



President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden hold a meeting 12 November 2013 with combatant commanders and military leadership in the Cabinet Room of the White House. (Photo by Pete Souza, White House)

Civilian Control of the Military A “Useful Fiction”?

Col. Todd Schmidt, PhD, U.S. Army

Effective civilian control of the military is a “useful fiction” and a fanciful myth.¹ This is the underlying and unspoken cause for recent articles declaring civil-military relations under extreme strain. This strain has three primary causes: a shrinking pool of seasoned, capable, effective civilian leaders; an increasingly politicized military; and the exceptional influence of military elites on the national security policy process.

In the 2022 War on the Rocks op-ed “To Support and Defend: Principles of Civilian Control and Best Practices of Civil-Military Relations,” an unprecedented list of signatories penned an open letter to the public.² Eight former secretaries of defense and six retired chairmen of the Joint Chiefs sounded a clarion call for adherence to basic principles of civilian control. The premise of the op-ed is that current civil-military relations between U.S. elected and appointed officials and the Nation’s military are strained because of recent policy decisions related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, pandemic-induced societal turmoil, economic fluctuations, and continued debate over events related to the 2020 presidential election. Esteemed and exceptionally respected defense experts and scholars Michele Flournoy and Peter Feaver followed up with a supporting article that reinforced the sanctity of the principle of civilian control and offered an anecdote related to how military elites related to and behaved with senior members and the president during the Trump administration.³

Effective Civilians

To military professionals and scholars of U.S. civil-military relations, these articles outline aspirational principles. Unfortunately, real-world nuances and realities of the current civil-military balance of power were neglected or omitted. There was further a failure in these articles to explain why civil-military relations have deteriorated over the past several decades and why effective civilian control of the military is no longer sacrosanct.

“Effective civilian control of the military” is a founding, bedrock principle of democracy in the United States. It is noteworthy, however, that the principle comes with a recent conventional qualifier, describing the imperative for “effective” civilian control. Scholars, however, tend to focus on “civilian

control” while completely ignoring the imperative of an “effective civilian.”

Over the past two decades, scholars have found that civilian leadership of the military is increasingly conditional. In multiple studies, to include one by RAND, military service members increasingly believe that submitting to civilian control is contingent on the ability of civilians to provide able leadership.⁴ In other words, to have effective civilian control in government, there must be effective civilian leaders.

There are, no doubt, extraordinary civilians that lead and serve in the Department of Defense, and they are exceptionally qualified. They understand and comprehend the complexities of national security and strategic policy. They are seasoned, experienced, and possess the cognitive and intellectual capabilities required to serve at the highest levels of government.

However, these qualified civilian elites are a minority in a rapidly shrinking pool of talent. The resulting impact is that inexperienced, novice elected officials and appointees are heavily reliant on military elites to inform national security policy development and decision-making. Military elites are relied upon to establish, lead, manage, and implement policy that has become ever more militarized and less whole-of-government in its approach. In return, military elites are reportedly disconcerted by the amateurism of their civilian counterparts within the national security policy process.⁵ In the findings of Kori Schake and James Mattis, civilians have become so reliant on the military that they have allowed resident “strategic thinking to atrophy.”⁶ It is important to note that President Joseph Biden recognized this in the early release of his *Interim National Security Strategy Guidance*, calling for increased investment in the professional development of national security civilian officials and a recommitment to the principle of civilian control.⁷

A Politicized Military

Members of the Armed Forces swear an oath to the U.S. Constitution. Thus, there is a fair expectation that military elites in a democratic republic will be apolitical and above the partisan, political scrum. Yet, the mythical narrative that the military is apolitical is fraught with contradiction.

An increasing number of studies find that U.S. military elites openly identify with a political party and



Various dignitaries witness President Harry S. Truman signing House Resolution (H.R.) 5632, the National Security Act Amendments of 1949 on 10 August 1949 in the White House Oval Office, Washington, D.C. H.R. 5632 converted the existing National Military Establishment into the new Department of Defense and made other changes in the national security system. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

purposefully and deliberately engage in partisan activity.⁸ In the lead up to the 2020 presidential election, for example, nearly seven hundred retired generals and admirals publicly endorsed the Republican or Democratic presidential nominees. Some promoted misinformation, endorsed extremist views, spread wild conspiracy theories, or condoned the idea of a military coup d'état.⁹ Reports on the 6 January 2021 riots at the Capitol building

found that nearly one in five participants were retired, recently separated, or active-duty military personnel.¹⁰

Despite this tragic episode, military elites have demonstrated a historical propensity for praetorian behavior.

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Praetorian behavior is defined as a dynamic in which members of the military actively participate in government in positions historically reserved for civilians. Politics penetrates the military ranks. Political beliefs and policy preferences affect decision-making. It is in our DNA. Shaping and controlling the operational environment, whether in garrison or combat, is what military leaders are trained to do. Leaving conditions to chance, luck, or hope is not a method.¹¹

Following World War II, military elites played an important role in the creation of the National Security Council (NSC). The intent was to inoculate the Nation's national security policy process against unorthodox, unconventional, inexperienced, and disorganized presidents with chaotic leadership styles.¹² As Adm. Sidney Souers, former executive secretary of the NSC, testified before Congress, the NSC was intentionally created to be run by the military as a measure of



Civilian and military officials pose for a group photograph 1 December 1990 prior to discussing U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Shield. Dignitaries include (*front row from left*) Paul Wolfowitz, undersecretary of defense for policy; Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney; Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander in chief, U.S. Central Command; Lt. Gen. C. Waller, deputy chief of staff, U.S. Central Command; and Maj. Gen. Robert Johnston, chief of staff, U.S. Central Command. In the back row are Lt. Gen. W. Boomer, commander, I Marine Expeditionary Force; Lt. Gen. C. Horner, commander, Ninth Air Force, Tactical Air Command; Lt. Gen. J. Yeosock, commander, Third Army; Vice Adm. Stan Arthur, commander, Seventh Fleet; and Col. Johnson. Cheney commented that he felt “surrounded by military elites that made him feel nominally in charge.” (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense)

control over future presidents. By 1953, a presidential committee report attested to the military’s influence, finding that civilian elected officials and appointees lacked leadership, lacked respect for the importance of strategy and planning, were “wedded to a philosophy of reacting to problems as they arise,” and that “military professionals are the makers of national policy,” not the president or Congress.¹³

More specifically, President Dwight Eisenhower found his administration undermined by his generals throughout the entirety of his time as commander in chief. Gens. Matthew Ridgway, Maxwell Taylor, James Gavin, and William Westmoreland famously worked to subvert and sabotage Eisenhower’s “New Look” policies, believing they were following a higher

calling.¹⁴ Distraught by the subterfuge of his generals, Eisenhower confided to his closest friends that “some day there is going to be a man sitting in my present chair” with no military experience and little understanding of international affairs.¹⁵ His apprehensions were formidable, his fears prophetic. And, despite more recent legislation that endeavors to balance military influence, civilian positions increasingly are left empty and vacant while military officers fill the void and provide continuity across administrations.

Praetorian Propensity

Civilian control of the military is supposed to be exercised across all three branches of government. This “best practice” is idyllic. However, the military

is deeply embedded across the government and has come to constitute and behave as an epistemic community with exceptional influence over national security policy and process that can overwhelm a system of “checks and balances.”¹⁶

Within the executive branch, the military assigns detailees across the Executive Office of the President, the

spending requests typically only occur in matters that may affect domestic and electoral politics.

The judicial branch tends to demur from matters of civil-military relations, particularly since the Reagan administration. Post-Civil War, Congress enacted laws to ensure that military officers were prohibited from serving in positions intended for civilian officials. These laws

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National Security Council, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and many other institutions and agencies, providing the best and brightest officers to advise and inform senior executive leadership. For example, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice credits then Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno for convincing her to support “the surge” in Iraq in 2007.¹⁷ Former Secretary of Defense and Vice President Richard Cheney describes military elite influence as so powerful that he unwittingly absorbed the military’s policy preferences. Civilian appointments, often left vacant, left him surrounded by military elites that made him feel nominally in charge.¹⁸

Congress also follows the military’s lead. With the repeal of the 1921 Budget and Accounting Act, the military was free to directly lobby Congress for its budgetary wants and needs. Congressmen often bragged of trusting “God and General Marshall” to inform them of the military’s budgetary requirements.¹⁹ The National Security Act Amendments of 1949 further unencumbered military elites in providing unsolicited and unconstrained “best military advice” to legislators regarding their budgetary requirements. In an understatement, Samuel Huntington called this “a problem” for balanced civil-military relations, while Sen. Barry Goldwater described taking the military’s budgetary requests “as gospel.”²⁰ With over one hundred military officers embedded across congressional staff and offices, exceptions to congressional acquiescence to military

were reaffirmed in the mid-1920s and codified again by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in *Riddle v. Warner* (1975), which ruled that the laws enacted were to “assure civilian preeminence in government” and prevent “the military establishment from insinuating itself” into civil government.²¹ However, these laws were repealed in the 1980s, allowing senior military officers such as John Poindexter, Colin Powell, and most recently, H. R. McMaster to serve as national security advisors while remaining on active duty.

Tired Theories

The theoretical framework or lens by which to view these dynamics is found in the scholarly field of civil-military relations theory. Unfortunately, civil-military relations theory and scholarship is challenged; it is stale, stuck in the past, and backward looking. It fails to account for future operational environments in which the velocity of war shrinks the time and space available for national security decision-making. It fails to account for the “ineffective civilian” leadership that increasingly haunts the human capital among our elected officials and civil servants.

Although there are important principles of civil-military relations and best practices in maintaining civilian control of the military, they are not necessarily practiced or inviolate. As authorities, responsibilities, and powers are increasingly delegated to the military,



Gen. Mark Milley (*second from left*), chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the joint chiefs listen as President Donald Trump speaks during a meeting 7 October 2019 with senior military leaders. (Photo by Brendan Smialowski, Agence France-Press)

expectations of civilian control must evolve. If jurisdiction over national security policy and process are ceded to the military, as they often are, then delegation of authority and decision-making requires continued adjudication. In fact, current studies at the Army War College advocate for renewed study and negotiation of an antiquated civil-military framework that no longer accounts for current and future political, international, and threat environments.²²

Current civil-military relations theory also fails to account for an evolution in American politics. As political actors rend and tear at the fabric of our Nation, often exploiting societal divisions for political gain, the military stands on the sidelines. Military elites find themselves providing overwatch as some in American society, including politicians on both fringes of the spectrum, appear to be intent on upending the very democracy the military has sworn to protect.

Congressman Michael McCaul describes the current political environment as increasingly occupied by ignorant, disrespectful mischief makers with no intent to faithfully serve their Nation. They are more intent

on buffoonery—spewing vile, slanderous rants and demonizing the opposition to gain media attention and raise money for their political coffers. They have succeeded in turning the American political system into what many characterize as a circus and its institutions as increasingly populated by “clowns.”²³

In the halls of the Pentagon and the cubicles of the NSC, or the personal offices of members of Congress, military elites exercise immense influence that often makes civilian leaders feel “boxed in.” They are boxed in deliberately, or, more aptly, encouraged to face the realities of the limitations of civilian authority and power. Yet, fragile egos must be protected, and the “useful fiction” maintained.

Moving Forward

If civilian leaders and lawmakers are to confront the dangers of strained civil-military relations, they need to focus less on the military and more on themselves. Strained and imbalanced civil-military relations are less about how powerful and influential the military is and more about how broken our political system is and how weak our political leaders

have become. Imbalanced institutional investments, a dearth of competent political appointees, a political environment that discourages and disincentivizes civil service, extreme partisanship and polarization, uninspired recruitment of younger generations to public service, poor civic education and growing political ignorance, lack of intellectual curiosity exacerbated by deliberate disinformation—all these factors have created a vacuum of capable leadership among our elected and appointed officials.

In the end, I agree with concerns related to strained, unhealthy, and imbalanced civil-military relations. Polite academic alarms, however, fall short. The issue is more urgent. It is worse than “they” say, and here is why: Americans, and a huge portion of civil-military relations scholars, view civil-military relations through a normative, unidirectional, idyllic lens that is elementary. It provides a textbook description of what civil-military relations in the United States or a democracy should be.

But, that is not the reality—it is not black and white. There is nuance. Structural challenges in the policy process and between civilians and the military are real, just below the surface of a salute and a smile. Civilians do not always realize this because, for the military, issues of national security are existential. We have deployed and fought for over twenty years in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our families are committed. Our sons and daughters now increasingly wear the uniform in what has become the “family business.” We are stewards of the military profession. We have a little skin in the game. So, while civilians come and go from government, more concerned with maintaining power than ensuring good governance, the military remains vigilantly engaged, safeguarding the system and the Republic. It is incumbent on those civilians that wish to serve, whether in elected or appointed positions, to be equally, if not more so, qualified, engaged, and committed to duty to country. ■

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Military Review

WE RECOMMEND

In her 2001 Army War College monograph, *Political Control over the Use of Force: A Clausewitzian Perspective*, Maj. Suzanne C. Nielsen discusses and analyzes the challenges and impediments that exist in the often fragile relationship between military commanders and political officials during time of war. She uses tenets specified by Carl von Clausewitz in the formulation of his theory of war as outlined in his master work *On War* to analyze the civil-military relationships as they relate to the nature of political decisions regarding the application of force. She asserts that Clausewitz provides a clear argument that extensive political influence over the direction of military operations is not only inevitable because of the nature of war itself but is of vital concern because the quality of political influence has a decisive influence on the outcome of a conflict. After reviewing his theoretical approach, she discusses four key implications of the basic idea that political purposes govern war. Her argument suggests that Clausewitz has issued both statesmen and commanders a challenge. Commanders must appreciate the necessity of subordinating military means to political ends, and statesmen must think as strategists as they make decisions about the relationship between ends and means and the achievement of their goals.

POLITICAL CONTROL
OVER THE USE OF FORCE:
A CLAUSEWITZIAN PERSPECTIVE

Suzanne C. Nielsen

May 2001

To view *Political Control over the Use of Force*, visit <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA389673.pdf>.