

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

by Eliot A. Cohen

There is no crisis in American civil-military relations if crisis means the kind of collision between civil and military authority that would breed a coup d'état or other manifestation of a breakdown of civilian control of the military, such as systematic and open disobedience of orders.¹ But, to a remarkable degree, members of the Defense Task Force agreed that deep and pervasive difficulties plague American civil-military relations, that these problems merit attention and exploration, and that dramatic and possibly painful actions are required to resurrect the relationship between the armed forces and civil society that the Founders envisioned and that makes sense for a twenty-first-century democracy. The three core problems discussed at length were the politicization of the military, the growing divide between civil society and those who wear the uniform, and the centralization of military power in the Joint Staff and in the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).

A Politicized Military

As one participant put it, when hearing military officers speak about President Bill Clinton, he felt tempted to turn Voltaire's apocryphal defense of free speech on its head: "I agree with everything that you say and am appalled by the fact that you say it." The first two years of the Clinton administration were marked by an extraordinary display of open disdain and hostility by the military for the new president. The ill-advised nature of his manpower policies (particularly his effort to lift the ban on homosexuals serving in uniform), the general disregard for things military that characterized junior staffers in the White House, a proclivity to see the military as a tool of domestic and international social work rather than strategic action, and the president's own evasion of the Vietnam-era draft explained this behavior on the part of officers but in no way made it acceptable. On many occasions sen-

ior military officers not only tolerated their subordinates' making contemptuous remarks about the commander in chief—itsself an offense subject to court-martial under the Uniform Code of Military Justice—but amplified and reinforced such comments. Military officers also were increasingly willing to announce their political affiliation (almost invariably with the Republican Party) or to display their political beliefs in such ways as driving cars with anti-Clinton bumper stickers onto military bases, in defiance of tradition and the norms of military service.

Yet most conference participants argued that the politicization of the military reflects something more profound than the reaction of the officer corps to a particular politician. As one put it, "There has been a long-term, secular trend towards politicization of the U.S. officer corps." To some extent that mirrors similar trends within other professional groups in American society. The current conception of the military officer still reflects an image drawn from the austere portrait of the "professional" put forward in the 1950s. Professionals, according to the social science literature of the time, were defined by three characteristics: corporateness (that is, a sense of collective identity), responsibility (to society at large and not simply to a particular client or customer), and education (both throughout their careers and at a high intellectual level). Society viewed the professional as someone whose technical expertise and detachment from politics made him both unique and difficult to manage, and much ink was spent on the subject of how professionals defined their relationships with those around them.

Over time, this purist model of the professional has changed and eroded. As doctors and lawyers have become politicized and demythologized, so too have military officers shed the image of pure and apolitical expertise once ascribed to them. Like other interest groups, they lost a sense of uniqueness and learned how to play the game. Indeed, it is not uncommon for officers to describe themselves as a governmental interest group and to justify (if somewhat abashedly) their collective actions in such terms.

Politicization sprang from other sources as well. In the last thirty years, the American military has become remarkably sophisticated regarding politics, in part through a professional military education that stresses the importance of the political dimension of warfare. A revival of the study *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz's classic text examining the relationship between war and politics, followed on the heels of the Vietnam War as officers struggled to understand why they lost a war in which they seem-

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ingly held the trump cards of firepower, mobility, and resources. In his introduction to *On Strategy*, one of the earliest critiques of the military's efforts in Vietnam and a major contribution to the Clausewitz revival, Colonel Harry Summers recalled his conversation with a North Vietnamese officer during the final armistice negotiations. When Summers remarked to his counterpart that the Vietnamese never beat the Americans in a single battle, the North Vietnamese colonel paused for a moment and said: "That's true. It's also irrelevant."² More than one officer came away from that war convinced of the necessity of entering the next with a far more sophisticated appreciation of policy than that brought to bear in Vietnam. At the same time, the rejection of the military by some segments of American society after the war dismayed members of the officer corps, who consequently came to believe that domestic politics also required their attention.

Yet Vietnam merely accelerated trends that originated during World War II and the early Cold War, when officers found themselves engaged in the murky areas where politics and war overlapped. Programs ranging from courses in American and international politics at the war colleges to internships in government exposed officers to politics in various forms. Today, military officers serve on congressional staffs and are present throughout the federal government, even in such seemingly non-defense-oriented bureaucracies as the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Indeed, General Colin Powell, perhaps the shrewdest political general since Eisenhower, describes his year as a White House Fellow serving in OMB as his introduction to the bureaucratic politics that he would play so well during his time in Washington.

Seared by its experience in Vietnam, the officer corps reacted by seeking to manipulate political leaders and processes so that any commitment to conflict would be made under circumstances that it approved. An early case in point was General Creighton Abrams's successful creation of the Total Force in the 1970s—in particular, an army dependent on reserve mobilization to conduct any sizable war. With the tacit acquiescence of the civilian leadership, the military in effect created a system that could not go to war without some kind of national mobilization, even though the army's leadership traditionally mistrusted the reserve components.

To some extent, political awareness is desirable in an officer corps. But when military officers lose their self-restraint about

both political identification and actual participation in politics—including behind-the-scenes manipulation of any branch of government—a boundary has been crossed. The military is a unique calling that bears special responsibilities for the security of the nation and poses particular threats when deformed by open partisanship. When officers do not hesitate to refer to themselves as another interest group, when they willingly identify themselves by party affiliation and feel free to comment in public, and in front of their subordinates, about the faults of their civilian superiors, corrective action is needed.

The Gap between Society and the Military

Since 1940, military service has shaped the early careers of millions of American young men, particularly those who have gone on to become business and political leaders. The end of the draft in the early 1970s created a noticeable gap between civilian and military elites. That gap widened with the dramatic shrinkage of the military in the wake of the Cold War, a shrinkage likely to continue. At first glance, this development might not seem terribly important. After all, throughout most of U.S. history the military was small and in many cases unrepresentative of American society. The great difference today is that the United States is, and will remain, a superpower for whom military might is central to national policy. That was not the case in times of peace before World War II.

The gap between the military and society is exacerbated by the military's increasing tendency to recruit from narrower segments of the population. One conference participant reported that some 25 percent of new entrants into the military now come from military families. Of greater concern, in the view of some, is the increased role of the military academies as providers of officer candidates. Whereas West Point, Annapolis, and the Air Force Academy produced only 10 percent of new officers during the Cold War, today they produce roughly one-quarter. In the view of many, the services would be happy not only to restrict as much officer intake as possible to the service academies but to force new officers to serve for extended periods of time. The demands of efficiency, in particular the desire to reduce training expenses and turnover, lead the military to press for long-term service contracts.

Increasingly, some military leaders also see a growing gap

²Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (1982; Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1995), p. 1.

between military and societal values. The U.S. Marine Corps, perhaps the least civilianized of all the armed services, has changed its basic training programs to instill values in recruits that it believes American society has failed to provide. Military leaders routinely remark, with more than a little complacency, that the military has coped with problems that still bedevil the rest of American society: drug and alcohol abuse, and even in large measure race relations. As sociologist Charles Moskos has put it, the army is the only institution in which black men routinely give white men orders and no one thinks twice about it. The army's success on issues involving the sexes is less clear. The military has struggled, with varying success, to open to women careers that traditionally embodied masculine qualities. Still, that the military has come to see itself as an organization with better values and more functional social behavior than civil society marks yet another departure from the past, when the armed forces saw themselves more as a reflection of society and less as its superior.

Different issues are inherent on the civilian side of the relationship. Fewer politicians, let alone their staff assistants, have any military experience; yet they will be required to make decisions about the employment and structuring of military forces. Not all conference participants had equal concerns here. Some pointed to political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln who with minimal military experience nonetheless proved to be outstanding strategists and civilian leaders. But all agreed that it would be desirable to improve the military expertise of today's generation of Congress members and journalists. The current ignorance gives rise to two equally problematic trends: a growing number of political elites who have little appreciation for the needs of the military and are inclined to view it in terms of stereotypes of discipline and inflexibility, and, no less troubling, the emergence of a political class that unthinkingly defers to this alone of all public institutions, without subjecting it to critical but informed scrutiny.

The Rise of a Centralized Military Staff

Since the turn of the century, there has been steady movement toward the centralization of military authority in large staffs. The creation of a chief of staff of the army and a chief of naval operations was followed during World War II by the creation and later institutionalization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Defense Department Reorganization Act of 1958 further strengthened the

chairman of the JCS and the Joint Staff, and the Goldwater-Nichols legislation of 1986 took another large step in that direction. Today, the chairman of the JCS serves as a de facto commander of the American armed forces, operating under the supervision of either the president or the secretary of defense. The Joint Staff has taken over many of the prerogatives of the service staffs, both civilian and military, and has even strayed into the legitimate territory of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). These developments have generated several problems:

A reduction of sources of military advice for civilian authority. The president and secretary of defense need more than one senior military adviser. Any one adviser, being human, may have the prejudices and distorted perceptions that naturally can accumulate during a career. While Goldwater-Nichols does not prohibit civilians from seeking advice from the other chiefs, it tacitly discourages such a move. As a result, during the war in the Persian Gulf, the secretary of defense was forced to resort to unusual channels to elicit more options than he was receiving from the Joint Staff.

An attenuation of long-range thinking. The perspective of the Joint Staff and the regional and functional commanders in chief (CINCs) is short term; their understandable concern with immediate operational issues leads them to discount future problems and focus on current activity. In the past, the services provided a long-range perspective, but their weakened bureaucratic clout and exclusion from military planning activities have undercut their ability to make contributions in this area.

A weakening of competition. The United States has benefited greatly from the armed services' competition with one another for resources and missions. In all other walks of life, the United States has traditionally appreciated the merits of competition. Yet in the Pentagon the trend has been towards centralized control and allocation of resources. Particularly as technology allows the services to compete for roles and missions (in the area of deep strike, for example), it makes sense to enhance rather than diminish the competitiveness that has been so valuable in the past.

A diminution of civilian control. Goldwater-Nichols did little to enhance the quality or power of the staff in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, but it tremendously strengthened the roles and career tracks of Joint Staff officers. As a result, the weight of influence within the Pentagon has shifted decidedly in favor of the Joint Staff, which has an increasingly strong hand in bargaining with OSD and sometimes takes positions at variance with it.

To be sure, some of the results of the Goldwater-Nichols legislation have been favorable. “Jointness” is not merely a fad of the moment, but an undeniable trend in military operations brought about by changing technology. When shipboard systems (missiles as well as aircraft) can precisely strike the same targets as land-based ballistic missiles or aircraft, increased coordination of effort is clearly needed. As certain common systems—intelligence-gathering satellites, for example—gain importance, so too does the need for management of them throughout the Department of Defense. Moreover, some of the parochialism and obstructionism of the services conceivably has diminished in the face of the growing power of the chairman of the JCS, the Joint Staff, and the theater CINCs. Nonetheless, like all orthodoxies, that of jointness requires critical examination and a dispassionate review of its impact on long-term strategic thinking and civilian control.

Solutions

The ills besetting civil-military relations in the United States are the deeply rooted product of historical developments dating back several decades or longer. Remedies will take time to have an effect. More important, they will require tough and imaginative civilian leadership, because they will be opposed by important (though by no means all) segments of military opinion and will be relatively unattractive politically. The military opinion will be bolstered by civilian allies, including military retirees (who can speak far more freely than those in uniform) and that large group of civilians who occasionally confuse unthinking support of military traditions and practice with patriotic support for the armed forces.

Reforming the military academies. It should be a basic principle of the American armed forces that the officer corps be as widely recruited as possible. Therefore, for both practical and symbolic reasons, the military academies should be modeled along the lines of Sandhurst. That is, officers would complete their undergraduate educations at any acceptable civilian college or university and then attend a military academy for nine months to a year of military training. This system would preserve the valuable traditions and character-building qualities of the academies, while dispensing with their cliquish and self-absorbed nature. The services would still be pressed to maintain active ROTC presences on campuses, including those that might produce small numbers of high-quality officers.

The service academies currently wrestle with two contradictory missions: the training of young officers and the provision of a liberal education. They cannot be expected to do both well, for the two purposes are somewhat at odds with each other. This proposed reform would allow officers to receive their normal, liberal education elsewhere, leaving the academies free to focus on military training.

Recruitment schemes for the citizen-soldier. Soldiers and civilians alike applaud the concept of the citizen-soldier, but the time has come to reconsider what that term means. It is neither accurate nor adequate to say that professional soldiers have the full rights of all other citizens, thereby making them citizen-soldiers. Rather, citizen-soldiers are best understood to be short-term or temporary service personnel whose primary careers are in the civilian rather than the military world. Ideally, such personnel would comprise a large part of the armed services. The services should therefore be required to develop and advertise programs similar to those operated with some success by the army, which attract young men and women for short (twenty-four-month) stints of service in return for college tuition or other benefits. Similar plans would be designed to attract older men and women to the reserves, which would be revamped to take advantage of the many talents in the civilian sector.

Now more than ever, the National Guard and the reserves embody the concept of the citizen-soldier, whose centrality to the national defense was enshrined in the Constitution and remains important today. The guard and reserves have much to offer the armed services by bringing the maturity and expertise of civilians to bear on military problems, as seen in the notable success of the army reserve civil-affairs units. Moreover, the reserves have a tremendous range of programs, from the extremely successful reliance of the air force on reserve air crew and support personnel to operate the logistics fleet, to the far less successful incorporation of naval reservists into the fleet. Many future units may focus on the realm of information technology, where expertise often commands salaries that the military cannot match. Overall, a general review of reserve policy seems called for, particularly as some reserve units (army civil-affairs units, for example) have begun to be extremely active, to the point of being overstretched, while others (combat divisions in the National Guard) seem to have little function at all.

Professional military education. The conference members also

argued for increasing the military educational system's attention to problems in civil-military relations. Too few officers, even at senior levels, have reflected on not only such well-known cases of civil-military friction as Douglas MacArthur's dismissal from command in Korea, but the legislative and philosophical underpinnings of the U.S. military establishment.

Moreover, as the nature of warfare itself changes, so too does the nature of military professionalism. In an age when the directing of firepower increasingly takes place from a distance, the very concept of officership must be reassessed. To a remarkable degree, current regulations, organizational forms, and rank structures reflect a bygone era, in which the roles and relationships of both commissioned and noncommissioned officers were very different from what they are today. A first-order reexamination of what officership means is thus in order. To this end, the curricula of the staff and war colleges need to be reviewed, including the material that deals with civilian control of the military. The clichéd notion that civilian control consists of giving the military unambiguous (and unchanging) goals, providing resources, and stepping aside—a notion particularly prevalent following the Persian Gulf War—needs to be replaced with a more discriminating, if less comfortable, view.

Military familiarization programs. Lastly, it is desirable to institute programs that would improve the quality of civilian leadership by educating civilians about military organizations and modern warfare. These programs would be intended for legislators, journalists, and other "opinion leaders" (to include civic leaders and people in business), to help them develop sound criteria for evaluating contemporary defense matters. Formats for such an enterprise could include the following:

- lectures on the organization and function of the Department of Defense;
- visits to a variety of facilities, including training installations;
- participation in simulations and exercises; and
- academic work (through case studies, seminars, and site visits) in the field of military history.

Currently, the Department of Defense offers many groups visits to ships or military facilities, such as the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. But these opportunities, though valuable, are episodic (that is, undertaken without a coherent plan of instruction) and are not selectively targeted. A military installa-

tion's standard "pitch" for civilian outsiders is generally intended to highlight the sophistication and excellence of its people and machines, not to promote critical evaluation.

A serious program of military instruction would be quite different. It could be a part-time course during two years that would require roughly the same level of participation as reserve duty—say, a weekend a month plus a two-week stint of "active duty." These visitors to military installations would receive more than the standard dog and pony show, and they would be exposed to a variety of opposing views on a range of military matters (for example, the future of the aircraft carrier, or manned aircraft, or women in combat). Innovative use of educational technologies, such as CD-ROM-based instruction like that pioneered by the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base, would enable participants to absorb quickly many of the basic details of military equipment, organization, and procedure on their own. Participation in such a program would be selective and begun on a small scale.

If Nothing Is Done

No one at the conference suggested that absent these recommendations the republic would be in mortal danger. But it is worth speculating about the direction of American civil-military relations without the kinds of measures indicated above to correct current adverse trends. An ever more inbred military elite would evolve, recruited largely from families of military personnel and increasingly educated at the service academies. Confronted (as appears likely) by a steadily shrinking defense budget, this group would not retire into frosty isolation but would attempt to influence the political process directly. Military officers might, within the bounds of the law (but just barely), attempt to throw support to the political party most favorable to their interests.

At the same time, a political elite generally ignorant of military affairs would divide into three groups. The first, and largest, would simply be indifferent to defense matters and would be inclined to regard military expenditure as wasteful unless proven otherwise. Another group would view the military with suspicion, believing its notions to be both retrograde and at odds with those of society on a variety of issues, most notably homosexuality. And a third group would regard the military with unthinking admiration as the embodiment of virtues shunned by the rest of society.

Oddly enough, this last group could prove to be the most dangerous. Democratic society normally produces a certain amount of healthy suspicion of the military—a distaste for the hierarchy, subordination of self, and adherence to discipline that military life requires. Unrestrained deference to military authority and expertise, on the other hand, can lead to gross errors in both foreign and defense policy. The horrifying experience of World War I, when deference to military authority was at an all-time high, offers an important warning. The generals repeatedly resorted to strategies of appalling bloodshed, not merely out of arrogance, but because of adulation from journalists and politicians who made them into gods of war rather than what they were—fallible men, albeit well-educated, patriotic, and determined. By the end of that conflict, mutual confidence at the top and throughout society had broken down, politicians mistrusted their military subordinates, and more than one military leader was willing to endorse the theory of the “stab in the back.”

Healthy civilian control of the military requires a political leadership that understands how uncertain of a business war is and that recognizes that even the best-trained and most dedicated military professionals can err. Such politicians can exert effective civilian control because they appreciate military virtues, can discern which military officers are the best, and can weigh the relative importance of political and military requirements. On the other side of the equation, civil-military relations require officers who understand and accept the preeminence of political considerations in the conduct of war and who can cope with civilian intrusion into their realm whether or not they like it. And at the very top, a dialogue must exist between statesmen and generals, unequal though that dialogue may be. Overall, healthy civil-military relations need a military with standards distinct from those of general society and a society that appreciates the need for the deference, even if it does not always approve of the military's views.

Left uncorrected, the trends in American civil-military relations could breed certain pathologies. The most serious possibility is that of a dramatic civil-military split during a crisis involving the use of force. In the recent past, such tensions did not result in open division. For example, Franklin Roosevelt insisted that the United States invade North Africa in 1942, though the chiefs of both the army and the navy vigorously opposed such a course, favoring instead a buildup in England and an invasion of the continent in 1943. Back then it was inconceivable that a senior mili-

tary officer would leak word of such a split to the media, where it would have reverberated loudly and destructively. To be sure, from time to time individual officers broke the vow of professional silence to protest a course of action, but in these isolated cases the officers paid the accepted price of termination of their careers.

In the modern environment, such cases might no longer be isolated. Thus, presidents might try to shape U.S. strategy so that it complies with military opinion, and rarely in the annals of statecraft has military opinion alone been an adequate guide to sound foreign policy choices. Had Lincoln followed the advice of his senior military advisers there is a good chance that the Union would have fallen. Had Roosevelt deferred to General George C. Marshall and Admiral Ernest J. King there might well have been a gory debacle on the shores of France in 1943. Had Harry S. Truman heeded the advice of his theater commander in the Far East (and it should be remembered that the Joint Chiefs generally counseled support of the man on the spot) there might have been a third world war.

Throughout much of its history, the U.S. military was remarkably politicized by contemporary standards. One commander of the army, Winfield Scott, even ran for president while in uniform, and others (Leonard Wood, for example) have made no secret of their political views and aspirations. But until 1940, and with the exception of periods of outright warfare, the military was a negligible force in American life, and America was not a central force in international politics. That has changed. Despite the near halving of the defense budget from its high in the 1980s, it remains a significant portion of the federal budget, and the military continues to employ millions of Americans. More important, civil-military relations in the United States now no longer affect merely the closet-room politics of Washington, but the relations of countries around the world. American choices about the use of force, the shrewdness of American strategy, the soundness of American tactics, and the will of American leaders have global consequences. What might have been petty squabbles in bygone years are now magnified into quarrels of a far larger scale, and conceivably with far more grievous consequences. To ignore the problem would neglect one of the cardinal purposes of the federal government: “to provide for the common defense” in a world in which security cannot be taken for granted.