

Bartlett's News Briefs

NOT JUST ANYBODY

community-sponsored stories
by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer

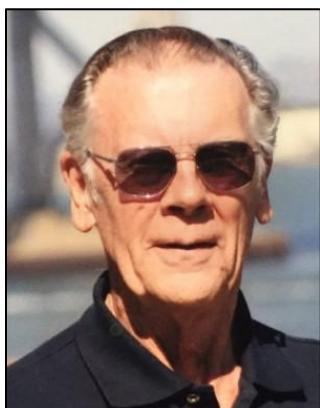
For 12 weeks in the New Year, five Pacificans, all veterans, answer a Question on the Street

When I wrote features for the printed *Pacifica Tribune*, for many years that also included a question on the street – *Bartlett's Bullets*. It's interesting to hear what our neighbors think. I've asked five people, all veterans and members of the Pacifica American Legion, to answer a question each week for 12 weeks. The purpose is not to stir up annoyed responses from people who are not part of this group, but to just have a listen to what someone else is willing to share. Food for thought! It is also to encourage community dialogue.

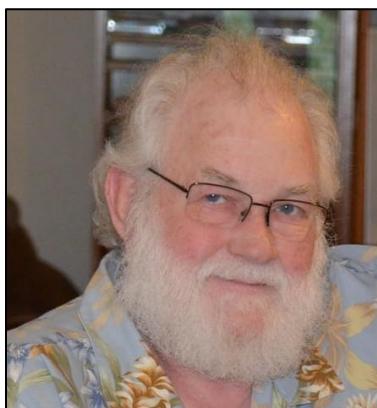
Date: January 13, 2026

Question 2: Why does this country need conservatives and liberals, and how do individuals with different political beliefs work together as a team in the military?

Answerers:



Robert Biby



Ed Clements



Jay Crawford



Allan Hale



Greg Stepanenko

Robert Biby. (Served: United States Marine Corps)

Conservatives and liberals – that is just the way some of us experience life. It also can be the way that we are brought up. One thing they have in common is religion. Liberals are just as religious as conservatives but it doesn't play as major a role in their lives as it does with conservatives. Liberals will have religion but it doesn't run their lives. They know to be good to other people. Conservatives have religion first and life second. Liberals realize that they are free because of our Constitution. For conservatives, the word of God is more important than the Constitution. But we do need both liberals and conservatives. We need them both for stability in the world.

The left-wing liberals want us to be more advanced than we are today. The conservatives as a whole and the right-wing conservatives more so, would like us to be back right before WWII, when we had 132 million people in the U.S. and now we have 342 plus million people. But we had to change due to the increased population. Our population has grown beyond the total conservative factor, but the conservatives want to go back to when we didn't have that much population. We need liberals that are conservative liberals, as well as middle-of-the-road liberals, who have to be able to say no to the left-wing liberals. Our Nation, and our world, will continue to evolve – that's why we still have wars because we have conservatives and liberals.

This Nation is, in my opinion, only a couple of steps away right now from being a dictatorship. This is because the conservative conservatives have for years, set in motion, without liberals paying much attention to it – that conservative belief again, religion first and the Constitution second, and a President that goes along with everything the conservatives say because Congress won't do their job. We've got a Supreme Court now with a majority that makes their decisions based on the conservative views of religion. That is not freedom.

In the military, how do people work as a team? Politics do not come into play in the military. Most of us in the military were young. Like myself, I was very naïve when I went into the military and I didn't pay much attention to politics. We did not have political discussions in the barracks. That is just the way it was. It was a hierarchy and when you got into that Corporal/Sergeant area, you had a script that you followed and you were responsible for this, that and the other. Each rank had a little more and/or a little different responsibility. If you were under that rank, you paid attention to that rank. When you are in combat you don't think about someone else's beliefs. You have other things to think about. There is no theoretical in combat. It is all in the here and now, and it is very physical. In combat, there is no political thought. I cannot envision politics entering into warfare until you are of a very high rank when you are getting your instructions from political people. I was in the Marines from 1955 through 1959, which was not long after the Uniform Code of Military Justice came out following the Second World War and was enacted by Congress. It is a complete set of criminal laws covering all the military branches, and it includes an article or maybe several articles that came into being because of the Nuremberg Trials. Those trials concluded that "just following orders" is not a defense for illegal acts or war crimes, and we were told in the military if an order was illegal, we did not have to follow it.

Ed Clements. (Served: United States Navy)

We need liberals and conservatives for the simple reason that we all have different points of view and if we listen, we can learn something from each other. The one thing that we have now that we didn't have when I was younger, is nobody listens to anybody. Somebody has an issue so they are going to make a big deal out of it with the particular thought that they don't care if other people like it or not. Whereas before, you would sit down and you would talk about it. Take our representatives. One representative back in the day would say, "This is what I would do." And the other representative would say, "Okay, well, here's what I want to do." Then they'd both say, "Okay, we've got some room here. You can give a little and I can give a little and then we can take that to our constituents." But if the representatives are all

fighting about it and nothing gets done, then the hardcore liberal or the hardcore conservative is going to get angry and upset. Then you get a lot of anarchy going on which I do not think we need at all in this country. That is the reason why I feel that you need both sides, and both sides need to sit down and listen to each other. You don't have to agree with everything the other person says, but if you really listen, you'll find common ground. First you listen, and then you go home and sit and think about what you just talked about. You might even say, "Hey, you know what? There was this one little piece that he or she said there that was right. I need to call them up and talk about that." That is the way it used to be done. Now too many people just walk away angry and let it swell up. That gets us nowhere fast and we stay at nowhere for a long time.

When I received my Draft Notice in August of 1965, my autographed birthday gift from the U.S. Government, ha! ha!, I went right down and joined the Navy immediately before I had a chance to sign any papers with the Army. I had relatives that were already in the Navy. I was familiar with the Navy. I asked my relatives, "What is Boot Camp like because I am really worried about it." They told me, "Don't worry, it will be a piece of cake. You just graduated from high school and you're in great physical shape." I had no problem with the physical part. The psychological part is what shook me. Here I was a young kid, a little more liberal than conservative, and they changed everything. They took everything I thought and took it away from me. "You're going to do what we say when we say it. If we tell you to jump, you just jump. You don't ask how high or how many times." Once yet get that through your head, all of a sudden a light goes on. If this person in charge says, "Jump," and we all jump, we did what we were supposed to do and everything works out. If one person hesitates, then some of the people around that person will also hesitate. Then you can't accomplish the objective. I was on a fleet oiler. We were a giant gas station. Everybody needed us. We had the same escorts with us that an aircraft carrier had because if you sink the oiler, everyone runs out of gas and nobody can get anywhere. So you had to do it right. When the alarm went off you knew exactly where to go and you went. Nobody cared what your politics were. Nobody asked if you think this is the right thing to do or not. You were taught to respect your superior officers from when you were a Seaman. If you were told to do something, you did it. You learned, all the way back in Boot Camp, that if you didn't do it, it could cost you your life or someone else their life, indirectly, because you were the one that held up. You all had to be on the same page. Politics were taken out of the equation.

I have voted since I was 18. I have never missed an election and maybe the person I voted for president didn't win or maybe they did. But no matter what, I still had the same job to do on the ship. So nobody talked politics. We talked about something that happened in the engine room, or that somebody had a new girlfriend. Things worked smoothly because you were not distracted. My theory in life – and most guys I served with in the service were on the same page – is worry about things that you can take care of and change. If you personally can't change it and make it better, you are obviously not the one that will change it. But, you can talk to someone else and ask for help and then the situation can be moved along together as a team. But whether you are in the military or not, learn from listening.

Jay Crawford. (Served: United States Army)

I think if you look real closely, most of the conservatives and most of the liberals have the same core values. In the United States, one of those shared values is pride in having freedom. There is also the thought of taking care of each other. That is true for both as well. When you get down to the details, it's like a family. You're at home and you want to put in a garden. What are the odds that the wife, the husband and the kids all want to plant the same thing in the same spot? Zero. By having a disagreement, if you can work past it, the final answer will be more creative. That's one thing. The other is like watching the traffic go by. Imagine if there were no stop signs, what would happen to our accident rates? If everybody is on the exact same page not only does creativity go down, but there is no stopping them once you get the momentum going. Without brakes, you can eventually get to a point where you are making decisions and laws that are off target. So, by having the division between the conservatives and the

liberals, they can put brakes on each other. What we really need is time to sit back and think. If you are trying to put through legislation, for instance, to make the color purple the national color of the United States, and you've got somebody else that wants red, then we've got to sit back and find a compromise between the two. That's why we need both. Otherwise creativity is stifled and there are no brakes on the direction in which you are going.

In the military, if you get into discussing politics while you are trying to get a mission accomplished, that is a dangerous situation if you are in combat. You are so busy arguing that you stop looking at the common thread. So, you've got to work together. Now, during peacetime, it's not quite so dramatic. Still, if you want to get things done and you want to get them done in a hurry, you've got to work with each other. The final thing is, liberals and conservatives are broad labels that really don't work. I'm a retired cop and usually when I tell people that was my profession, they immediately label me as a conservative. I am also a retired high school teacher. When I tell them that, they immediately label me as a liberal.

Back in the early 1970s when I was in college, we were talking about gender in class. The professor said it wasn't a matter of someone being one gender or another, he said it was a line. Somewhere along that line, your gender identity would fall. He brought up all kinds of examples. But I think the same thing applies to conservatives and liberals. People fall somewhere on a line. As a cop, you are supposed to enforce the law. The law, in California anyway, is statutory. That means it's in writing. In other states, it's common law. Yet, there is a provision in the penal code that says it shouldn't be a strict interpretation. There has got to be some flexibility in it. Here I am a cop and I am supposed to enforce these laws. Do you know how many laws there are in California? Just the list of the different statutes is probably covered in 40 different law books. There are literally thousands. If I enforced every one of those laws, I'd never make it out of the coffee shop without saying, "You can't do that and you can't do that and you can't do that." But that is what in essence following every law would mean. There is also this. You turn around and you see a conflict between something that you believe in and something that is against the law. A prime example of that was a friend of mine was a New York City police officer. When she was on the line as an officer trying to control a specific protest, her parents were on the other side of the line. Had she not been on duty, she probably would have been on the other side of the line. The point I am getting at is these labels, conservatives and liberals, are a matter of convenience but they are also largely wrong.

Allan Hale. (Served: United States Coast Guard)

Our country has liberals, conservatives and everything in between. We need to respect all groups, even those with different points of view. The difference helps us find rational solutions to our problems. The military is led by those in positions of authority whose job demands respect. All in military work together, regardless of their political beliefs, to support the laws and principles of our country.

Greg Stepanenko. (Served: United States Navy)

We need to have conservatives and liberals so you can see the full spectrum of what the problem is, and they need to come together and work the problem out so they can meet in the middle ground where it will be best for the country and the people that they are supposed to represent. In the military, you are more focused on the mission or on the next watch. You really don't think about the politics. In the military you are given an order or an objective that you need to reach and that's what you focus on. You don't focus on the political part. That's for the higher ups. In my experience in the Navy, both when I was working with the Ethiopia communication station and when I was aboard ship, I don't remember ever talking about politics.

By Jean Bartlett (January 13, 2026)

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Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This article was anonymously sponsored.