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WHAT MILITARY OFFICERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

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It is a great honor and pleasure to return to the US Air Force Academy today. It is also a great honor to be associated with the name of Ira Eaker, a true American hero and one of the fathers of American air power. I’m sure by this time you have seen *Twelve O’clock High*, and I assure that if you haven’t, you WILL see it in the future. You may know that Major General Patrick Pritchard, the character played by the actor Millard Mitchell, is based on Ira Eaker. When we use the movie at the Naval War College, we focus on Pritchard as an example of strategic leadership—linking the tactical and the operational levels of war to national policy. This is what Ira Eaker did: he was responsible for proving the feasibility of daylight precision bombing as an operational concept linked to national policy. Someday many of you will be expected to provide this same strategic bridge between operational art on the one hand and national policy on the other.

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

My topic tonight is civil-military relations. Now many of you are thinking to yourselves: why do I need to worry about civil-military relations? First, the US military as an institution seems to have internalized the commitment to civilian control. There’s no likelihood of a military coup. Second, any problem with civil-military relations is something for the generals and admirals to worry about. But I contend that it is the obligation of every officer to understand the dynamics of civil-military relations. Healthy civil-military relations in the future will depend a great deal on you fine, young, soon-to-be officers.

So what do we mean by civil-military relations? I argue that the term refers broadly to the *interaction between the armed forces of a state as an institution, the government, and the other sectors of the society in which the armed force is embedded.*

Civil-military relations have to do with the *allocation of responsibilities and prerogatives between the civil government and the military establishment.*

Civil-military relations can be understood as “Two Hands on the Sword.” The civilian hand determines when the sword is drawn. The military hand keeps it sharp and wields it in combat, always guided by the purposes for which the war is being fought.

I argue that US civil-military relations constitute a *bargain*, regarding the aforementioned allocation of prerogatives and responsibilities.

There are three parties to the bargain: the American people; the government; and the military establishment. The bargain must be periodically re-negotiated to take account of political, social, technological, or geopolitical changes.

There have been several renegotiations of the US civil-military bargain over the past 70 years, including:

- World War II: when the military became a “central” as opposed to a peripheral institution in America
- Cold War: when the rise of nuclear weapons and the central role of deterrence marginalized the military’s contribution to strategy-making
- Post-Cold War: a shift to regional conflict and constabulary operations changed the military’s operational orientation
- Post 9/11: civil-military relations during a time of protracted conflict, giving rise to the possibility of praetorianism.

A central question today is whether another renegotiation is in the offing.

The civil-military bargain focuses on five questions or sets of questions:

1. How do we ensure civilian control of the military establishment? The dominant model in the United States is Samuel Huntington’s “Objective” Control, which maximize military professionalism in exchange for political neutrality. As Huntington wrote: on the one hand, civilian authorities grant a professional officer corps autonomy *in the realm of military affairs*. On the other, “a highly professional officer corps stands ready to carry out the wishes of any civilian group which secures legitimate authority within the state.” According to Huntington, objective control assures civilian control while simultaneously maximizing military effectiveness. Eliot Cohen calls this the “normal” theory of civil-military relations but points out that it has often been violated in practice. The fact that liberal societies such as the United States often take civilian control for granted begs several further questions: does civilian control refer simply to the dominance of civilians within the executive branch – the president or the secretary of defense? What is the role of the legislative branch in controlling the military instrument? Is the military establishment “unified,” that is, does it speak with anything like a single voice vis-à-vis the civil government? What is the nature of military advice? Should military leaders “insist” that their advice be heeded? What courses of action are available to military leaders who believe the civilian authorities are making bad decisions? In other words is there something that might be called a “calculus of dissent” that military leaders can invoke in cases where they believe civilian decisions are dangerous to the health of the country? These issues, addressed below, are part and parcel of what officers need to know about civil-military relations.
2. What constitutes an acceptable level of military influence on the other spheres of society? The extreme form of military influence in society is militarism, a state of affairs in which military values predominate and the military devours a disproportionate share of society’s resources. What is the proper scope of military affairs? In today’s environment, what constitutes military expertise? Does it go beyond what Samuel Huntington called in *The Soldier and the State*, his classic study of civil-military relations, the “management of violence?” Should it? For instance, to what extent should the military influence foreign policy? Has American foreign policy become “militarized?” Do combatant

commanders exercise too much power? Have they become the new “viceroys” or “proconsuls?” What is the proper role regarding the military and domestic politics? Should active duty officers be writing op-eds in support of particular programs or policies? Should retired officers get involved in partisan politics? What is the military’s proper role in influencing the allocation of resources?

3. What is the primary purpose of the military? Is it to fight and win the nation’s wars or to engage in constabulary actions? What kind of wars should the military prepare to fight? Should the focus of the military be foreign or domestic? The United States has answered this question differently at different times and under different circumstances. For example, throughout most of its history, the United States Army was a constabulary force. It permanently oriented itself toward large-scale conflicts against foreign enemies only in the 1930s. The end of the Cold War and the attacks of 9/11 have suggested new answers (e.g., a focus on “irregular warfare”) as well as an openness to the use of the military in domestic affairs (e.g., disaster relief in response to emergencies such as Katrina, domestic law enforcement during the Los Angeles riots, or border security). What impact do such issues have on civil–military relations?
4. What pattern of civil-military relations best ensures military success? All of the other questions mean little if the military instrument is unable to ensure the survival of the state. If there is no constitution, the question of constitutional balance doesn’t matter. Does effectiveness require a military culture distinct in some ways from the society it serves? What impact does societal structure have on military effectiveness? What impact does political structure exert? What impact does the pattern of civil military relations have on the effectiveness of strategic decision-making processes?
5. Who serves? Is military service an obligation of citizenship or something else? How are enlisted members recruited and retained? How should the US military address issues of “diversity” in the force? What about reserves, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and gays?

Obviously, questions regarding military service have been answered differently by Americans at different times under different circumstances. Through most of its early history, the United States maintained a small regular peacetime establishment that mostly conducted limited constabulary operations. During wartime, the several states were responsible for raising soldiers for federal service, either as militia or volunteers.

While there was limited federal conscription during the Civil War and a more extensive draft during World War I, conscription only became the norm in the United States from the eve of World War II until the 1970s. Today the US military is a volunteer professional force. But even now the force continues to evolve, as debates over such issues as the role of the reserve components in the post-9/11 military force, women in combat, gays in the services, and the recruitment of religious minorities make clear.

I ask you to keep these questions in mind as I describe the eight things about US civil-military relations that I believe every officer needs to know.

First, it is important to realize that civil-military tensions in the United States are not new; examples of civil-military tensions in the past include:

Washington at Newburgh

Federalists vs. Republicans regarding a Military Establishment

Andrew Jackson and Spanish Florida

Mexican War: Whigs and Democrats

Civil War: Lincoln and McClellan

Reconstruction: Johnson Urged to Use the Military to Suppress Congress

Preparedness Movement

Election of 1920: Leonard Wood

Second, the absence of a coup does not necessarily mean that civil-military relations are healthy.

All too often, US military officers seem to believe that if the United States does not face the prospect of a Latin-American or African style military *coup d'état*, then all is well in the realm of civil-military relations. But this is a straw man. A number of scholars, including Richard Kohn, Peter Feaver, the late Russell Weigley, Michael Desch, and Eliot Cohen have argued that although there is no threat of a coup on the part of the US military, American civil-military relations have nonetheless deteriorated over the past two decades.

For example, the US military has “pushed back” against civilian leadership on numerous occasions during the last two decades. This pushback has manifested itself in “foot dragging,” “slow rolling” and leaks to the press designed to undercut policy or individual policy-makers. Such actions were rampant during the Clinton presidency and during the tenure of Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense. Such pushback is based on the claim that civilians were making decisions without paying sufficient attention to the military point of view.

Third, civilian control involves not only the Executive Branch but Congress as well.

As the constitutional scholar Edwin Corwin, once famously observed, the Constitution is an "invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy" between Congress and the president. But there is a similar tension at work with regard to civil-military relations. Those who neglect the congressional role in American civil-military relations are missing an important element. Military officers are obligated to share their views with Congress. Doing so should not be treated as an “end run” undermining civilian control of the military.

Fourth, US military history illustrates that the military is not always right, even regarding strictly military affairs.

For instance, during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln constantly prodded George McClellan to take the offensive in Virginia in 1862. McClellan just as constantly complained about insufficient forces.

Despite the image of civil-military comity during World War II, there were many differences between Franklin Roosevelt and his military advisers. George Marshall, the greatest soldier-statesman since Washington, opposed arms shipments to Great Britain in 1940 and argued for a cross-channel invasion before the United States was ready. History has vindicated Lincoln and Roosevelt.

Similarly, many observers, especially those in the uniformed military, have been inclined to blame the U.S. defeat in Vietnam on the civilians. But the U.S. operational approach in Vietnam was the creature of the uniformed military. Today, many argue that the operational strategy of General William Westmoreland was counterproductive; it did not make sense to emphasize attrition of Peoples' Army of Vietnam forces in a “war of the big battalions”—that is, one involving sweeps through remote jungle areas in an effort to fix and destroy the enemy with superior fire power. By the time Westmoreland's successor, Gen. Creighton Abrams, could adopt a more fruitful approach, it was too late.

During the planning for Operation Desert Storm in late 1990 and early 1991, General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of CENTCOM, presented a plan calling for a frontal assault against Iraqi positions in southern Kuwait followed by a drive toward Kuwait City. The problem was that this plan was unlikely to achieve the foremost military objective of the ground war: the destruction of the three divisions of Saddam's Republican Guard. The civilian leadership rejected the early war plan presented by CENTCOM and ordered a return to the drawing board. The revised plan was far more imaginative and effective.

Finally, many senior officers opposed President Bush's surge in Iraq in 2007, further illustrating the fact even in wartime, the military does not always know best.

Fifth, dissent is not disobedience

The military has an obligation to forcefully present its best advice but does not have the right to *insist* that its advice

be followed. However, dissent is not disobedience: there must be a “calculus of dissent” that extends beyond the stark choice of “salute and obey” and “exit.” This is a function of professionalism.

Dissent raises the question: is the uniformed military just one more obedient bureaucracy in the Executive Branch or is it a profession granted significant autonomy and a unique role in its relationship with civilian policy makers due to its expert knowledge and expertise? What options does an officer have when he/she disagrees with policies/orders, etc.?

During the so-called Revolt of the Generals, Lt. Gen. Greg Newbold, USMC (ret) wrote: “I offer a challenge to those still in uniform: a leader’s responsibility is to give voice to those who can’t—or don’t have the opportunity—to speak...It is time for some military leaders to discard caution in expressing their views and ensure that the President hears them clearly.” Many believed that his dissent would have carried more weight had he offered it while he was still on active duty.

Nonetheless, the issue of dissent has suggested to some that resignation or retirement is the only option for those officers who disagree with policy. But as the eminent military historian Richard Kohn argues, “Personal and professional honor do not require a request for reassignment or retirement if civilians order one’s service, command, or unit to act in some manner an officer finds distasteful, disastrous, or even immoral. The military’s job is to advise and then execute lawful orders...If officers at various levels measure policies, decisions, orders, and operations against personal moral and ethical systems, and act thereon, the good order and discipline of the military would collapse.”

I have argued elsewhere that this belief on the part of officers is the result of a serious misreading of H.R. McMaster’s *Dereliction of Duty*: “Many serving officers believe that [McMaster] effectively makes the case that the Joint Chiefs of Staff should have more openly voiced their opposition to the Johnson administration’s strategy of gradualism [during the Vietnam war], and then resigned rather than carry out the policy. . . .But the book says no such thing. While McMaster convincingly argues that the chiefs failed to present their views frankly and forcefully to their civilian superiors, including members of Congress when asked for their views, he neither says nor implies that the chiefs should have obstructed President Lyndon Johnson’s orders and policies by leaks, public statements, or by resignation.”

Sixth, civil-military disputes usually do not per se pit civilians against the military, but involve one civil-military faction against another.

Examples include:

The post-World War II air power debate pitting the newly emerging Air Force against the Navy: on the one hand, President Truman, Secretary of Defense Johnson, and members of Congress favoring the B-36 strategic bomber and the effort by the Air Force to gain control of naval aviation vs. the Navy and its civilian supporters favoring the “super-carrier” *USS United States*.

The firing of MacArthur (Marshall and Eisenhower urging Truman to fire him, Republicans in Congress supporting MacArthur);

The Marines and the Osprey. The Office of the Secretary of Defense rejected the Osprey but the Marines’s congressional coalition kept it alive.

As budgets decline, this is likely to be the main shape of civil-military discord for the foreseeable future.

Seventh, patterns of civil-military relations affect military outcomes.

As Richard Kohn has written, “In effect, in the most important area of professional expertise—the connecting of war to policy, of operations to achieving the objectives of the nation—the American military has been found wanting. The excellence of the American military in operations, logistics, tactics, weaponry, and battle has been manifest for a generation or more. Not so with strategy.” He is echoed by Colin Gray who observed that: “All too often, there is a black hole where American strategy ought to reside.”

The problem here is that Huntington's objective control, which reinforces the military's desire for autonomy leads it to focus on the operational level of war and not on strategy. As Hew Strachan has observed, "The operational level of war appeals to armies: it functions in a politics-free zone and it puts primacy on professional skills." Herein lies the problem for US strategy making: the military's preference for focusing on the operational level of war creates a disjunction between operational excellence in combat and *policy*, which determines the reasons for which a particular war is to be fought. In other words, the combination of the Huntington's objective control and the US military's focus on the non-political operational level of war means that all too often the conduct of a war is disconnected from the goals of the war.

As two writers recently observed, "rather than meeting its original purpose of contributing to the attainment of campaign objectives laid down by strategy, operational art—practiced as a 'level of war'—assumed responsibility for campaign planning. This reduced political leadership to the role of 'strategic sponsors,' quite specifically widening the gap between politics and warfare. The result has been a well-demonstrated ability to win battles that have not always contributed to strategic success, producing 'a way of battle' rather than a way of war."

They continue: "the political leadership of a country cannot simply set objectives for a war, provide the requisite materiel, then stand back and await victory. Nor should the nation or its military be seduced by this prospect. Politicians should be involved in the minute-to-minute conduct of war; as Clausewitz reminds us, political considerations are 'influential in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle.'"

The reverse is true as well. The military has to be at the policy and strategy table in order to ensure that its advice regarding options and risk are being heard. Which leads us to:

Eighth, it is important to recognize that there is a difference between being "political" and being "partisan."

Military officers must be "political" in the sense of understanding the political environment and being able to navigate its currents. But they must be non-partisan and resist becoming an adjunct of a political party.

WHAT FACTORS WILL INFLUENCE US CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE FUTURE?

They include the character of the wars we will fight in the future.

- 1) For instance, protracted wars often create the danger of praetorianism as exemplified by the French military after Indochina and Algeria. A milder though still dangerous manifestation of praetorianism was evident in the "Team America" conceit on the part of Gen. McChrystal's staff in the *Rolling Stone* article that led to the general's resignation.
- 2) Declining defense budgets may lead to the end of "jointness" and the emergence of civilian-military factions fighting over resources and missions reminiscent of the B-36 vs. USS United States debate in 1949. *The really great danger is that inter-service battles over resources may lead the American people to conclude that the US military is just another interest group.* If that happens, the high standing of the US military could rapidly evaporate.
- 3) New circumstances (e.g., cyber and oversight of special operations may create new tensions).
- 4) The Participation Gap: the "other one percent"
- 5) Future debate over the Iraq and Afghanistan "narratives." Copperheads and Vietnam.
- 6) Domestic Politics, the truly "Forgotten Aspect" of US Civil-Military Relations: How society treats its soldiers and veterans and vice versa. For instance, will PTSD, a "disease model" prevail in society's view of veterans or may it be supplanted by what Gen. James Mattis has called "positive traumatic growth" as the best way to look at the impact of close combat/intimate killing on soldiers. In other words, do we see our veterans as *victims* or as those who served honorably under difficult circumstances? Here we might look to the legacy of Vietnam.

Karl Marlantes, with whom I served in the same Marine infantry battalion in Vietnam has addressed these questions in a book: *What it is Like to Go to War* (he is also the author of the remarkable Vietnam War novel, *Matterhorn*). He describes the psychological “split” in the soldier at war. This split is captured in a passage from Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*: “Shame and honor clash where the courage of a steadfast man is motley like the magpie. But such a man may yet make merry, for Heaven and Hell have equal part in him.”

CONCLUSION

Today’s US civil-military relations since 9/11 raise a number of issues. How informed are civilian leaders when they choose to commit the military instrument? How well does the prevailing pattern of civil-military relations enable the integration of divergent and even contradictory views? Does this pattern ensure a practical military strategy that properly serves the ends of national policy?

The post-9/11 US civil-military relations also point to the issue of *trust*: the mutual respect and understanding between civilian and military leaders and the exchange of candid views and perspectives between the two parties as part of the decision-making process.

Establishing trust requires that both parties to the civil-military bargain reexamine their mutual relationship. On the one hand, the military must recover its voice in strategy-making while realizing that politics permeates the conduct of war and that civilians have the final say, not only concerning the goals of the war but also how it is conducted. On the other, civilians must understand that to implement effective policy and strategy requires the proper military instrument and therefore must insist that soldiers present their views frankly and forcefully throughout the strategy-making and implementation process. This is ultimately the key to healthy civil-military relations.