markers of this shift are recognizable, once you know to look:

The cause shrinks to fit the person. A genuine anti-bullying campaign within a uniformed service is big. It encompasses policy reform, accountability mechanisms, cultural change, legal protections for those who report. A campaign to block the promotion of one specific officer is small. It may be just. It may even be strategically useful as a signal to the institution. But when the full weight of a years-long advocacy platform is mobilized exclusively around that narrow personal outcome, the cause has contracted to fit the grievance rather than the grievance informing the cause.

Coalition-building becomes transactional. Altruistic advocacy asks others to join a cause larger than any individual. Ego-driven advocacy asks others to join *your* cause — and the ask is almost always one-directional. The advocate who spent years declining to assist others in the network, and then reaches out to request signatures on a personal petition, is not building a coalition. They are making a withdrawal from a bank they never deposited into.

Suffering becomes currency rather than context. Every advocate carries their wounds into the work. The ethical ones use those wounds to build empathy — to recognize the wounds in others and respond to them. The unethical ones use those wounds as leverage: as a claim on moral authority that exempts them from reciprocity, from accountability, from the ordinary obligations of community. When an advocate's past suffering is deployed primarily to deflect scrutiny of their present behavior, the transformation is complete. The experience is no longer fuel. It is a shield.

There is also a simpler, more human problem lurking here: few people want to hear someone's tale of woe indefinitely. Sympathy has a natural arc. In the early days, a compelling personal story of injustice draws people in — it is galvanizing, it is real, it earns attention and support. But an advocate who returns to the same wound year after year, who makes every conversation about what was done to them, who measures every new relationship by whether the other person has adequately acknowledged their suffering — that advocate begins to lose the room. Allies quietly disengage. Donors move on. The media stops calling. What began as a powerful origin story becomes, over time, a reputation for grievance rather than a reputation for results. The cause doesn't just shrink — it becomes indistinguishable from the person's unresolved pain.

Angela Duckworth's research on *Grit* offers a useful corrective lens here. Duckworth found that the individuals who see difficult, long-term goals through to completion are not simply the most passionate — they are the ones whose passion is oriented outward, toward something larger than themselves, combined with the perseverance to keep showing up even when the personal rewards are thin. Passion alone, she argues, is not enough; it can burn hot and burn out. What sustains people through the grinding middle years of any worthy endeavor is passion yoked to purpose — a reason to keep going that doesn't depend on personal vindication.

> *The advocates who last, who actually move the needle on entrenched institutional problems, tend to be the ones for whom the cause itself is the point.*

They are energized by progress for others, not just resolution for themselves. By that measure, an advocate whose engagement reliably spikes around their own grievances and reliably goes quiet when others need help has not demonstrated grit. They have demonstrated persistence in the service of self — which is a very different thing.

The test of altruism is what you do when there's nothing in it for you. This is, ultimately, the cleanest line between genuine advocacy and its imitation. The altruistic advocate shows up for cases that will not advance their profile, for people who cannot return the favor, for causes that will not generate a speaking invitation or a congressional hearing with their name in the title. The self-serving advocate's engagement is, when examined honestly, almost perfectly correlated with personal benefit. They are busy when the cause needs them and silent when it doesn't need them to be visible.

None of this erases the legitimacy of the original grievance. A person who was bullied and retaliated against within their branch deserves accountability — full stop. But deserving accountability and being a trustworthy steward of a collective cause are two different things. The military advocacy community is not obligated to absorb and amplify a personal grievance through its institutional credibility simply because the person making the ask once had a genuine mission. Past service to a cause does not create a perpetual line of credit against which any future ask can be drawn.

The fine line, then, is this: *Are you using what happened to you to help others it is also happening to? Or are you using the language and apparatus of helping others to pursue what is, at bottom, your own unfinished business?*

One is advocacy. The other is something more complicated — and the community is entitled to tell the difference.

THE HARDEST PART

The most tragic version of this story doesn't involve cynics. It involves people who started out genuinely, who did real good in the early years, and who slowly, imperceptibly crossed a line they would deny exists.

I do not know with certainty that Officer X's motives are purely self-serving. People are complicated. Perhaps they told themselves that blocking their abuser's promotion would send a message to the institution — that it would protect future subordinates. Perhaps they believed it. Perhaps they were right.

But I know what I saw over three years. I know the silence when others came forward. I know the energy that materialized, suddenly and efficiently, when their own name was on the line. That contrast — whatever its explanation — is what prompted this piece.

The work is more important than the worker. The mission cannot become the man — or the person. And the community of advocates who depend on each other to show up, consistently and selflessly, for people who are not them, has every right to say so out loud.

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